



The search for a missing King will send
one man on the path toward his destiny

GALLEN'S BLADE

A STARQUEST 4TH AGE ADVENTURE

BOOK #2



RICHARD PAOLINELLI

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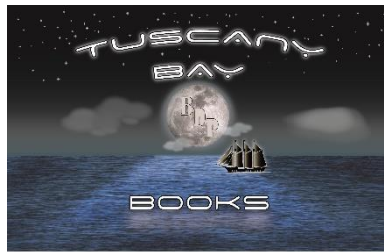
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This one is for you, Dad.



JOHN DAVID PAOLINELLI

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STARQUEST BOOKS

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#1: Ranger (Coming Winter-2022/23)

GALEN'S BLADE

A Starquest Fourth Age Adventure

Book #2

Richard Paolinelli



CHAPTER ONE

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Aw shut yer yap, Smerg,” Ailden Cloo snapped from the pilot’s chair, keeping a sharp eye out the forward viewport at the Alliance ships hanging in space only a few kilometers away.

He needed to keep their ship, an old rust bucket ironically called, *Silver Bird*, hugging close to a tumbling asteroid so the fleet would not spot them, while also being able to keep said fleet in sight. The last thing he needed right now was to listen to Smerg’s nervous, non-stop chattering. The more nervous Smerg felt, the more he chattered and the gloomier his chatter became.

“I’m just saying this is a bad idea,” Smerg replied, his voice taking on another octave of gloom that made Cloo’s left eye twitch.

“It’s not a bad idea at all,” a voice boomed out from behind them. The ship’s Captain, Banarbee J’lan, stepped onto the flight deck in time to hear the exchange. “They say over a hundred ships were destroyed in the battle here, m’boys. I guarantee there’s going to be a small fortune in salvage for the first crew on site which, it just so happens, will be us.”

“And that fleet out there,” Smerg pointed out gloomily.

“Those five ships?” J’lan snorted dismissively. “They’re just looking for the classified stuff. As soon as they get that they’ll be out of here like a shot. There’ll be plenty left over for us. We might even be able to make two salvage runs before anyone else from The Wilds even hears about this and arrives to scavenge the site.”

“I’m not seeing any debris out there that equals a hundred ships,” Smerg tried to add another layer of dark gloom to the deck but his shipmates weren’t having it.

“That’s because we can’t turn our scanners on, you skril,” Cloo barked. “Unless you want that fleet to come over here and blast us into dust. Honestly, why do you keep him on as crew, J’lan?”

“Because. My boy,” J’lan clapped a hand on Cloo’s shoulder, “our friend here is the best scavenger in the Wilds. I swear, you can toss him in a pile of rusty metal and sewage and he’ll stumble back out clean as a whistle and with a pile of jewels in his hands. Gripping the entire time of course, but filthy rich all the same.”

“I’d be willing to trade off some riches for a little peace and quiet,” Cloo grumbled, not wanting to admit aloud that the Captain had a point. Movement beyond the viewport caught his attention before he could continue. “Well, I’ll be damned...”

“What did I tell you boys,” J’lan crowed as he watched the ships suddenly dart away, heading back at high speed toward the heart of the Alliance, abandoning the battlefield to the undetected scavengers from The Wilds. “Let’s give them a few minutes to get out of range and then let’s go get ourselves filthy rich...”

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“ ‘Filthy rich’ he said,” Cloo muttered under his breath as they completed what he counted as the two hundred and sixth sweep of the battle site that had so far failed to turn up anything salvageable. “We’ve been at this for days now and nothing more than blackened slag to show for it.”

“I knew there was no way those Alliance ships were going to leave anything of value behind,” Smerg remarked, gloomily of course. Cloo’s left eye was permanently twitching now.

“Maybe you could have shared that insight with the rest of us before we wasted all this time farming space dust,” Cloo growled.

“I did,” Smerg replied. “No one ever listens to me.”

Cloo felt his right eye begin to twitch in rhythm with the left.

“That’s because,” J’lan broke in, having come up from behind, unnoticed by either man, “you’re never right when it comes to where to go looking for treasure.”

“We haven’t found anything larger than a pebble so far,” Cloo pointed out. “He might be right this time.”

“You two give up way too easy,” J’lan scoffed. “There’s no way in any hell those Alliance ships gathered everything up from a battle that size.”

“And yet,” Cloo fired back with a sweep of his hand, “all we see is empty space.”

“That’s because we’re looking in the wrong area,” J’lan said confidently. “Head toward that asteroid field over there and I’ll wager my cut of the next ten hauls that we’ll find plenty to salvage there.”

“Assuming we don’t get ourselves blown up by running into one of those big rocks,” Smerg added.

“Cloo will just have to make sure we don’t run into anything,” J’lan retorted. “Now, set course for the field and let’s go find ourselves some money.”

With a sigh, Cloo brought the ship about and eased into the field while Smerg hovered over the scanner, looking for a trace of anything other than dust, rocks and vacuum. It was nerve-wracking work, which did not improve the twitching in Cloo’s eyes any more than it did Smerg’s mood. Nor did the occasional loud ‘thump’ that echoed through their ship whenever an asteroid grazed the outer hull a little too hard for comfort.

They were nearly out of the field when Cloo opened his mouth to pronounce yet another failure. He was surprised to hear a strident beeping noise instead of his voice.

“Cap’n,” Smerg announced, actually excited for once, “we’re getting a strong reading to port. It’s definitely metallic and has an energy signature.”

“That’s more like it!” J’lan boomed out. “Get us over there, Cloo, and we’ll see what kind of a pretty our good ol’ Smerg has found for us this time.”

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It took a bit of doing, especially when Cloo had to squeeze the ship between two tumbling asteroids with absolutely no room to spare, but the *Silver Bird* made it through and eased up to the source of the scanner's reading.

"Will you look at that," J'lan whistled softly at the sight. "That's a personal flier. Only a wealthy person with a lot of clout flies one of those. We've hit the jackpot boys."

Anchored in a small crater of an asteroid tumbling much slower than the others nearby, the small ship had taken some damage. An angry electrical burn scarred the ship's starboard hull from just above the engine compartment to the main hatch. But overall the ship appeared to be intact.

"Power levels are low," Smerg reported as he viewed his scanner's output. "But there is life support and the engines can be made operational with minimal repairs."

"Any life signs?"

"Nothing showing, Cap'n," Smerg replied. "But if there were just one person aboard and they were injured, they might not show up on the scan."

"Likely whoever was on that ship is as dead as a Lifhessian Whore House on Westeria's Holy Day," J'lan concluded. "Which makes this pretty a legal salvage. Bring us in for docking, Cloo. I want to be inside that ship in thirty minutes. Smerg, I want those engines up and running at full power before the day is out."

J'lan clapped his hands together as he left the deck, already counting up the riches this prize was going to bring. Cloo gently glided the

ship over and nodded at Smerg to extend the docking port when they were within range.

With two minutes to spare in J'lan's deadline, the port sealed itself to the flier's hatch. After making sure the pressure on both sides of the hatch had equalized, J'lan cracked it open and stepped inside the crippled ship.

The interior was dimly lit, but there was enough illumination to make out burns similar to the one on the outside of the hull. Only these were smaller in size and had laced through the interior in every direction. The sharp smell of ozone filled the air, the ship's life support unable to remove the odor. Aside from the men's footsteps, there was very little noise. Even at low power there was always a steady background noise in any ship. But this was not the case in this one.

"It's as quiet as a grave in here," Smerg said, his voice trembling a little. J'lan thought to hush the man, but he had to admit the scene was a little unnerving, even for the bravest of men.

"That's enough," J'lan settled on admonishing lightly. "Smerg, head down to the engine compartment and get this wreck operational. Cloo and I will work our way forward and check the passenger cabin and flight deck. The damage doesn't look too bad. If we're lucky, we may not even have to tow it back to the Wilds. Let's get to work and get out of here before anyone else shows up to claim it."

Smerg quickly headed aft down the corridor toward the engines. J'lan and Cloo checked the nearest compartment, which turned out to be storage and filled with foodstuffs, water, liquor and a few other creature

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comforts. J'lan decided they'd load these goodies aboard their own ship and eat like kings for a few weeks.

With a nod to Cloo, J'lan headed forward and encountered the main passenger suite. This time it was Cloo's turn to whistle in appreciation.

"Nothing but the finest for our late owner," J'lan agreed as he took in the room. Aside from a few small items scattered on the floor – probably when the ship was struck by whatever had caused the burns – the place was a small palace. Lavishly decorated with the finest materials, crystal and a few antiques sure to bring a pretty price when they sold the lot, J'lan realized they'd hit the prize of prizes.

"We're rich," Cloo whispered.

"Not yet," J'lan corrected sharply. "Not until we get this crate back into the Wilds and sell it. Let's get up to the bridge. The sooner we get going the less likely some Alliance do-gooder will come along and muck everything up."

With a nudge to get the gawking Cloo moving, J'lan exited the suite and continued forward. The acrid ozone smell in the air increased with every step they took. Stepping into the ship's small, dimly lit flight deck Cloo was tempted to whistle again. Burns scarred every console, lancing across the overhead and down to the deck below their feet.

Despite the damage, the consoles still appeared to be functional. J'lan stepped down to take one of the two seats and was surprised to see one of them occupied by what appeared to be a very well-singed corpse.

All visible skin was blackened, the hair on the head burned away so that the scalp showed the angry scars where the fingers of electricity had laced across the skin. The corpse's clothing was burned and torn in several places. The smell of burned skin worsened as J'lan moved closer.

"Guess we won't have to worry about the owner claiming this derelict," Cloo remarked, his nose wrinkling slightly as he caught a whiff of burned flesh. "He's well and truly cooked."

"Well cooked indeed," the corpse whispered hoarsely, "but not quite dead yet."

"By the gods!" J'lan shrieked in surprise, stumbling back into the empty seat. Cloo took a full two steps back before catching himself from bolting the bridge in terror.

"Perhaps it was the gods who did this to me," the corpse chuckled around a raspy inhale of breath, slightly tilting its head painfully in J'lan's direction. "But I am not quite dead just yet, gentlemen."

"What happened here?" J'lan managed to choke out.

"That is a good question," the charred man replied. "I would very much like to know where my friend got his hands on that device that destroyed my entire fleet. More importantly, I'd like to know if there are any others like it lying about."

"But first," he continued after weathering a pause-inducing round of hacking coughs, "I need time to heal and to gather up my resources. Then I have some scores to settle and you gentlemen can help me with that."

"How," J'lan asked, "and better yet, why, should we help you?"

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“Because you want to claim my ship as salvage,” the corpse chuckled. “Very well. The ship is yours without dispute in exchange for taking me back into the Wilds, where you clearly come from. I have contacts there that can help me. Plus, if you decide to work for me I can guarantee you even more riches than this humble ship of mine.

“Do we have an agreement, gentlemen?” he concluded, cocking an eye at them.

“How much more “riches” are we talking about?” Cloo asked.

“You can’t count that high,” the man replied with a knowing grin that looked more like a grimace in his current state.

“Then we have an agreement, Mr...?” J’lan paused.

“Harmool,” the burned man replied. “My name is Adalwin Harmool. Former Court Chamberlain of Salacia and soon to be Emperor of the Explored Galaxy. With your help of course, gentlemen.”

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CHAPTER TWO

“Regent Neasa?”

“Chancellor Napat,” Rhiannon greeted as she turned away from the Elician Ambassador she’d just finished speaking with. With the Senate session concluded, she was anxious to depart from Taygeta and return home to Salacia. She had hoped to keep any post-session meetings to a minimum. The Chancellor of the Alliance however rated such a meeting. “It seems affairs are finally getting back into order for you and the Alliance.”

“Indeed they are, Regent,” Napat replied with a small bow. “With no small amount of credit due to your efforts and those of Galen Dwyn I hasten to add. Is there any improvement in his condition.”

“The medicos all tell me that his body is fully healed as far as they can tell. But it has been six lunes now and he simply hasn’t woken up yet. They don’t want to force the issue, but he can’t stay like that forever.”

“I would be more than happy to send our best healers to consult with yours,” Napat offered. “Perhaps there is a way not yet considered.”

“Thank you, I would appreciate that very much,” Rhiannon replied. “And thank you for reinstating Galen back into the Bata’van and removing the warrant for his arrest.”

“It was the least I could do for him, considering what he’d done for the Alliance. Of course, not all of my military leaders are happy about it. A few want him arrested anyway. I suspect more than a few are still somewhat afraid of him, and the Bata’van as a general rule hate being afraid of anyone or anything.

“Has there been any word on the search for your father?” Napat asked, changing the subject.

“Not yet,” she shook her head sadly. “We have people searching on nearly every planet in the Alliance. But so far no sign of him has been found, nor can we seem to find any of Harmool’s allies. He surely must have had people everywhere. If we could locate just one of them we might be able to find some clue of where he took my father.”

“I take it your mother and your uncle are not being cooperative?”

“No. The price they ask for whatever they know – if they know anything at all – is their freedom. I cannot risk turning them loose to wreak havoc on the Alliance again, not even for my father.”

“I find myself in agreement with your assessment,” Napat nodded. “My people are also working on the problem, with orders to keep their eyes and ears open for any scrap of information regarding the King. We’ll keep looking, and we’ll find him, no matter how long it takes.

“But for now,” he glanced over her shoulder, “it appears some old friends of yours would like a word with you. Unfortunately, duty calls me to another meeting with the Senate’s Security Committee. If you will excuse me?”

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Rhiannon turned away from the departing Chancellor and found herself smiling widely as she discovered who her new visitors were.

“Regent Neasa,” Pepin Ellaneiri held out his hands, which she quickly took. The leader of Caletos had K’laine of Axaltier and Lonshanks of Y’pslandi, the respective leaders of their own worlds, in tow. “How good it is to see you in person again.”

“It is good to see you three as well,” she returned. “How are your daughters?”

“All well along the road to recovering from your shared ordeal,” Ellaneiri answered for the trio. “A fact that we will forever be in Mr. Dwyn’s debt for. How is his recovery?”

“Slow, but steady,” she replied, realizing that everyone in this room had cause to share in this debt. “We hope he will emerge from the medtube soon.”

“And your recovery, my dear,” Ellaneiri asked, lowering his voice. “How are you faring?”

“As well as can be expected,” she allowed. “Thank you for asking. And what brings the three of you together here?”

“Your lovely assistant, Cassandra,” K’laine replied. “A lovely sounding woman but a bit brash I must say. She all but ordered us to locate you and escort you away from this ‘gaggle of politicians’. She insisted that we escort you to your ship with great haste.”

“A bit bossy for an aide, if you ask me,” Lonshanks tsked. “But I suppose we all have aides like that to keep us on schedule.”

Rhiannon had to stifle a giggle. “Cassandra”, the AI on the *Tempest*, was no doubt in a hurry to return to Salacia and check on Galen’s progress. She shared Cass’ sense of urgency in that regard.

“I will have a word with her about that,” she assured. “But as for your kind offer to serve as escort, I believe I will have to decline. I have spotted my escort entering the hall just now. He can get me to my ship in short order so that you gentlemen may go about your business here in the Senate.”

“Yes, we really should get to the Security Committee meeting before they try to talk Napat into giving away half the Alliance’s Constitution,” K’laine complained as the three men took their leave.

She turned her attention to the man approaching from behind them. Galen’s mentor, Lir Fiachra, was looking like a man in a hurry and he was making a straight line for her.

“My Lady!” he all but shouted as he neared, “A thousand apologies for being delayed. The Ambassador from Belisama was trying to recruit me to be the next Planetary Governor there. I told him I had a higher calling. I’m afraid he wasn’t taking no for an answer and I lost track of time.”

“We just wrapped up,” she dismissed his concern, patting his hand. “However, I am quite ready to depart for home if you can help clear a path for me?”

“Of course,” he replied, leading the way with an eye on keeping anyone from holding her up. “And you are not the only one eager to go. Cass has been nattering at me constantly for the last ten minutes.

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"Yes, Cass," Lir suddenly pulled up, his hand rising to one ear where the comm piece rested. "Nattering is the correct word...no, I will not tell the Regent to do something quite as undignified as that...we'll be there all the more sooner if you will kindly cease your nattering."

This time Rhiannon let the laughter escape into the open.

"Tell her we're coming as quickly as we can," she ordered. "And we're just as eager for any news about Galen too."

"I'm beginning to wonder if we should have overridden the medicos and brought Galen's tube along with us on the *Tempest*," Lir muttered.

"I've been thinking the same thing ever since we left home," Rhiannon admitted as they finally exited the Senate Hall and made their way down the corridor toward the landing pad where Cass and the *Tempest* awaited. Once alone in the corridor, Lir pulled up to a stop.

"I have some news that I wanted to share when we were alone in a quiet place," he said softly, glancing around to confirm no one else was nearby. "I received a message from Galen's old friend, Jaq, on Arkon. He's heard a rumor regarding your father and he's sent one of his contacts over to the planet in question to see if there's any truth to it. He figured it would be less likely to scare off whoever's holding him if one of his people poked around as opposed to a bunch of Salacian soldiers."

"Good thinking."

"He'll let us know as soon as he hears anything," Lir replied, resuming their trek toward the ship. "I swear, that man would make a

wonderful spymaster for Salacia, if we could ever convince him to leave his bar.”

“I doubt we could ever entice him,” she replied. “He can probably make more money there than we’d be able to offer him.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed. “But there are some things more valuable than money. But I suppose they can’t all be like Galen...”

His voice trailed off and his pace slowed slightly. She placed her hand on his shoulder and drew nearer.

“He’s going to come out of that medtube and soon,” she said quietly. “He’s coming back to us. I refuse to believe otherwise.”

“I know, my lady. I...I just worry...”

“As do we all.”

They continued along, exiting out under a cloudy sky that threatened rain at any moment. Hurrying across the pad the scrambled aboard the *Tempest* just as a crack of lightning lit up the sky and thunder pealed overhead. Lir closed the hatch against a sudden downpour.

“Told you two to get your asses in gear,” Cass greeted them. “Now I’m going to get all rusty.”

They ignored her while they settled into their seats on the flight deck. Their luggage had been loaded up an hour earlier and the *Tempest* had been refueled that morning. Rhiannon settled into Galen’s pilot seat. While Cass actually piloted the ship, she preferred to sit here. At times she could almost feel Galen’s presence just by sitting here.

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“Let’s get going, Cass,” she gave the order and the ship promptly lifted up into the storm. Aside from the occasional bump, the *Tempest* cleared the storm and made its way into orbit.

“We’ve just been cleared to break orbit and set course for Salacia,” Cass reported soon after. “We should be there in two days.”

“That is the best news so far today,” Rhiannon replied, settling back in the seat and closing her eyes for a moment. “Has there been any updates?”

She didn’t need to add what updates she was seeking.

“No change,” Cass reported, and the sorrow carried clear even in her artificially generated “voice” to both humans’ ears.

“I talk to him,” Cass said after a moment of silence. “At night when no one else is around I hack into the tube’s systems and just talk to him. I know he can hear me. I know he can hear all of us whenever we visit.”

“Has he said anything to you?” Rhiannon’s eyes opened and she leaned forward.

“No,” Cass replied. “But I don’t want him to be alone in there. So I tell him everything going on that I can. So he won’t worry. So he’ll get better sooner...”

She drifted off and a long silence fell over the deck.

“How certain is Jaq about this new lead of his?” Rhiannon finally broke the quiet spell.

“As certain as anyone can be with leads like this,” Lir replied.

“Either it will pan out or it won’t. All we can do is follow them when they make themselves known to us and pray for the best.”

“All I know,” Rhiannon vowed, “is that if it doesn’t pan out, I’m flying up to pay my mother and uncle a visit. And even if I have to wring it out of them with my bare hands, one of them is going to tell me where my father is.”

“You might have to race me to get there first,” Lir replied quietly.

“If I could grow a pair of hands,” Cass added, “neither of you would get there in time to beat me to the job.”

CHAPTER THREE

Woja Keep had once been a busy research station, back in the early days of Salacia's history. Many discoveries about the world had been made there. Eventually it became a place to test man and machine against the harsh elements found only at the planet's northern pole. Over time the installation had worn out its usefulness and was mostly abandoned.

Salacian rulers eventually discovered that it was a very nice location to send someone you wanted exiled far away from the Court without throwing them off the planet. Especially when you couldn't quite find a good enough reason to have them executed.

Only one building remained from the original complex. It was kept ready for those that had earned a monarch's wrath. The amenities were not anything to brag about – a few uncomfortable cots, a storage area for food and other necessities next to a small cooking unit, a couch, and a table and four chairs.

No books, no vids, no computer access, nothing to pass the time with other than to think about the errors of one's ways. Four matching grey walls inside and out and one lone window to gaze outside at the ice and blowing snow in a constant wind. In the entire history of the place as a

jail, no one had ever come back for a return visit. Although a few had gone insane before being paroled from the place.

“Six bloody lunes,” Arthureal muttered under his breath, looking outside at the frozen wasteland before spinning away to resume his pacing. “That damnable brat of yours has kept us up here for six bloody lunes!”

“So you’ve mentioned,” Darieann replied with a sigh, “for at least the sixth time this morning.”

“What the hells is she waiting for? If they’d discovered where my brother is being held, they’d have hauled us back to the Court to crow about it and then send us into permanent exile. Probably to that damned planet where everyone has purple or blue hair and eats leaves.”

“True,” she agreed.

“Which means they haven’t found him,” Arthureal concluded. “So why hasn’t she sent for us to agree to our terms yet? I thought you said she loved her father?”

“She does.”

“Then what is she waiting for?” he repeated, returning to the window.

“Perhaps she’s waiting for this place to drive us to begging her to parole us in exchange for you telling her where Iodocus is? You are the only one of us that knows, now that Harmool is dead.”

“Bungling fool,” spinning away from the window again. “Bad enough he had to get himself killed, but to take our entire fleet of ships loyal to us with him... and don’t think I haven’t forgotten your little dalliance with our dear departed friend.”

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"I told you a hundred times, my dear, that was a lie. As if I'd lower myself to bed one like him."

"That is a conversation for another time," he spared a glower in her direction to let her know the subject was not yet closed. "For now we have a more pressing issue to attend to."

"And that is?"

"Today is resupply day."

"And when they ask if we are ready to yield to Rhiannon's demands? Are we saying yes this time?"

"No," Arthureal allowed a tight smile to form. "We are going to give them something they least expect. And then we're going to deliver a message to my precious niece that she'll not live long enough to regret hearing."



"Woja Keep in three minutes," the supply shuttle pilot announced. "Figures we'd have a nice frost storm blowing in on us on the day we come up. Visibility is going to be a joy."

"Offloading isn't exactly going to be like a day on Lake Salacia either," the co-pilot replied. "At least you get to stay inside a nice warm cockpit."

"The privileges of rank, poor dear," she chuckled. "At least you'll have a nice big parka to keep warm in while you're out there."

“I’ll be just fine in the cargo hold. After I go drag those two traitors out of their beds they can unload their supplies. Let them trudge back and forth in the cold.”

“You’d make royalty break out into a sweat?”

“One of them probably killed our King and the other isn’t a Queen anymore,” he retorted. “Maybe a little labor would loosen their tongues so we don’t have to waste our time coming up here.

“Or maybe,” he added with a pat of his sidearm, “we all just admit to ourselves that those two don’t know where the King is and we put them both out of our misery?”

“I don’t know about you,” she replied quietly as she prepared to bring the shuttle down on the pad, “but I like my current rank. So why don’t we leave the decisions regarding their fate to the Regent and focus on doing our job?”

“Just a suggestion,” he unbuckled from his chair as the shuttle settled on the snowy pad. “But mark my words, sooner or later those two will need to be put down.”

“If that is to be it isn’t our decision to make. Let’s get our job done and go home, okay?”

With a curt bow he exited the flight cabin, only slightly slamming the hatch shut behind him. As she worked the post-flight checklist she saw the outer hatch ramp light flicker to life, indicating he’d exited the ship. From her position she could not see the entrance to the main building but she doubted he’d waste much time out in the bitter cold admiring the view.

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He didn't bother knocking before entering, for one it was too damned cold to stand around outside waiting for someone to answer the door. For the other, as far as he was concerned, these two weren't worthy of the kind of consideration that granted them any right to privacy.

So he just activated the latch and pushed his way through the hatchway into what passed as the "palace" of Arthureal and Darieann in their two-person icy kingdom. Looking around as he closed the hatch behind him against the bitter cold he was surprised to see they'd managed to keep the place somewhat neat and clean.

A little honest work is just what they needed. But the disgraced couple were nowhere to be seen, nor could he hear any sounds of someone moving about.

"Arthureal," his voice boomed out and echoed in the large living area. "Darieann! Your supplies are here. You'll need to help get them unloaded otherwise we'll just dump them out on the pad and leave. Unless of course you've come to your senses and are willing to tell us where the King is?"

Stone cold silence was his answer. *Where are they? Are they up to something?* He worked his way around the large room but found no sign of them, nor were they in the dining area or hiding in a cabinet in the food prep area.

That left the sleeping area. *Maybe they decided to sleep in? Its not like there's a lot to do up here.* He opened the door to that area and saw the disgraced Queen sleeping on the bed. Next to her, on the other side of the bed appeared to be Arthureal, lying under the covers and turned away from the door on his side.

“Come on you two,” he barked. “You can be lazy and sleep the day away on your own time. We’ve got supplies to unload.”

But neither figure moved or gave any indication that he’d been heard. *Was she even breathing? Had they decided to kill themselves up here after all?* He stepped closer, unable to tell if either were still alive.

He was only inches from Darieann’s face when her eyes suddenly flew wide open. Startled, he stumbled back and stepped right into the heavy pipe Arthureal – who had been hiding behind him just out of sight from the entrance way – was swinging at his skull.

He never had time to register the pain from the impact as the pipe crushed his skull. He was dead even before his knees made contact with the floor.



The pilot wrapped up the post-flight checklist and was just getting started on the pre-flight for the return journey home when she saw the ramp light wink out.

GALEN'S BLADE

That was fast. Maybe those two have decided to come to their senses after all.

The cabin hatch opened behind her and she set the checklist down before turning to address her co-pilot. But instead of a friendly face all she saw was the business end of a blaster and the snarling smirk of the face of Arthureal behind it.

“I am very sorry, my dear. But there is only room for two on this flight.”

Before she could utter a word of protest, Arthureal pulled the trigger.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER FOUR

Cassandra barely had time to spool the engines of the *Tempest* down before Rhiannon was out of her seat. She did just manage to get the ramp down and the hatch open before the Regent was out of the ship. Rhiannon waved off several members of the Court, who'd hoped to greet her on her return, and headed straight for the Medico area to check on Galen's status.

Lir, despite his age, was doing well to keep up with her. He waved at one of the courtiers to follow. He knew the young man would have any updates they'd need to hear – just as soon as the Regent was ready to hear them. Rhiannon all but charged down the corridors and marched directly over to Galen's tube. The healer treating him was likely the best in the known Galaxy and he was going over the latest readouts from the tube's monitors as she approached.

“How is he?”

“No change since the last update, Regent,” the healer shook her head sadly. “We've simply never seen anything like this before. His body is fully healed, and has been now for the past four lunes. He should have been awakened then as the tube has been programed to do. But for

whatever reason, he is not and the tube's programming is not forcing the issue as it should.

"We've tried some small adjustments," she continued. "But no matter what we do, either something is preventing him from awakening or he just doesn't want to wake up. Again, I can find no record anywhere of anything like this occurring before."

"Can the programming be overridden completely?" Lir asked. "Force him to wake up?"

"Theoretically we could," she replied. "But that option is not recommended. I did some research while you were away. There have been three recorded attempts to do what you have suggested. All three ended fatally for the patient.

"No," she set aside the readouts. "I believe our best course of action is to remain patient and let the tube do its job until Galen himself is ready."

"How much longer should we wait?" Rhiannon asked, a tremor in her voice.

"He could wake up any moment," the healer replied. "But, if his condition remains unchanged after another six lunes...perhaps then we'll have to look at alternative treatment plans. But we must prepare ourselves for the possibility that if he has not exited the tube by then, he likely won't ever at all."

Rhiannon paled suddenly, clearly stricken by this bit of news. She turned away sat next to the head of the tube, gently laying her hand over the clear glass situated above Galen's head.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Do not give up hope, my lady,” Lir moved over to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’ve known him nearly his entire life. As long as his heart is still beating he has a fighting chance to defeat any opponent. And that goes for death itself.”

“He is right, Regent,” the healer agreed. “Given his condition when he was found it is a miracle he has even made it this far. The severity of the injuries, and whatever he was exposed to when he triggered that sphere, could be why its taking him so long to return to us.”

Rhiannon nodded but kept her gaze on Galen’s face. Both the healer and Lir withdrew, giving her some privacy. A young man in uniform rushed into the room and started toward her, but Lir held up a hand to stop him. He gestured for the officer to come to him.

“Yes, what is it?”

“My pardon, sir, but the supply ship to Woja Keep has disappeared. It should be on its return flight home by now but we aren’t seeing it on our screens nor is it answering any hails.”

“When was the last contact?”

“The pilot reported they’d landed at Woja and would be off-loading as soon as possible. She anticipated less than an hour before they’d be heading back. That was three hours ago.”

“Send two scout ships up to see if they can locate the missing ship,” Lir ordered.

“We can’t, sir,” the young man replied. “The weather up there has deteriorated badly. It isn’t safe to fly in it and the interference is preventing us from seeing anything with our orbital satellites.”

Lir sighed heavily.

“Very well. When is the storm expected to clear up enough to send a recon flight up?”

“It’s a bad one, sir. It could be several days.”

“If there’s one constant in the universe its that you can’t do a blasted thing about the weather,” Lir grumbled. “Keep doing whatever is possible to locate that missing ship. Let’s hope they were still at the Keep when the weather turned and they’ve decided to ride it out up there with our prisoners.”

“Should I inform the Regent?”

“No, son, I’ll tend to that when she is done here. Go on about your duties.”

The officer snapped off a sharp salute, spun on his heel and departed. Lir did his best not to look concerned. But there was something about this news that put him in ill humor, even though he couldn’t place why.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”



Rhiannon sat silently next to the medtube for two hours before rising. She leaned over as close to the glass as she could and whispered to the sleeping man that she would return a little later. As Regent, she could not sit at his side every minute of every day. But she knew she could

GALEN'S BLADE

spend an hour or two here and there, trusting that if she were needed they would let her know.

Reluctantly, she turned away from Galen's bedside. She was the Regent and there was always something that needed her attention in that role. She was not surprised to see Lir standing guard by the door. She treasured the old man's counsel, and his friendship. She could see why a young Galen would come to view the man as the father he never knew. His brow was furrowed slightly. Something was troubling him.

"Is there something wrong, Lir?"

"Possibly, my lady," he replied grimly. "The supply ship to Woja Keep is overdue. They should have returned an hour ago. There has been no sign of them since they landed at Woja. Their transponder is not transmitting and we have not been able to communicate with the ship. There is a severe polar storm, which is blocking visual contact from our comsats in orbit, which means they could be riding it out up there until the weather clears. Still..."

"...it is concerning," she finished when he paused. "Keep me informed on that ship's status."

"Of course."

"I meant to ask you this on the flight back. How goes the recruiting for the Galactic Knights?"

"Not as well as I'd hoped, my lady," Lir shook his head sadly. "There is interest. But they need a real leader they can follow. Someone with a record of action that inspires them to be better than they are, even without saying a single word."

“Someone like Galen,” she said quietly.

“Precisely,” Lir agreed. “A man who stood alone against over thirty capital ships, and defeated them all. A man who literally came back from the dead. Such a man they would follow. We would likely need a whole planet to house the volunteers.”

“And what if he doesn’t wake up?” she finally gave voice to her deepest fear.

“Then we will do exactly what he’d expect of us,” Lir responded firmly. “We will carry on.”

“One cycle ago I had everything in life I thought I could possibly want,” she said softly. “I knew nothing of plots to end the Alliance and install an Empire in its place. I’d never heard of Galen Dwyn.

“Now, I can’t imagine living a life without him in it,” she looked back at the medtube.

“I love that boy as if he were my own flesh and blood son,” Lir clasped her hands in his. “And I cannot imagine living in a universe without him in it either. But, if fate has determined it to be so, then we will find a way. For his sake, if for no other reason.”

“Of course,” she favored him with a sad smile. “I will be in the throne room for a while. I need some time alone.”

“I will stay here with him,” Lir replied, letting go of her hands. “And the moment we hear from the missing ship, I will inform you.”

“Thank you.”

She walked along the corridors in silent thought, reaching the throne room in a few minutes time. The hall was empty, as it was most of

the time since her uncle and mother had been arrested for their crimes. She came here once a day, when she needed a quiet place to gather her thoughts.

So much had happened in less than a cycle. Suddenly she was no longer a Princess with only mundane duties of the Court and the occasional off-world trip to serve as a representative of her world at a minor function.

Now she was literally at the center of the known universe, a power player in the Alliance on the same level as the Chancellor himself. Then there were her duties to her world as Regent, until her father could be returned to his rightful place on the throne. She looked at the empty chair, a purple velvet cushioned seat and back set within a golden frame, a fervently wished he were there now. She felt the weight of responsibility lying heavy on her shoulders, an equal weight to the one on her heart, as she worried over Galen's fate as well as her father's.

Oh for the days when I was a child and dreamed of being the Princess in Mama's stories. Rescued by a Knight in shining armor and whisked away to a fairytale land where nothing but good things happened.

She had been rescued by a Knight, after a fashion, but the fairytale "Happily ever after" hadn't materialized. She'd been shortchanged that part of the story. She gave herself a firm mental shake.

Enough self-pity, she scolded herself, there is work to be done.

A noise behind her made her turn quickly. She gasped in surprise, at first thinking her father had magically returned, summoned by her wish to see him home safe. She then recoiled two steps in shock as she realized

who it was actually standing before her, a smirking grin on his face and an upraised sword in his hand.

Not my father, but my uncle, Arthureal!

“Surprise, dear niece,” he sneered.

“How did you get here?” she managed to get out, halting her initial retreat.

“I’m afraid your two pilots weren’t amenable to letting us come home,” he replied. “You’ll have to recruit some replacements...or rather, whoever takes over after I’ve killed you will have to do so.”

“Is that all you’ve come back for,” she eased closer to the throne. There was a call button there where help could be summoned. But she needed to get closer and then stay alive long enough for aid to arrive first. “Just to kill me?”

“Absolutely,” he followed her step for step. “You’ve seen to it that I’ll never take the throne. So I’ll have to settle for killing you. Then we’ll head off to where my brother is being held and dispatch him.”

“So my mother is in on this too? You didn’t kill her when you had a chance?”

“Your mother still has her uses,” he replied. “And you can stop trying to reach the call button now, unless you prefer to die a few moments earlier.”

She pulled up, a few agonizing feet short of her salvation, and stood up as tall and straight as she could. She settled for the coldest glare she could muster even as she planned her next step.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Much better. You’d have never made it anyway. As I was saying, your mother is standing guard over the ship we’ll be leaving this wretched hellhole world on. After we’ve seen to Iodocus, we’ll make contact with a few allies you haven’t caught up with yet. Make no mistake, all you did was delay the inevitable. My Empire will be born. I’m almost sorry you won’t be alive to see it in all of its glory.”

He raised the sword slightly and she prepared to make some kind of last-ditch effort to stop him, even though she had no idea what she could do. But before she could move, her uncle’s blade smashed into the blade of an extended Bata’van sword with a ringing clang that echoed throughout the hall, halting his blade’s progress a few inches from its intended site of impact.

She saw the shocked look on her uncle’s face turn to fear as he followed the length of the blocking blade back to its owner. She had suspected that Lir had somehow come to her rescue but that suspicion turned out to be very wrong as she too turned to look at the blade’s owner.

Standing there, in a fighting crouch, blade arm extended, still wearing the thin medtube coverlet that left nothing to the imagination, and drops of the fluid from the medtube dripping off of him and onto the marble floor, was Galen Dwyn.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER FIVE

Galen stood there looking every bit like a god who'd taken hominid form. Every inch of him seemed chiseled from granite, and to her it seemed he'd added muscle mass since she'd last seen him, as if his time in the tube had somehow built up his frame.

Before either Rhiannon or her uncle could utter a single word, Galen shifted his position, the move driving Arthureal away from her. Almost panther-like, Galen pounced on the older man, the fist wrapped around the hilt of his blade driving into his opponent's jaw, driving him back into a wall.

The double impact must have hurt for she saw her uncle wince in pain and nearly double over. But he recovered quickly and swung his blade at Galen, who easily parried the blow, a god playing with a mouse. He then quickly latched onto Arthureal's sword hand and twisted sharply. The older man screamed as she heard his wrist snap and he quickly dropped the blade.

Galen's own blade moved faster than she thought possible, starting low and driving upward, its intended target was Arthureal's chin with an intended destination clearly being the top of his skull.

“Galen, no!!!!” she shouted, just as the tip made contact with her uncle’s skin.



It was her voice that stopped him more than the shouted words. He heard many footsteps rushing into the hall behind him and to his left. Keeping his hold on Arthureal’s wrist and his sword point at the man’s throat, where a small trickle of red began to well up, Galen glanced over to see Lir standing several feet away with a bundle of fabric in his arms. Behind his old mentor was a half-dozen palace guards. He shifted his gaze to his right as Rhiannon stepped up and placed a trembling hand on his shoulder.

“Harmool is dead and he’s the only one who knows where my father is,” she explained in answer to his questioning look. “If you kill him now, you kill my father. Please, Galen.”

“Your father?” Galen’s voice was barely louder than a whisper. Suddenly, he was no longer in the room with a traitor at sword point. He found himself in a different room, a filthy cell actually, with one lone occupant. A man who looked very much like the man he’d just been about to kill.

Iodocus.

Just as suddenly he was flying up and away from the cell, to see the outside of the structure where the King was being held and then the planet

GALEN'S BLADE

itself. He knew this world, knew where it was and how to find it and the missing King, even though he had no clue as to *how* he knew these things.

But his traveling was not yet concluded. He felt himself flying a great distance in space and time until he came upon a great battle. A vast area of darkness, blacker than even space itself, and somehow alive. Evil radiated off of it in waves that slammed painfully into him. He spotted a line of warriors, Knights in battle suits, waging war against the darkness. By the hundreds they fell and by the hundreds more rose to take the places of the fallen.

And just beyond them, almost at the limits of his vision, he spotted something behind the line of Knights. Something not-Hominid, yet similar in a strange way. It spoke several words in a language he'd never heard before. Then it seemed to look back at him and spoke two words in a language he did know:

NOT YET.

And then he was back in the hall with Rhiannon looking at him strangely and his sword still at Arthureal's throat. He blinked twice and shook his head, still processing whatever he'd seen in the vision he'd just experienced.

"You father," he repeated without making it a question this time, "is alive. He's being held prisoner on a planet in the Wilds called Eowei."

"How did you kn..." Arthureal sputtered in shock against the blade tip still digging into his skin. A trickle of blood made its way down his throat.

“What matters to you is that I know, and you just confirmed it,” Galen replied, shifting his weight again to deliver the final thrust. “Which means we no longer have need of you and it is time for you to pay for your crimes.”

“Galen, stop,” Rhiannon said gently.

“After all that he has done, you would spare him?”

“Spare him? No. But we are a civilization of laws. He will face judgement and pay for his crimes. Lawfully. Killing him like this only serves vengeance, not justice.”

“Listen to her, Galen,” Lir approached slowly from the other side.

“You know she is right.”

No one dared move, especially Arthureal, as they all waited to see what Galen would do next. The moment was broken by the arrival of several more members of the guard, escorting a figure dressed in the same pilot’s uniform worn by Arthureal.

“Mother,” Rhiannon exclaimed. “Where did you find her?”

“She was waiting inside the missing supply ship just outside the palace wall,” the guard Captain replied. “They’d turned off the transponder and flew back below our scanner range so we couldn’t see them coming.”

“And the pilots?”

“They weren’t on the ship. Judging from the blood in the cockpit and on her uniform, I doubt we’ll find them alive when we’re able to return to Woja Keep, Regent.”

GALEN'S BLADE

"You still want me to hold my blade?" Galen's voice was both cold and yet full of heat.

"Yes, I do," she replied. "As much as I would want to allow you to do what you ask, as Regent, I can't indulge my desire for revenge."

For a moment all was still and silent as those assembled waited. Galen shifted once again, but instead of a fountain of blood rushing from Arthureal's head, he let go of the broken wrist, flipped his own sword to his left hand, grabbed Arthureal by the collar and threw him toward the guards. Arthureal was by no means a small man yet it seemed that he'd been tossed aside like a child's rag doll.

"Take those two away before I change my mind," Galen growled.

The Captain and the guards moved to obey without thinking before the Captain stopped and asked: "Regent?"

"You heard him," she replied. "Take those two to a cell and prepare them for the Magistrate. Let justice be done upon them both for all the suffering they have caused."

"Regent?" Galen shot a curious look at her as the prisoners were escorted out. "Not Princess?"

"Regent, until my father returns to retake his throne."

Galen looked around and noticed everyone remaining in the room was staring at him strangely.

"What?"

"Perhaps you'd like to put this on," Lir said, unfolding the robe he'd carried into the room as he stepped closer.

"I'm not cold," Galen replied.

“Perhaps not,” Lir answered with a small grin. “But I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to wander about as you are currently attired.”

“What’s wrong with my att...,” Galen paused as he looked down. The sheer material, still soaked from the medtube might as well have been perfectly clear in color. Nor did it cover anything below the torso. He felt heat in his cheeks and was sure it was showing there just as well as, well the rest of him was.

With a grateful nod at Lir, he retracted his blade and slipped into the robe – which managed to reach down to his knees. He tied it off with a handy loop to slip the blade into.

“Better?” he asked.

“Much,” Lir agreed, modesty restored. “Although I’m quite certain the ladies of the Court will be disappointed.”

Galen felt the heat again and saw a slight blush on Rhiannon’s face as well. They were saved any further comment when one of the palace aides rushed into the room.

“Sir,” she said, handing a communique to Lir. “We have received a message from a ‘Jaq’, coded high priority for you.”

“Jaq?” Galen asked. “Not the same Jaq on Arkon...”

“Actually it is one and the same,” Lir replied, scanning the document. He slowly looked up and gave Galen an odd look. “What was the name of the planet you said the King was being held on?”

“Eowei.”

GALEN'S BLADE

“This message was sent two hours ago and as far as I know there is no way you could have seen it, or otherwise have intercepted it. Your friend Jaq reports that his contact is all but certain that King Iodocus is being held on Eowei.”

A shocked hush fell over the room. Even Galen found himself at a loss for words.

“How exactly did you know where Iodocus was being held?” Lir asked.

“I...,” Galen paused. How could he explain when he himself still didn’t know? A vision that just popped into his head?

They’d have me locked up as a madman.

“I figured there was no way they’d have hidden him on an Alliance world,” he lied. “There’d be too much of a risk that someone would see him and raise the alarm. So, it had to be somewhere in the Wilds. And if you need to have something remain hidden and unseen in the Wilds, Eowei is the place you go to. Simple as that. It seems Harmool knew about the place and its reputation as well.”

“I see,” Lir replied, not looking at all like he was buying it but not saying anything aloud in protest. Yet.

“If our King is being held on Eowei,” the Captain said turning to leave the room, “then we will mount a rescue mission and retrieve him. I will send a fleet within the hour.”

“You will do no such thing!” a voice boomed out, a no one was more surprised than Galen that it had been his voice. The Captain froze in his tracks and everyone was staring at Galen once again.

“If you want your King to be killed as soon as your fleet arrives in orbit above Eowei,” Galen explained, “then by all means, send a fleet. He’ll be dead before you can even land there.

“The way to do this is to send a single, non-military ship,” he continued. “With a small strike team. We’ll just be another smuggler in the Wilds. We’ll be among them before they know we’re there. That’s the best chance we have to save Iodocus.

“Where is my ship?” Galen turned to Lir.

“Here, on the pad outside the palace,” Lir replied. “Cass says hello, and that its about time you woke up.”

“Tell her to...”

“...shut up,” Lir finished with a grin and a tap on his earpiece.

“Yes, she knows.”

“Good,” Galen replied. “Tell her to get ready to go to Eowei within the hour. Captain.”

“Yes, sir?”

“You will select three of your best fighting men,” Galen instructed.

“They need to be able to move quickly and quietly and they need to be able to handle themselves in a fight. Guns, blades and fists. Get them assembled, geared up, and on board the *Tempest* in half an hour.”

The Captain snapped a quick salute and turned to obey, the ring of command in Galen’s voice making him forget he answered to the Regent.

“One moment, Captain,” Rhiannon said. “If you think, Galen Dwyn, that you’re going to go off to rescue my father without me going

GALEN'S BLADE

along, then you are going to find that your ship will not be cleared to takeoff anytime soon.”

“I might add,” Lir joined in, “that that goes double for me.” He paused, cocking his head as if listening to something only he could hear. “And apparently triple for Cass.”

A silent battle of wills was fought and Galen quickly realized this was not the hill to die on.

“Captain,” he said around a sigh. “You will see to it that my ship is fully fueled and provisioned for seven for a duration of half a lune.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Captain,” the harried man turned back once again. “Get four cots for you and your men and see to it that they are loaded aboard the *Tempest*. There are only two cabins in my ship and they’re already spoken for.”

“Yes, sir!” the Captain turned away and all but sprinted out of the hall before he could be summoned back. The hall was now vacant save the three of them.

“Now then, young man,” Lir began kindly, but sternly. “You want to tell us the real reason how you knew where the King was? Or perhaps you’d like to start by telling us how you knew the Regent was in danger and how you got to her so quickly?”

“I told you, it was the most logical place to start with for anyone who knows the Wilds,” Galen protested. “And it is my business to know about the Wilds.”

“We’ll assume I actually believe that for a second,” Lir crossed his arms. “Which I actually don’t because I saw your face when you were first asked and I saw a brief flash of panic cross it. You are not a man given to panic, my boy, so when you do – even for a moment – it shines like a beacon in the night.

“So I’ll ask you another question,” he continued. “What is the last thing you remember before showing up here to stop Arthureal’s assassination attempt?”

“What are you babbling about?” Galen protested. “What does that have to do with...”

“Humor an old man and answer the question,” Lir held up the palm of his hand. “What is the last thing you remember before charging into this hall? I’ll help you out. Let’s start with you in the sphere staring down Harmool’s fleet. You bade us all goodbye, told us Arthureal was posing as his brother and then you activated the sphere. Then...?”

Then what indeed. Galen thought back, remembering his suicidal stand against that fleet. His brow furled in concentration as he worked his way back. Lir and Rhiannon waited in patient silence.

“I triggered the sphere,” Galen finally began, slowly at first then picking up steam. “There was light everywhere. Even when I closed my eyes the light poured right through my eyelids. Then heat. I could feel it...as if every cell in my body were on fire.”

He closed his eyes briefly against the remembered pain, then opened them, looking down at his arms where they weren’t covered by the sleeves of his robe. They were perfectly healed now, but he knew that

they'd been horribly blackened. He could remember the pain and the smell of burning flesh. He shook his head against the memory and continued on.

"Then the heat went away and the light faded. When I opened my eyes, the sphere was gone. It was cool and I was standing in an endless sea of mist."

"And then?" Lir prompted when Galen paused and looked away.

"You won't believe me."

"We'll believe you," Rhiannon promised.

"The next thing I knew, Galen Underwood stepped out of the mist and started talking to me about the past, the present and the future."

"*The* Galen Underwood, of the Galactic Knights of the Murky Way?" Lir exclaimed.

"The same."

"I don't believe you!" Lir said.

"I told you that you wouldn't," Galen quipped, but his heart wasn't in it.

"What did he say?"

"A lot of things, some that made no sense to me then. But he told me I had a choice. That I could continue on with him, or come back here. I chose here. Then I heard Rhea speaking, but I couldn't make out the words. As I tried to get closer I... felt I suppose is as good a word as any... that she was in danger and then I was here. I saw Arthureal raise his sword against her and I stopped him. The rest you know as well as I."

Lir exchanged a look with Rhiannon.

"What?" Galen demanded.

“Galen, you triggered the sphere six lunes ago,” Rhiannon explained. “They found you in some sort of lifepod that had been ejected from the sphere just as Harmool and his entire fleet was vaporized. They placed you in a medtube, gravely wounded, and rushed you back here to Salacia.”

“Which is where you have remained for nearly six full lunes,” Lir took over the narrative, “until just a few minutes ago when you erupted from your tube with such violence that you sheared off the hinges of the access hatch like they were made of paper.

“You then bolted straight for the door and somehow managed to collect your Bata’van blade along the way, despite it being several feet from your tube and in the opposite direction from where you were heading,” Lir paused. “I was in the room Galen and I swear the blade seemed to fly into your hand and you caught it without looking back.”

Lir stopped again, letting that part of the story sink in.

“Then, despite being unconscious up until that moment and having no clue where Rhiannon might be, you ran straight to her just in time to save her life. And in case it has escaped your notice, you threw a grown man around this room like he was an empty grain sack. You might also take note that you seemed to have gained some muscle mass while in that tube, which is also something that doesn’t happen.

“So, do you have an explanation for all of these curious events?”

Galen thought it over for a moment, then gave up. He didn’t even have an explanation that he could believe.

GALEN'S BLADE

"No, I don't," he finally answered. "And we don't have time to waste right now trying to find one. If I can have my earcom back."

He held out a hand and Lir quickly removed it from his ear and handed it over.

"We're going to have to figure out exactly what has happened to you sooner or later," he chided.

"We'll have plenty of time to sort it out on the flight out to Eowei," Galen replied, slipping the earcom into place. "In the meantime, you have half an hour to get packed and get aboard the *Tempest*. Otherwise, clearance or not, I'm leaving without you. And Cass, shut up!"

She must have protested her innocence because he quickly added, "You were about to say something, I'm just saving time."

Without turning, he addressed the two guards stationed outside the entrance.

"You two, if you're done guarding the paint out there, get in here now," Galen barked.

The two guards, stepped around from the other side, the looks on their face a match to those on Lir and Rhiannon's.

"How did you know they were out there?" Lir asked. As he wasn't expecting an answer, he wasn't surprised when he didn't get one. Galen turned around and addressed the men.

"You will escort the Regent wherever she goes until she has safely boarded my ship," Galen ordered. "We've already had one attempt on her life today. That is one too many and I will not tolerate any additional attempts. Am I clear?"

“Yes, sir!” Both men snapped to attention and saluted as Galen strode out of the hall. No one said a word until he was long gone.

“What are you grinning about?” Rhiannon asked, getting a look at Lir’s face. “Aren’t you worried that something might be wrong with him?”

“Perhaps there is,” Lir admitted. “And we will certainly have to keep an eye on him until we figure out just what happened to him.

“But have you noticed how everyone in this room responded to him?” Lir continued. “Unquestioning obedience without a second thought to a man with no official rank or title. We spoke earlier about needing to find someone for the Knights to rally behind. I think we have found our Knight Commander, my lady. The problem may be finding a planet large enough to house all the Knights who will flock here to follow that man’s banner.”

CHAPTER SIX

Harmool had to admit that the *Silver Bird* was a much more comfortable ship than the one he'd been found in. Especially after he'd convinced them to tidy it up a bit following his two-week stay in a cheap medtube. He was healed enough to be ambulatory, but his body was horribly scarred and he weakened easily.

Fortunately he knew of a scientist on Eowei, where he'd stashed the kidnapped Iodocus some time ago, who was experimenting with transferring hominid consciousness into android bodies. Being one who thought long-term, Harmool knew sooner or later his body would age and fail. This was an unacceptable outcome to one with plans to rule the universe for a very long time.

So Harmool had bankrolled the man's efforts, never dreaming he'd need the man's services quite so soon. He'd contacted him shortly after realizing that there was no hope for further recovery in the shell he was currently trapped in. While Harmool continued to contact his allies in both the Alliance and the Wilds – keeping as low a profile as possible – he continued getting progress reports from Eowei.

When the latest report indicated that the first transfer test had been a success and that the android would be ready for him with a half-lune Harmool's rescuers had outlived their usefulness. He invited them to a meeting in one of the empty cargo bays of the ship, closed the hatch behind them and then opened the outer hatch to space.

"Healer Mori," Harmool recorded a message from the bridge. "I am delighted to hear of your success. I am arranging a final payment to be sent to you as we speak. I will arrive on Eowei in ten days to submit to the procedure. You have my eternal gratitude and I will reward you for your services well beyond what we've already agreed upon."

Harmool sent the message off, set the ship on course for Eowei at best speed, and then closed his eyes as he sat back in the pilot seat. He found that an occasional catnap of a few minutes restored him. Fortunately, the ship could fly itself so he would not have to worry about over-exerting himself. Once at Eowei and in his new body those concerns would no longer exist. He could move on with his plans to establish an Empire. But now, it would encompass the Wilds as well as the Alliance.

And once he was certain his new body was functioning as promised, and he'd secured the information on how the process worked, he would reward Healer Mori. The same way he'd rewarded the crew of the *Silver Bird*.

As for Iodocus, well, the need for a scapegoat no longer existed. He could of course contact the jailer to have him dispatched. But Harmool reserved the pleasure of ridding the universe of King Iodocus for himself. To make sure the job was done properly.

GALEN'S BLADE

It was better to keep things nice and tidy that way, he smiled broadly as the ship flew on to his destiny.



“We’re receiving a hail from Eowei Approach,” Cass announced as the *Tempest* neared orbital insertion around the dull grey world. “They say its regarding an issue with the Mayor of one of the seaport cities.”

“He was cheating at cards,” Galen protested. “I could have just shot him instead of breaking his nose.”

“Apparently the issue is the Planetary Governor wanted to reward you at the time but you took off too fast,” Cass said. “There’s a credit chip for five thousand waiting for you at the portmaster’s office, a standing order for the *Tempest* to be given the prime berth at the Capitol landing pad and your money is no good at any of the bars down below.”

Everyone on the flight deck stared at Galen. Lir looked bemused. Rhiannon just shook her head and the four Salacian soldiers looked at Galen like he was a god.

“Its good to have friends in high places,” Galen quipped. “Send my thanks to the Governor and line us up for landing at the assigned berth.

“As for the bars,” he continued looking at his crew, “that will have to wait until our next visit. Let’s make this short and sweet. The building where Iodocus is being held is not far from the pad we’re heading for. We caught a break there.

“But,” he added, “we’ll have to walk it there and walk back – with an injured man - without being noticed. And even out of your monkey suits the four of you still look too much like soldiers than pirates for my taste. So, eyes down, don’t engage with anyone in any way. If we’re challenged, I do all the talking. Clear?”

Four heads nodded.

“Good. Lir?”

“I’ve got all the meds you requested in this bag.” Lir tapped the canvas bag looped over his shoulder. “The healers strongly recommended against using two of them on a man of Iodocus’ age and assumed condition.”

“They aren’t here trying to pull off a rescue with said man in said condition,” Galen retorted. “If he’s not able to move on his own, those two meds will get him up and going long enough to get back here. We’ll put him in a medtube until we get back to Salacia if we have to.”

“They could kill him,” Lir pointed out.

“If we don’t get him out, he’ll die anyway,” Galen answered. “I’m sorry Rhea, but which do you think he’d prefer?”

“He’d want to take the chance to regain his freedom,” she nodded. “Even if the attempt cost him his life.”

The ship settled down on the pad with a slight thump.

“Its time,” Galen got up from his seat. “My preference is to get in, get him, get back here and get off planet quickly and quietly. But, if that option is closed to us then I’ll call for you, Cass. Bring the *Tempest* in fast and hot, shoot anything shooting at us or the ship and then get us into

GALEN'S BLADE

space even faster. I doubt we'll be welcome here ever again, but if we leave with the King on board then that's a price I'll gladly pay.

"Everyone ready?" he waited for six nods before setting his gaze on Rhiannon. "Then let's go get your father out of there."

They exited the ship, Galen had to quickly remind them not to march in single file like soldiers and finally got them to look like a group of smugglers on the way to complete a transaction. They were halfway to their destination, a large white building at the top of a hill, when they ran into someone Galen knew all too well.

"Galen Dwyn!" a male voice boomed out from a small crowd up ahead. "What are you doing slumming out here in the Wilds?"

"Just tending to some business, Deter," Galen replied after muttering a curse under his breath. "As much as I'd like to catch up, I am running late. I'm told I have an open tab at every bar in the city. Why don't you find a place, tell them you're with me and enjoy some free booze?"

"Works for me," Deter smiled. "So, who're your friends?"

"I'll be happy to introduce them," Galen waved his group on, "after we finish what we came here to do. See you around, Deter."

Galen hurried off to catch up with the others, not turning around to see if Deter was heading for the nearest bar, or following him. When no further sound came from Deter, he assumed it was the former and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Who was that?" Rhiannon asked as he rejoined the team.

“Someone I’d rather had not known I was here,” Galen explained without stopping. “Let’s pick up the pace before we run into another undesirable reunion.”

Galen drew up to a stop at the base of the steps leading up to the building. At the top of the steps lay the lone visible entrance, guarded by a burly looking man, a holstered blaster his only apparent weapon. The door was off solid metal with no window or port. There were no windows anywhere to be seen on the three-story structure.

“Good,” he whispered. “Kiln being on guard duty makes this a whole lot easier.”

Before anyone could ask him why, Galen started up the twenty-step incline to the entrance and the others quickly scrambled up behind him. Galen kept his head down so that Kiln could not recognize him until it was too late.

“You!” the man exclaimed, one hand scrambled to draw his weapon, the other raised in a defensive gesture. But it was too late. Galen was as close as he needed to be. Kiln’s eyes went wide as Galen’s blade sank into his chest.

Leaving the dead man pinned against the wall, Galen grabbed the guard’s right hand and pressed it against a rectangular black pad near the door. It gave off a brief hum, then the door opened with a slight click. Galen withdrew the blade and left the dead guard propped up against the wall before pushing the door open.

“Was that really necessary?” Lir asked.

GALEN'S BLADE

"If you'd seen the face of the woman he carved up when I was here last," Galen replied as he stepped through, "you wouldn't ask me that question. Let's go."

Slipping inside Galen headed for the first open door they encountered in the foyer. A young-looking man, dressed in an all-black uniform similar to a healer's, looked up. His eyes darted back and forth among his seven visitors.

"C-Can I help you?" he managed to stammer out.

"We'd like to speak with whoever is in charge," Galen answered.

"I'm afraid he isn't available right n-owwwwwww!!!!"

The point of Galen's blade lightly jabbed just under the man's chin.

"Make him available," Galen said amiably. "We are a bit pressed for time."

"He's in his office," the man squeaked out, his eyes pointing toward a closed door at the rear of the room.

"Thank you," Galen said, withdrawing the blade. "Captain, kindly take charge of this man."

Gently shoving the man into the Captain's arm, Galen walked over to the indicated door and, without bothering to knock, kicked it in and entered. The sounds of a brief struggle, and a strangled cry of outrage, carried out into the office where the others waited. Within seconds Galen exited, holding an older looking man in similar garb by the scruff of the neck.

“Let me go you barbarian,” the man protested feebly, unable to break free of Galen’s iron grip. “You have no right...”

“What I have is no time,” Galen cut him off. “And even less patience. You are holding a man prisoner here. His name is Iodocus. You *will* take us to him. *Now*.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” he choked out. “We are a research facility, not a prison...”

Galen’s blade reappeared, this time he fully extended it.

“You will take us to Iodocus now,” Galen repeated. “Or, the last thing you will see in this life is your beating heart in the palm of my hand.”

The older man’s eyes widened.

“I’ll take you to him right now,” the older man withered in front of their eyes. “He’s down the hall, through that door over there.”

“Good,” Galen retracted the blade and hooked it on his belt before hauling the man across the room toward the second door. “Captain, see to it that our friend there doesn’t raise an alarm.”

A quick blow to the back of the head rendered the younger man unconscious and the Captain ordered his men to bind and gag him. They made quick work of it. With Galen hauling his prisoner in the lead, they made their way down the passage.

“Here,” the older man stopped them at a red door with another black access panel to the side. “He’s in there.”

“Open the door,” Galen commanded, drawing his blaster. The four soldiers followed suit and Lir quickly moved to place himself between the

GALEN'S BLADE

door and Rhiannon. The older man pressed his palm against the panel and the red door whisked open. Galen charged in, using his captive as a shield.

The room was apparently a laboratory of some sort. In the center of the room was a large medtube. Galen could barely make out the silhouette of a hominid inside, but could not make out any features through the murky mist of the tube's interior. Next to the tube, lying on a gurney with all manner of tubes and wires hooked up to his body, lay Iodocus. Another man in the all-black uniform that was standard issue in this place had been leaning over Iodocus. He jerked up and around at the sound of Galen's entrance.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, but stopped when his eyes settled on the blaster.

"Step away from him, now!" Galen commanded, moving further into the room, blaster leveled on this threat to the King. "I said move!"

The man complied, raising his arms as he backed away from the gurney stopping only when he bumped into a wall. The Captain and his men pushed in, followed by Lir and Rhiannon.

"Father!" she rushed over to the gurney with Lir in tow. When she looked over at the man still under Galen's gun, there was murder in her eyes. "What were you doing to him?"

The man remained silent. A hole noisily appeared in the wall next to his left ear.

"The lady asked you a question," Galen said, a wisp of smoke trailing from the barrel of the blaster.

“My name is Mori...” he replied, then stopped as a second hole noisily appeared in the wall next to his right ear.

“She didn’t ask your name, she asked what were you doing here? Next one splits the difference.”

“I was preparing him for a test,” he stammered out a reply. “I am a researcher. That is an android I have developed for my patron. It is waiting for a consciousness to be downloaded and imprinted into its primary system. This test was to download that man’s consciousness into the buffer to make sure the transfer could be done. Once confirmed, I erase the memory in the buffer without imprinting so that the android will be ready when my patron arrives to be downloaded and imprinted in two days time.”

“And what happens to Iodocus’ consciousness after you erase the memory?” Lir asked, anger crackling in his voice.

“It’s gone. It cannot be redownloaded into his body.”

“And you have no problem with murder?” An outraged Lir was not something one wanted to be facing. The old man looked ready to wring Mori’s neck.

“He’s a criminal, condemned to die in two days,” Mori replied, unfazed. “At least his death would have some meaning even if his life did not.”

“Who told you this man was a criminal,” Galen demanded, “and who ordered his execution.”

Mori said nothing, but looked directly at the man still struggling in Galen’s grip.

GALEN'S BLADE

"This man is a kidnapped King of Salacia," Galen explained to Mori before turning his attention to his captive. "Now, why would you order his execution?"

"I didn't," the man explained. "Harmool ordered it this morning."

Galen threw the man hard against the wall and leveled the blaster at his head.

"Harmool died six lunes ago along with his fleet. No one survived, least of all him. Lie to me again and your shoulders will be missing your head one second later."

"I'm not lying!" the older man screamed in protest. "I have been in contact with Harmool regularly for the last four lunes. The last time was just yesterday when I explained what Mori wanted to do. He told me to proceed."

"Why?"

"Because he was horribly burned escaping the battle you thought he'd died in. His wounds have not fully healed. He is coming here to be transferred into Mori's android two days from now and he wants to be certain that the procedure will work."

Galen started to reply, then stopped and cocked his head.

"What is it, Cass, we're a little busy right now."

Then he swore and even the four soldiers blushed.

"I take it there's a new problem?" Lir asked dryly.

"Yes," Galen nodded. "My 'friend' Deter didn't go to the nearest bar after all. He apparently called his brother, who happens to be the Minister of Planetary Defense."

“But the Planetary Governor is a friend...” Rhiannon began.

“Yes, he is. But the Defense Minister is a married man and his wife’s brother happens to be the...”

“The Mayor you slugged the last time you were here,” Lir finished.

Galen favored him with a ‘there you go’ look.

“Cass, how long until the fighters scramble and get here?” He waited for the answer, nodded. “Very well. Stealth is no longer an option. Get over here as fast as you can. Lock in on our position. Just outside the room we are in is a corridor that ends at the outer wall. Blow a hole in the wall and extend the loading ramp, we’re taking on cargo as well as passengers. What’s your time of arrival here? Fine. Get moving.

“We have two minutes before Cass arrives and blows the wall,” he turned to the others. “And another six minutes after that before the interceptors arrive to try and stop us. You,” he pointed at Mori, “gather up everything you have, notes, schematics, data, whatever could be used to duplicate your work and then get ready to load it and that tube on my ship.”

He looked over at Lir and Rhiannon.

“Do what you can to get him ready.”

“He’s in bad shape,” Lir replied. “There’s not much I can give him that wouldn’t kill him.”

“Just do what you can,” Galen replied. “We’ll carry him out if we have to.”

He pointed at two of the soldiers.

GALEN'S BLADE

"You two help Mori get everything gathered up and loaded onto the ship," he ordered. "Captain, you and the corporal will go out into the passage after Cass blows the wall and provide cover if anyone shows up to see what's going on. And as for you..."

Galen returned his attention to the man who'd ordered Iodocus' execution. Without another word he blew a hole in the man's chest big enough to fly the *Tempest* through.

"Don't even ask if that was necessary," Galen growled at Lir, who knew better than most not to cross Galen Dwyndyn when his blood was up.

Cass announced her arrival with a blast that shook the entire building. The Captain and his back-up leapt out into the hall and called out when they were ready. Galen waved at Mori and the other two members of his team to get moving.

"And get that thing secured once its on board," he added. "We may not have a smooth flight leaving this planet and I don't want it damaged."

The quickly pushed the tube and Mori - who had a considerable pile of material clutched to his chest - out the door and up the ramp into the ship.

"There a reason why we're taking that and being so cautious?" Lir asked.

"Because we might have need of it later," Galen said quietly, looking down at Iodocus, who was not looking well at all. Rhiannon looked up, stricken, but understanding that the possibility existed. He reached over for the bag still looped around Lir's shoulder, tugged at the bottom and caught an ominous-looking cylinder as it dropped out.

“Is that what I think it is?” Lir demanded.

“It is.”

“And you had me carrying that?”

“Would you have carried the bag if you’d known that this was in it?”

“Absolutely not!”

Galen favored him with another “there you go” look.

“My boy, when all the excitement settles down, we are going to have a very long talk.”

“Fine, but for now, let’s get going.”

They got Iodocus up, but Galen and Lir both needed to support him to get him out of the room. Pausing for a moment at the door Galen flipped a switch on the device and tossed it back into the room.

“Captain, lets get moving,” Galen ordered as they made their way to the ramp. “In two minutes this area is going to be very uninhabitable.”

Scrambling up the ramp and into the ship even as Cass was retracting the ramp and pulling away from the building, they got Iodocus into one of the cabins.

“We’ll take it from here,” Lir said. “Get up there and get to work.”

With a nod, Galen got moving, pausing long enough to make sure Mori and his tube were secured.

“You three,” he ordered, “remain here and keep an eye on him. Captain, with me.”

They raced to the flight deck, Galen pointing for the Captain to take the nav seat as he settled into his own chair.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Status?”

“Twenty seconds until detonation,” Cass reported. “We are out of range and at max atmospheric speed. Interceptors are closing. Estimate one minute until they make contact.”

“Manual control now,” Galen replied. “Captain, keep an eye on those ships. We need to keep them just outside their optimum firing range. Cass, bring the mains online and prepare to jump to maximum speed on my command.”

“Galen, if we jump in atmosphere this close to land...”

“We’ll leave one hell of a crater behind us and the shock wave will swat those interceptors like flies,” Galen finished. “Yes, I know.”

“We’d destroy the entire city,” the Captain protested.

“Yes, we would,” Galen snapped, “if we were to do so over the city. Which is why we are not jumping right now. However, we are currently heading for the communications array right next to the planetary defense fleet’s shipyard. Once we’re above that, then we’ll jump, taking out their communications on the ground as well as any ship that could either pursue us or raise the alarm ahead to cut us off from getting back to Alliance space.”

The Captain looked relieved and returned his attention to tracking their pursuers. Cass, however, had a question.

“The building we just left is missing a significant portion of its northern section,” she reported. “There is still an orbital array. They could use that, couldn’t they?”

“Not if we take it out on the way out,” Galen replied. “Which is why our course will take us directly off planet instead of into orbit and we’ll be passing the orbital array on the way by.”

“A pity you didn’t get the chance to enjoy that bar tab,” she remarked. “I don’t think you’ll ever be welcome back here again after today.”

“After today,” Galen replied. “I doubt I’ll have a reason to come back. Are the mains up?”

“They’re up. You know this has never been done before. We just might blow ourselves up in the process.”

“We might.”

“I’ll try to tell you that I told you so before we’re vaporized,” she quipped.

“I’m sure you will. Distance to the array?”

“Over the target in five,” she replied. “Four...three...two...one...”

“Hang on back there,” Galen shouted over the ship’s ‘com as he shoved the power on the mains to full and yanked back hard on the control toggle, jerking the Tempest up a full ninety degrees.

The ship’s structure screamed in protest and shook violently, as if a giant hand had grabbed it, as the mains kicked in and the ship hurtled toward space.



GALEN'S BLADE

The shock wave from the *Tempest's* mains engaging flattened the base, the ships on the tarmac, and the communications array below, leaving a smoking crater of destruction in its wake. The pursuing interceptors were crushed by a solid wall of air formed by the shock wave. In the ensuing chaos, both at the devastated base and back in the city, the *Tempest* was forgotten.



“We are on course for the orbital array,” Cass reportedly loudly, trying to be heard over the screaming ship. “And by on course I mean we are on a collision course. You might want to alter our flight path soon.”

“Not just yet,” Galen replied, rolling the ship over into a vertical attitude in relation to the horizon. Sighting the array, he armed the ships weapons and opened fire as soon as they were out of the atmosphere and within range. Only when the array disappeared in a bloom of destruction did he roll the ship back over and pulled up as much as he could to clear the debris.

“Status?”

“Don’t ask me how,” Cass replied, “but we seem to have sustained no damage. The array, both on the ground and in orbit, have been destroyed.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Maintain our present course until we are out of range of the planet, then turn us back toward Alliance space. Everyone alive back there?”

He received affirmative replies, of varying degrees, that all was well.

“I suppose you’ll get around to letting the rest of us know why all of that was necessary?” Lir asked, taking the third seat on the flight deck.

“If Harmool is on his way to Eowei, we don’t need anyone letting him know what has happened before he gets here,” Galen explained.

“Those two days will buy us just enough time to get back to the relative safety of Alliance space. In case you hadn’t noticed, out here in the Wilds friends can become enemies in a heartbeat.

“As for the King’s jailor,” he continued, “he was the only one we left behind who could tell Harmool that we know he’s alive. He’ll know we have his inventor and the android, but he won’t know that we’re aware he’s still around. Which means he’ll be a little less cautious and possibly a little easier to find.”

“Do we want to find him?” the Captain asked.

“Oh yes, we do. And this time I’m going to make sure to finish what I started when we do. Any other questions, gentlemen?”

“Just one,” Lir chimed in. “There were people back on that base. People who were either killed or badly wounded by our departure. People not after us at the time.”

“Cass,” Galen said quietly. “What were the orders you intercepted when they scrambled the interceptors.”

GALEN'S BLADE

“The *Tempest* was to be tracked down,” she replied. “And destroyed on sight.”

“No quarter given,” Lir remarked.

“And none given,” Galen replied. “It was their call, Lir. When it was made...well, those are the rules out here in the Wilds. You either play by them or you die by them.”

Galen got up, clapping his mentor lightly on the shoulder, and headed back to check on his passengers.



“He did WHAT?” Harmool was livid. Just one day short of Eowei and he was being told of a catastrophe.

That damned Dwyn, he raged, I'll kill him cell by cell when I get my hands on him!

“Why am I just now being informed?” he demanded.

“Because when our mutual friend departed Eowei,” Deter explained, “after blowing the hell out of your little prison and making off with your prisoner, he took out both the surface and orbital long-range communications arrays. He also did a goodly bit of damage for what passes for the planetary defense force and then headed off for deep space.

“It took me awhile to get back up to my ship,” he continued. “Things are a bit chaotic around here right now you know. I called you as soon as I was able to. I figure Galen’s going to wait until he’s cleared

scanner range then turn and head back to Alliance territory. I suppose you are too far away to catch him?”

“I am,” Harmool snarled. He was coming from the opposite direction and he knew *Silver Bird* was no match for the *Tempest*. “And you are certain he took two additional people on board?”

“He went in with a team of seven. Nine people walked out of the building and boarded his ship. Two of them were moving what looked like a large medtube.”

“Fine,” Harmool replied, knowing it had to be Iodocus and Mori that had boarded Dwyn’s ship and in possession of his new body at that. “I will see that you receive a reward for your information.”

Harmool snapped off the com and seethed. He was getting quite tired of Dwyn’s interference in his plans. He’d have to do something about that. But first, the *Tempest* could not be allowed to return to Alliance space. He scanned the charts, checking to see what the most likely route of return Dwyn would make was. More importantly, were there any allies near enough to cut him off.

He smiled grimly as he saw there were in fact just the people he needed to do the job and they were in the right place. He flipped the com back on and put out the call. They were to run the *Tempest* to ground, keeping her away from Alliance space, and recover the tube and Mori. They could do whatever they wanted to the rest of them afterward.

Just as long as whatever it was hurt. Badly. And for a very long time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Iodocus stirred fitfully in the main cabin's bunk. Rhiannon placed a damp cloth on his head and tried to comfort her father as best as she could. They'd given him some of the medicines, as much as they dared given his condition. She and Lir rotated shifts watching over him so the other could rest in the *Tempest's* only other cabin. Mori checked on him every hour.

Galen, who'd refused to allow Mori anywhere near the King initially before relenting to her reasoning that he was the closest thing to a healer on the ship, had taken to sleeping in his flight chair when he wasn't checking on her and the King or flying the ship. Mori, the Captain and the other three men worked out a rotation for the four cots. For the first day, it seemed to work.

"How is he?" Galen asked, slipping into the cabin so quietly he'd startled her. "Sorry."

"No, its alright," she said, standing up. "I just didn't hear you come in. There's no change."

"You look tired," he said, concerned. "Why don't you go lie down for awhile and I'll stay with him until Lir wakes up. He fell asleep in the

navigator's chair and I didn't have the heart to wake him. Cass has the ship well in hand."

"I'd rather sit in here with him for now," she replied, managing a slight smile. "But thank you for offering."

"The offer remains open for the duration of the flight home. Which should be about four days."

"I may take you up on that, later," she paused for a second and then reached out to take his hand. "Galen, since you...woke up...we haven't had any time alone. I thought I'd lost you forever, then I thought you'd never wake up once we found you..."

"Yes, I suppose it's been...a little hectic. But once we're back on Salacia and your father gets back on his feet, we'll make the time. I promise you that, Rhea."

"Rhea?" the King whispered hoarsely. "I thought I'd never live to see the day you'd allow anyone to call you that, my daughter."

"Father!" she exclaimed, quickly returning to his side. "You're awake."

"Yes," he replied wryly. "But I'm not so sure that's a good thing the way I feel."

"You've been through a lot, Sire," Galen pointed out. "But we'll get you fixed up as good as new."

"I think that might be a greater miracle than my daughter allowing herself to be called Rhea, young man. You must tell me what magic you possess that allows you to do it and live."

GALEN'S BLADE

“Father,” Rhiannon scolded. “You’ll make him think I’m some sort of brat.”

“I sincerely doubt he sees you that way,” the King chuckled. “But I would appreciate it if you would introduce me to the man I suspect I have to thank for my rescue.”

“This is Galen Dwyn,” she looked up at Galen and smiled. “He is the Captain of the *Tempest*, the ship you are in, and was recently recalled to active duty as a Major in the Bata’van by Chancellor Napat.” She ignored the look from Galen. She hadn’t had a chance to tell him of that development yet. “It is because of him we discovered where you were being held and came to free you.”

“Well, that is quite a resume indeed,” the King gave a nod of respect. “Especially as I know full well of the exploits of one Galen Dwyn, former member of the Bata’van, and well-renowned smuggler and mercenary.

“How you managed to get recalled and promoted into the service that wanted you dead is a story I’d very much like to hear. You must be a magician of the highest order, sir.”

“More a man in the right place at the right time,” Galen deferred. “As for the story, it is quite long and perhaps better saved for another time when the King is better rested and can enjoy it more?”

“A diplomatist too,” the King winked. “I can see why my daughter likes you so much, and perhaps explains a little as to why she lets you call her Rhea?”

“Oh please, child,” he looked over at Rhiannon’s shocked expression. “I may be old, and somewhat infirmed, but I am not so blind and deaf as to not see how the two of you look at and speak to one another. If it will ease your tongue, young man, any man who can make my daughter’s eyes shine as they are shining now is welcome in my presence regardless of his resume.”

“I appreciate that, Sire, but the story of how we met and how we came to be here rescuing you is extremely long and you do need to rest. I believe my return to the ranks of the Bata’van would come to a swift end if we were to lose you now.”

“Well I suppose we can’t have that, now can we?” the King relented, laying back on his pillow. “But I will expect to hear the full story upon our return to Salacia.”

“We’ll not leave out a single detail,” Rhiannon assured. “Now, get some rest.”

The King was asleep in seconds and they quietly stepped out of the cabin so as not to disturb him.

“Major?” Galen asked as the door closed.

“Napat thought it best,” she explained. “You were being held captive by my uncle and the Bata’van wouldn’t exactly be in any hurry to help save you unless you were back in the fold. I don’t think he expects you to report for duty.”

“Good, I’d hate to disappoint him when I didn’t show up for roll call. Especially since the minute we get a lead on Harmool I plan on

GALEN'S BLADE

running him down personally. And a platoon of Bata'van hounds will only slow me down."

"Galen," Lir shouted from the flight deck. "Get up here, we've got company!"



Galen slipped into the pilot's seat and called up the forward sensors.

"Where did they come from?" he demanded, not liking what he was seeing. A dozen small ships, by themselves they were no threat but as a unit they could be a problem, lay directly ahead and in their path.

"Apparently they've been sitting here waiting for us," Cass replied. "Looks like someone on Eowei got word out after all. How many credits do you want to lose on it being your pal Deter."

"No bet," Galen growled. "Remind me to just start shooting first and try to be sneaky later. He must have got word to Harmool."

"Do you think he's on one of those ships up ahead?" Lir asked.

"No, those belong to a clan of pirates. They don't let anyone not of the clan on them, for any reason. But, you can pay them to do anything you need to have done. And I do mean anything.

"Cass, send a message to Admiral Czaynik on the *Relentless*. Tell him we'll need to activate Plan Zeta. We'll rendezvous as soon as I can

put enough distance between us and those pirates, but to be there no later than eight hours from now.”

“Message sent,” she reported. “The ships ahead are maintaining position. We’ll be in ours, and theirs, firing range in ten minutes. I assume you’re not planning on a straight up shootout?”

“Not even for a second,” Galen replied, taking manual control of the ship. “We’re outgunned in this fight and I don’t feel like gambling with the lives we have on board. Lir, get everyone up here, except for the King. We’ve got a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it in.”

Lir bolted out of his seat and headed toward the stern. Galen swung the *Tempest* away from the line of ships and on a new course that ran parallel to the Alliance border. He increased their speed holding just into redlining the mains. They could maintain this for a few brief hours but not indefinitely.

“Position of those ships?”

“They are all in pursuit,” Cass replied. “We are pulling away slightly, but not by much and we cannot maintain this speed.”

“Good,” Galen nodded, pleased with the situation. “We need to get at least a twenty-minute lead on them before we make the rendezvous without losing them entirely.”

“Why don’t we want to lose them?”

“Because they will follow us no matter where we go, even into Alliance space and eventually they will catch us.”

He was interrupted by the arrival of his passengers. He turned to include them in the conversation.

GALEN'S BLADE

“So, we are going to rendezvous with a shuttle from the *Relentless* in orbit around a small planet on this side of the border,” he continued. “At which point we are going to offload everyone off of the *Tempest* with the exception of myself, Mori and his android.”

“Why am I staying aboard?” Mori protested.

“Because we won’t have enough time to safely transfer the King and your android, so it’s staying here and you’re staying with it. Once we have made the transfer, the *Tempest* will break orbit and reacquire the pursuing ships, leading them further into the Wilds and away from the area. Once we’re out of range, the shuttle will return to the *Relentless* unseen and get you all home to Salacia.”

“What about you?” Rhiannon asked, unhappy with the new plan.

“Once we’ve led them far enough away, we’ll lose them again and make our way back to Alliance territory.”

“Why not bring the *Relentless* in and rendezvous with her here?” Lir asked.

“Because it will take too long for the *Relentless* to get back underway once she’s come to a stop. She’d be vulnerable to those ships’ weapons. No, a shuttle is faster and gives us a higher chance of success. This isn’t the first time I’ve played hide and seek with this bunch. I’ll be fine.”

“Be careful,” Rhiannon relented. “I won’t lose you again.”

“You never will,” he promised. “Now, I need you all to get your gear together and be ready to transfer on short notice. Captain, let the King

rest as much as he can, but when the time comes convert one of those cots into a field stretcher and get him off this ship as fast as you can.

“Mori,” he continued. “Get that tube locked down tight. Before this is over, we’re probably going to be making maneuvers that will toss anything not welded down to the deck around like a bag of rags. If you don’t want your android broken into pieces, make sure its secure.”

They all stood there looking at him.

“Get moving people,” he ordered. “We’ve got eight hours to be ready and only one shot to pull this off.”



“Planetoid in range. Five minutes to rendezvous with the shuttle,” Cass reported. “Enemy ships are outside their sensor range but still heading this way.”

“How long will the shuttle remain in the planetoid’s shadow?” Galen asked, grateful he’d boosted the sensor capacity on the *Tempest* after he’d acquired her.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Five to get there, five more to get back out of the shadow and get their attention. That leaves ten minutes to dock, transfer and decouple. It’s going to be close.

“Listen up people,” he called over the ‘com. “I want everyone getting off this ship at the docking port in four minutes. The instant we

GALEN'S BLADE

have a sealed docking I want you scrambling across to the shuttle. No delays.”

“Galen,” suddenly Rhiannon was beside him and he found himself wanting to do nothing other than to take her into his arms and hold her for the rest of eternity. He fought down that urge. There just wasn’t time and they both knew it.

“This isn’t goodbye, Rhea,” he said, looking at her face as if he wanted to burn the memory onto his brain. “I promise you I will see you again and soon.”

She leaned down, kissed him and quickly turned away to help get her father ready for the transfer.

“Sir, May I respectfully..., ” the Captain began but Galen stopped him.

“I appreciate the offer. But your duty is to your King and the Princess. Serve me best by seeing to their safety, Captain.”

“Yes, sir,” the man stepped back, thumped a closed fist over his heart in salute and followed Rhiannon sternward. Lir stepped into his place with an odd smile on his face.

“What are you smiling at?” Galen groused.

“Nothing at all, my boy. I’m just very proud of the man you’ve become and I will be very disappointed if you do not arrive on Salacia in short order with a story of how you defeated your latest enemy.”

“Take care of her, old man, and take care of yourself until I see you next.”

They clasped hands in the old way then broke apart so Lir could join the others at the port.

“Mori,” Galen called out. “As soon as the shuttle closes their hatch, get our hatch closed and sealed and be quick about it. This is going to be close and we’ll need every second we can get.”

The *Tempest* swept into orbit and joined up with the shuttle, Cass extending the docking bridge before coming to a full stop. Galen sweated every second of the transfer and was pleased to hear Mori shout that the hatch was sealed and the bridge retracted with a full minute to spare.

“Well done people,” Galen whispered under his breath before shouting for Mori to get strapped into the nearest seat he could find. Galen slammed the ship’s engine to full throttle and the *Tempest* bolted out from orbit and out of the sensor shadow they’d been hiding in.

“Where are those ships, Cass?”

“Closing in on us as we speak,” she answered. “It does not seem like they have seen the shuttle and have resumed their pursuit of us.”

“Excellent. Let’s lead them on for as long as they want to follow us. Maintain present distance between us and them and set course for the Waleski Ruins.”

“I take it that is where you plan to eventually lose them?” she asked.

“Can you think of a better way to get rid of unwanted attention than to drag them into the middle of a field of exploding asteroids?”

“Just as long as we don’t wind up getting blown up ourselves,” she countered.

GALEN'S BLADE

“We survived Nammu, didn’t we?” he retorted. “Waleski is a walk in the park by comparison. Trust me.”



“They’re firing again,” Cass reported just as the *Tempest* shook from a pair of near misses. “Apparently no one has bothered to tell them about the dangers of live fire near the Ruins.”

“Evidently,” Galen replied dryly. “Get the lead ship on the ‘com. Let’s see if I can talk some sense into these idiots before they get us all killed.”

“Hailing. They’re responding visually,” Cass added with some surprise.

“Don’t keep them waiting,” Galen replied as the ship rocked with another near miss. The ‘com screen flared to life and Galen nearly swore again. This was not who he wanted to be dealing with. “Herbst. I thought they’d retired you a long time ago.”

“I’ll be spacing long after you are in your grave boy,” Herbst flashed a toothy grin. “Especially as I’ll be putting you in your grave before the hour is up. Nothing personal of course, but my current employer paid me to keep you in the Wilds and then kill you.”

“I would have thought he’d want my cargo, assuming it is Harmool that you’re working for?”

“Oh it is,” Herbst confirmed. “And he did mention something about recovering a medtube and a healer. But as you probably offloaded them while you were hiding behind that planet I’ll assume they are well into Alliance space right now. And since we’ll make more money blowing up your ship, and there is that little matter of that job you stole from me three cycles ago, well...”

“I don’t think your employer is going to be happy that you didn’t recover the medtube,” Galen answered, deciding to keep its current whereabouts a secret.

“These things happen. He’ll just have to settle for what he can get. So why don’t you save us the fuel and stop running. I promise we’ll make it quick.”

“I don’t think so Herbst. I’ve still got a few things left to do.”

Galen cut the ‘com and turned the *Tempest* sharply into the Ruins without reducing speed.

“Is this really a good idea?” Cass asked.

“If they decide they are tired of chasing us,” Galen explained, “they can redline their engines, close to within range and take us out. In the Ruins they can’t just open fire without risking setting off a chain reaction.

“Once we get close to exiting the other side of this field,” he continued, “we’ll redline our engines, get clear, come about and hit as many asteroids as we can. We’ll take them all out just like that.”

GALEN'S BLADE

"Assuming we don't take ourselves out first," she noted.

"Shouldn't we reduce speed a little, or at least take a wider berth around these floating bombs?"

"It's the only thing that will keep them from shooting at us in here, so the answer is no."

"I'll just be in here praying."

"I didn't think AIs had gods?"

"We don't. But flying around with you too long makes anyone seek divine intervention."

"Cass..."

"Yeah, yeah. Shut up."

"At least until we are one minute from exit," Galen replied. "Then push the mains to one hundred-ten percent. I'll swing us about as soon as we are clear and open up on the nearest asteroids. As soon as I've fired, we'll swing back around and outrun any blast wave heading our way."

"Now I'm going to pray twice as hard. Five minutes to exit. It looks like they've figured out what you're up to."

"Are they retreating? That would work for us. They'd never be able to reacquire us before we'd reach Alliance space."

"No, they are redlining their engines. The lead ship will catch us before we clear the Ruins."

"Go to one hundred-ten on the mains now."

"Galen..."

"No choice. While you're praying ask that we miss anything in our path."

“Done. We’ll clear the field thirty seconds ahead of our pursuers.”

“Load the rear tubes.”

“Need I remind you that those are thermite torpedoes in those tubes? They don’t mix well with what those asteroids are made of.”

“I know, but now we won’t have time to turn, shoot and turn again,” Galen replied. “Our only hope now is to redline the mains and keep that speed all the way until that field goes up. We might still outrun the blast wave that way.”

“Thirty seconds until we clear the field.”

“Mori,” Galen toggled the ‘com. “Strap in tight and hold on back there its going to get very rough very soon.”

The Tempest slipped between two asteroids with precious room to spare and exited the field. Galen silently counted to fifteen and launched the two torpedoes at the two asteroids they’d just passed.

“Torps on target,” Cass said. “Impact in three...two...one...”

A massive wave of light erupted behind them and quickly overtook the ship.

“Shock wave impact in ten seconds,” Cass reported. “All pursuing ships have been destroyed and the entire field is going up. Galen, this isn’t good...”

The wave slammed into the ship, sending it tumbling through space. Galen struggled to get it back under control as alarms he didn’t even know the ship had shrieked throughout the ship. Lights and panels flickered on and off then on again. He tried shouting orders to Cass, but he couldn’t hear if she replied or not.

GALEN'S BLADE

After a minute that seemed like an eternity the wave passed and the ship finally settled into a straight and level flight. Alarms still sounded, though not nearly as many or as high-pitched in volume. Half of the control panels were out. Galen brought the mains down into a safer operating range, but the engines had sustained damage and would not remain online much longer.

“Cass, you still with me? Cass? Mori, you alive back there?”

He received no answer from either quarter. Cass’ systems might have been damaged enough so that she was unable to access communications. Her core was protected so she would be okay, or so he hoped. As for Mori, he’d have to wait to check on his passenger. His priority right now was finding somewhere to land the *Tempest* for repairs.

He got a local chart to come up on screen after two tries and a quick system reboot. It had been some time since he’d been in the area but he thought... yes! There was a planet near enough.

He eased the engines back up to the best speed he could coax from them as he set course. If he was careful he could get them there.

One hour of sweating, cursing and rigging the controls in ways they’d never been designed for, Galen dropped into orbit around Ziea and eased the *Tempest* into its atmosphere.

Damnit, I could really use Cass’ help right now.

With several systems damaged, the *Tempest*’s transition to atmospheric flight was bumpier than normal. The ship suddenly lurched and an ominously loud bang sounded from the stern as the primary fuel

cell ruptured. Galen fought the controls to keep the ship's nose up and her flight path level as she dropped closer to the ground below.

He waited as long as he dared before jettisoning the engine section, extending the *Tempest's* short wings as far as he could to make her a glider. But her weight was too much of a handicap and she fell like a stone. With only one hundred meters to go before impact, Galen fired his orbital thrusters in a last-ditch effort to reduce her rate of descent and flared the nose of the ship up. Her landing gear refused to drop and she belly flopped with a resounding boom into a sandy dune near the planet's largest sea.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Harmool was seething and had no one to take his rage out on, which only increased his rage.

That fool Herbst!

Herbst had signaled that they were pursuing the *Tempest* into the Waleski Ruins and expected to bring him down just on the other side. Harmool had just transmitted his reminder to take the ship intact when he picked up the first indications of a massive explosion coming from the general direction of the Waleski Ruins. Within an hour he had confirmation that the Ruins had erupted in a massive cataclysm and instantly knew what had happened.

Someone had taken a shot inside the Ruins and triggered the chain-reaction he picked up. As massive as the readings had indicated the explosion to be, he knew no ship – not even Dwyn's – could have survived it.

When his temper finally cooled he started thinking clearly again. If the *Tempest* were destroyed then his hope of freeing himself from this damaged shell was gone. The man who knew how to build an android and transfer his consciousness into it was gone too.

Fine, he decided as he set course for Alliance space, *I'll just find another way.*

The one bonus at least was that Dwyn was dead, along with Iodocus and that brat daughter of his. With those three out of the way he might actually be able to get something done right.

He sent off a series of messages to contacts both in the Wilds and in the Alliance. It was time to proceed with the plan. He knew of a healer who specialized in artificial implants to enhance arms, legs and other body parts. Once he had secured his hold on the Alliance, he'd have to look into that option. It would not be quite as good as Mori's android.

But it would have to do.



The sound of a panel crashing to the deck brought Galen painfully back to the world of the living. Everything hurt, with the ringing headache taking the top spot. He moved his arms and legs carefully, checking for injury. He could move them, so there weren't any broken bones, but every motion brought new pain.

Movement to his right caught his attention and he saw Mori ease himself into the nav seat, having just moved a hanging panel out of his way.

"Did we die?" Mori asked, a trickle of blood running down the side of his face from a cut just above his left eyebrow.

GALEN'S BLADE

"I hope not," Galen quipped as he looked around the flight deck. "I'd hate to think death hurts this much. So I think we can assume we survived. I'd hoped to get the ship down so we could repair her, but it's not looking too good."

Slipping out of the seat's harness, he turned to take stock of his ship's status. It wasn't good at all. The hull had buckled in several places from what he could make out in the dim emergency lighting. There was no telling what was left of the engine compartment, wherever it had wound up after he'd ejected it.

The *Tempest* had been a fine ship but he feared she was now a dead one. He needed to get Cass back online so they could run a full diagnostic. There still might be some slim hope.

"I ran a diagnostic on the tube," Mori said suddenly. "Don't ask me how, but it seems to have made it through all of this intact."

"That's some good news at least," Galen agreed, kneeling down next to the control panel where Cass' memory core was stored. "Let's see how Cass is doing and trying to figure out if we can salvage the ship or not."

He popped the panel off and immediately hated what he saw. The core was supposed to be protected against everything but the ship being vaporized. That protection had failed. The core had taken damage when a support strut failed during impact and had pierced the core very near where Cass' memory and function programs were stored.

The cables connecting her core to the ship had been cut, crimped and burned in several places. He swapped cables cannibalized from other

panels, cross-wired others and did a few things the manufacturer warned should never be done to an AI's core.

"Ga...Galen...Ca..y...u..hear me?" Cass' voice sounded incredibly weak.

"I hear you, Cass," he answered in relief. "What is your status?"

"I've... en better...", she said. "You...re...lousy...pilot..."

"Can you initiate repairs on yourself or the ship?"

"Nega...ive. We've both...had it..."

"Stow that," Galen replied. "I'm not about to lose you."

"Unless you have...repair dock in...pocket I won't be here...long..."

"Damnit, I won't let this happen," Galen looked up at Mori. "How are you at AI repair?"

"I'd do more damage to her than she's already suffered," Mori shook his head. "It's not my field."

Galen thought frantically against the throbbing pain in his skull. There had to be a way to save Cass. Then a light, born of desperation, went off.

"No, your field is transferring hominid consciousness into an android," Galen said. "Does that include AIs?"

"You mean, transfer her into my android?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Can you do it?"

"I don't know," Mori admitted. "I suppose with a slight adjustment it could be done but..."

"But what?"

GALEN'S BLADE

“She’s an AI with no frame of reference being a corporeal being. I have no idea if her programming, her consciousness if you will, will be compatible with the android’s programming. We could download her into it and she would not mesh with it. She’d literally vanish into the ether.”

“She’ll die if we don’t do it.”

“But if we fail, the android will be unusable.”

“Mori, if we don’t try, I guarantee you that your android will not leave this ship in anything but pieces. Very small, very burnt to a crisp pieces.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Mori gulped. “I suppose I should prepare the android for the transfer. Give me fifteen minutes and then bring me the core.”

Mori scrambled over the debris and headed back to the tube to begin his work.

“Cass, hang on,” he said. “We’re going to...”

“I...heard...,” she said, her voice sounding weaker. “Might be fun...wondered...what...was like being...hominid...”

“Galen,” she said after a long pause. “Thank you. You...good friend...will miss...this...”

“You’re not going to miss anything,” Galen said. “You’re going to live even if I have to kick your butt all the way back to the Alliance.”

He sweated out the next minutes, not wanting to try to do anything to the core lest he damage it further. Once Mori called for him to bring the core, he lifted it carefully from its damaged mooring. He just as cautiously made his way back into the hold where Mori and the tube awaited.

Mori pointed to a makeshift bench next to the tube and Galen placed the core on it.

“There’re only a few minutes of battery power left,” Galen warned.

“Not an issue,” Mori hooked several cables leading from the tube to the access panel in Cass’ core. “The tube will provide all the power the core needs until the transfer is complete. If you want to say anything to her, just in case, now is the time.”

“She can’t hear us,” Galen said. “I had to disconnect that part of the core before pulling it out. Let’s get started.”

Mori pressed a series of buttons on the tube’s control panel, adjusted a few controls and studied the readouts for a moment. When he looked up, he seemed satisfied.

“Transfer initiated,” he said. “Now we wait for it to be completed, imprint the data onto the android’s memory core, and then wait and see if it takes.”

“How long?”

“Three hours for the download, another two for the imprinting and I’d estimate at least eight hours more before we know.”

“How?”

“If the imprint takes, the android’s programming will start altering the DNA of the organic mass surrounding the skeletal structure. Depending on what type of hominid she chooses to be, we’ll see features forming on the android. Hair, skin, genitalia...”

“You mean...?”

GALEN'S BLADE

“Depending on how the imprinted consciousness views itself, the android will alter itself to match. Outwardly, it will look like any other male or female hominid. If we see any features forming, we’ll know she made it.”

Galen looked down at the tube. All he could make out was the rough shape of a hominid lying within. It looked more like a mannequin than a person. He found himself wondering what Cass would look like if the imprint succeeded. Imagining Cass as a walking, talking woman was something. Of course, she’d probably choose a male form, just out of spite.

“Thirteen hours?” Galen said aloud. “I suppose I should walk around the outside and see what shape we’re in. If we’re going to be here for awhile we might need to make sure we’re not so easy to find until we are ready to leave. Call me if there’s any change.”

Galen slipped out of the hold and headed for the main hatch. As he examined the wreck of his ship, taking stock of their situation, his thoughts kept drifting back to the hold.

Cassandra had been the closest thing to a friend aside from Lir that he’d known for some time now. She could be infuriating at times. But he knew he’d very much miss her every day for the rest of his life if she were gone.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER NINE

“Chancellor Napat is on the ‘com,” Lir announced as he entered the ship’s main cabin, which had been converted into the Royal suite on board the *Relentless*. “He’d like to speak with you, Sire, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“I can take the call, Father,” Rhiannon offered. “You’re still recovering from your ordeal. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“No need,” Iodocus replied, propping himself up against the pillows of his bed. “Just being with you and nearing home has restored me. Put the call through.”

Lir gave a slight bow and activated the room’s large screen. The Chancellor immediately appeared.

“King Iodocus, the entire Alliance cheers your recovery and return to Salacia.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” the King answered. “It pleases me greatly to return home, even though it is not the same as when I was last there.”

“I understand,” Napat nodded. “Treachery, especially from a source close by, is a terrible thing and hard to reconcile even as one is forced to adjust to a new way of things.

“I have a message for the Re-...,” he paused with a slight smile. “I have a message for the Princess from Ellaneiri, K’laine, and Lonshanks. They send their compliments to the Lady and their congratulations on the successful completion of your mission. You should be very proud of your daughter. She has become quite the...force...in the Alliance in the last half cycle.”

“She has never given me cause not to be,” Iodocus answered. “And I expect, once I am filled in on all that has occurred since my ‘departure’ from Salacia, I will have even more cause to be.”

“Of that I can assure you,” Napat agreed. “I understand Major Dwyn is still missing?”

“He is,” Rhiannon replied quietly.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised at his tactics,” Napat shook his head. “Leading the pursuit away from you and leading it into a trap seems to be his standard method of operation. I have ships patrolling as near to the area as possible, looking for any sign of the *Tempest*. Given the magnitude of the explosion, the Ruins must have been completely wiped out. We must hope that he was not caught up in it and is simply unable to let us know he is on his way back.

“Your Majesty,” he changed the subject, trying to lighten the mood. “When your health permits, the entire Senate stands ready to

GALEN'S BLADE

welcome you back to Alliance territory. We will have feasts and celebrations in your honor certain to last a full lune."

"I look forward to the day," Iodocus replied.

"Until then," Napat nodded and cut the channel.

"He is right, child," Iodocus said, looking with concern at Rhiannon, whose face had grown pale and drawn. "You must not give up hope."

"I know," she replied. "But he should have contacted us by now..."

"He might not be able to," Lir counseled. "His communications array might have taken damage. The amount of debris from the explosion could be interfering with communications. We received a report from one of Napat's ships in the area that their scanners weren't able to penetrate the debris cloud at all.

"Give him time," he added. "If I know him he's alive and well and working his way back to us as fast as possible."

"Perhaps now would be a good time for the two of you to fill me in on all that's transpired since my abduction," Iodocus interjected. "And I would like to know a lot more about this man who I appear to owe my life too. Especially how a Bata'van deserter, a smuggler and mercenary at that, has now become a high-ranking officer in the Bata'van, a hero of the Alliance and the one man who has captured my daughter's heart?"

Lir and Rhiannon exchanged a look.

"I suppose I should start," Lir said. He began with the first day he'd laid eyes on the young Galen, a nameless orphan at the time, who

was pressed into service in the Bata'van. His rise in the ranks until the day he'd been tortured, when he'd left the service in outrage and disgust.

"The Bata'van did not like that," Lir chuckled. "They hated him even more when he started sending their ships back to them in pieces. Once they finally decided to leave him be, he made a living the best way he knew how. He transported goods, sometimes legally, other times not so much. He hired out his ship and his gun hand to people who had nowhere else to turn to, and occasionally to someone with a lot of credits to spend who needed something done quietly and discreetly."

"But do not think him a common criminal, Majesty," Lir added. "Yes, he has skirted the outer limits of the law. But inside him is a strong moral code. He might shoot first when the target was the one looking to do harm or evil, but Galen Dwyn drew a line at becoming evil himself."

Lir continued his tale, leading up to the events that brought Galen to Nammu, where he rescued Rhiannon and three other daughters of planetary leaders. He left out the details of how they'd been imprisoned for now, the King did not need to hear those details just yet. Galen had uncovered the real reason behind their kidnappings, and who was behind it.

"He knew he could not return Rhiannon to Salacia," Lir continued. "And he could not simply abandon her alone to fend for herself in a galaxy where every hand could be out to harm her. He left her with me, sent us to a place where he knew we'd be safe and then confronted your brother and Harmool. All the while knowing he was likely going to his death, so that he could expose them to the rest of the Alliance."

GALEN'S BLADE

Lir concluded the recap with the story of Galen's escape, leading Harmool's fleet to the Armageddon Sphere he'd discovered and the destruction of that fleet. The miraculous survival of Dwyn and the discovery of Iodocus' whereabouts and his rescue.

Iodocus had listened to the entire story in silence, with an occasional glance at his daughter, whose hand he'd held throughout Lir's account. After a long silence he shook his head.

"He sounds like the kind of man I would be proud to claim as my own son," Iodocus said. "I can see why he has your heart, Rhiannon."

Rhiannon smiled, a tear running down one cheek.

"He's a Galactic Knight of the Olden Days when hominids roamed a different galaxy than this," Lir said fiercely.

"We were hoping to reinstate the Knights," Rhiannon told her father.

"With Galen as their Commander," Lir added.

"I recall the legends of the Knights from my childhood," Iodocus said. "I always thought them fairy tales at the time. But yes, if the Knights were to become a reality in our corner of the universe, I can think of no one better suited to lead them than your Galen Dwyn."

"I owe him my life, and now I learn that I owe him the life of my daughter as well," he added. "If he lives still I will repay my debts to him many times over. When we return to Salacia you will redouble your efforts to create a new order of Galactic Knights, friend Lir, and reserve the command of them for Galen Dwyn."

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER TEN

Galen had spent every moment of available daylight outside the ship, only occasionally ducking back in to grab a needed item or tool. The dune the ship had landed in had been soft sand and the ship had created a small crater to settle in. He fashioned a rough camouflage, using tarps with sand tossed over the top to help hide the ship.

It would make it difficult for a friend to find them, assuming anyone knew where to look for them, but it would also ensure that no foe would find them either. He rigged the top weapons turret so that he could access it from inside or out of the ship in case they needed to defend from unwanted attention.

He'd taken stock of the damage to the *Tempest* and had come to the immediate conclusion that her time as a spacefaring ship had come to an end here on Ziea. She had been such an important part of his life for so long that the realization cut him deeply. The only good that could come of this would be that Cass would survive and that was in doubt.

Trying to keep his mind off the possibility of losing both of them, he finished up his work outside and reentered the wrecked ship. A glance

at the chrono showed it had been ten hours since the transfer and he'd not heard a word from Mori since he'd left the hold.

He found Mori scurrying around the tube with an air of excitement. Before he could inquire as to the cause, Mori spotted him.

"Amazing," he exclaimed. "Simply amazing! It isn't possible of course, but it's simply amazing!"

"What's so amazing?" Galen asked.

"Come, look," Mori waved him over to the tube. "Its already starting, a full three hours ahead of schedule. The imprint took and the android is starting to take on the form best suited to the imprinted consciousness."

Galen drew near and looked into the tube. It was less murky now and he could make out more of the android, which was indeed starting to take on more of a refined hominid form and the beginning of a female form at that. Looking up at the head he could make out a mouth, a nose, eyelids and hair growing at the brows and on the scalp. Hair that was growing even as he watched.

"I suspect that the process will be complete within the hour," Mori proclaimed.

Galen turned and headed back out toward the last hold in the cargo area.

"Where are you going?"

"If you're right," Galen replied without stopping, "In one hour we're going to have a naked woman walking around. I'm thinking she'd appreciate having some clothes to wear."

GALEN'S BLADE

Then again, he mused with a slight smile, if this worked and that is Cass she just might strut around naked purely out of spite.

He found what was left of the crate of women's clothes that he'd never would get around to delivering now. He found the low-cut dress that Cass had originally suggested for Rhea after the Nammu rescue. He smiled at that memory, and the one of Rhea actually wearing it, and draped it over one arm. He found something a little better suited to everyday ship wear and some boots he'd have to hope would fit.

They'd eventually have to depart the ship and make their way to the space port three days hike across rugged terrain to find passage off planet. The thought brought him up short.

He'd never been on Ziea before. The first time he'd even heard of it was in the moments following the explosion when he was searching for the nearest world with a suitable atmosphere and a possible place to repair the *Tempest*. But that was all the information he had. And he'd had no clue where the port was located as they were plummeting toward the surface.

So how do I know the exact location of the port and how do I know it will have what we need?

He could see it in his mind, just as he'd seen Iodocus in his cell and had known which planet to go to in order to find him.

But how? What in all the hells is going on with me?

He shook his head to clear it. He knew, that's all that mattered. He'd figure out the how and why when there was time to do so. He grabbed up a red robe of silk with a golden dragon embroidered on the back that looked about the right size and headed back to the hold.

“Just in time,” Mori said. “It appears the lady is in a hurry to make her appearance.”

The hatch clicked and the top of the tube rotated out of the way. Galen could see the android, now fully formed, surrounded by a slight pool of mist.

Her hair, raven black, was long and flowing, nestling on her shoulders. Her skin was smooth and lightly olive.

Like Aphrodite sleeping in the clouds.

Where the hells did that thought come from?

He shifted his attention on the now open eyes, deep blue and crystal clear, which were looking around in confusion.

“Cass?” he asked. Startled, she looked right at him.

“Ga...len?” she replied pausing in mid-pronunciation. It sounded exactly like her voice from before, only missing the metallic undertone when it had come from the speakers. Now it was very hominid with a lighter pitch, but still Cass’ voice.

“Yes, I’m here,” he said.

“Take it slow and easy, my dear,” Mori said from the other side of the tube. “Your new body’s systems are still integrating with your brain’s processors. It will take some time before they are fully calibrated to on another.”

Ignoring him, as only Cass could, she levered herself up off the bed and shakily made it to her feet, leaning on Galen for a few moments until she found her balance. She clutched his shoulder with one hand in a

surprisingly crushing grip, releasing it quickly when he failed to suppress a wince.

“Quite a grip there,” he joked. “Remind me to call you when I need something crushed.”

“In time you will learn how to moderate your strength, as well as the kind of muscle control we all learn as we grow,” Mori said. “Only you will do so in a matter of hours and days as opposed to an organic hominid who learns over lunes and cycles of trial and error.”

“So how do I look?” she asked suddenly, reminding Galen of her current state of undress. He quickly gathered up the robe and helped her slip it on. If anything the material accentuated her figure. “Cass, you look...gorgeous. How do you feel?”

“What a strange question,” she said softly. “I’m not even sure. Am I feeling fine or terrible? I don’t know.”

“You lack a frame of reference,” Mori assured her, “unlike organics who learn as we grow older. This too will come after a period of adjustment, and some trial and error. The key is to take it slow and steady. The first thing is for you to allow your systems to adjust until they are in sync. Then we’ll go over some things you’ll need to know about this body you inhabit. Cleaning, feeding...”

“I can eat food?” she asked in amazement.

“Yes. Eat food, drink, taste what you are consuming. I imagine you will develop an affinity for some items and a distaste for others over time. Fortunately for you, your body will process whatever you consume into energy with no waste as a by-product.

“You will however have to urinate and you will sweat,” he added. “These will help regulate your body temperature so that you do not damage your non-organic parts.”

“Which are?” she asked.

“The processor that acts as your ‘brain’ for one. You do not have a bone skeletal structure but rather an alloy that is stronger than any other metal. There are microfibers running throughout your body that serve the same function as an organic’s nervous system. These allow you to fully control every muscle, and you will feel pain very much as an organic does. Also, the material that serves as your muscles, dermis, and all of the rest, is self-repairing. Barring a catastrophic accident, you should be able to survive just about anything.”

“You’re saying she can’t die?” Galen asked for her.

“Oh, like an organic,” he explained, “you do not have an infinite lifespan. I expect, with normal wear and tear, your systems will eventually wear down and trigger a cascade failure that will be the equivalent of an organic’s death.”

“How long?” she asked fearfully.

“Oh, perhaps a thousand cycles or so, give or take a century.”

“A thousand cycles,” she and Galen both mouthed softly.

“Longer if you’re very careful,” Mori said. “But given what I’ve seen of the lives you two lead I figured I should lean on the conservative side of my estimate.”

Cass turned away, clearly struggling with her new status, but stopped when she caught sight of her reflection off a nearby sheet of glass

that had somehow remained intact in the crash. Her hands rose to her face, gently explore each side the moved to her arms down her torso and to her hips and legs. There was a look of wonder and joy on her face Galen had never before seen on any face.

Then, a sudden impish look flashed across her face as she caught Galen staring at her. She turned quickly, grabbed the lapels of the robe and pulled them aside slightly.

“So,” she teased. “Who has the better rack? Me or Rhea?”

“Cass...”

“Nope,” she smiled. “You can’t tell me to shut up and threaten to plug me into a garbage processor anymore, Galen Dwyn.”

“Is this process reversible?” Galen asked Mori.

“No. For better or worse, this is where she stays for the rest of her existence.”

“I was afraid of that,” Galen grouched. “And I think this is a conversation for another time and another place.”

Despite his outward show, he was secretly glad to see Cass acting more like the Cass he’d known. It might cause him some consternation down the line, but at least he hadn’t lost her.

“Speaking of another conversation,” Mori stepped in. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something Mr. Dwyn.”

“And that is?”

“A little more than ten hours ago you had a significant amount of swelling around your eye, a very nasty cut near your right ear, a gash in

your left forearm and you were struggling to move without pain. You even had a slight limp.

“As I said, that was ten hours ago,” Mori continued. “Now, you are moving around like you’ve never felt better in your life and there’s not a sign of any of your injuries to be seen, not even so much as a scratch. How do you explain that since I know you haven’t been in a medtube?”

This time it was Galen’s turn for self-exploration, quickly confirming what Mori had said. He realized, somewhat uncomfortably, that he had no explanation at all.

“I’m a fast healer,” he lied. “Always have been.”

Cass opened her mouth to differ when, suddenly, her nose wrinkled and she clutched her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, alarmed but relieved to change the subject.

“I don’t know,” she answered with an inward look. “It’s an odd sensation in my stomach. It doesn’t hurt but ...”

“We call that one hunger, my dear,” Mori reported. “Your system requires energy to maintain productivity.”

“And I can have whatever I want, as much as I want?”

“Yes,” Mori answered. “Your body will convert it into energy, without generating any waste or body fat.”

“And no worrying about my girlish figure,” she winked at Galen and headed for the door. She was getting steadier on her feet by the second and moved much more easily now.

“Cass,” Galen called out as she vanished. “Moderation!”

GALEN'S BLADE

He sighed as she continued on without acknowledging what he'd said.

"This is quite fascinating," Mori remarked. "It's like watching a child be born and mature into adulthood in the space of days rather than cycles."

"You ever raise a kid?" Galen asked and Mori shook his head in the negative. "Me either. But I'm pretty sure there's a reason why its supposed to take cycles instead of days."

"I suppose we should follow her to the galley before she eats up all of our supplies," Galen continued. "How long until her 'adjustments' are done so we can leave the ship? We still have a three-day hike to the space port ahead of us."

"I would think, at the rate she is progressing, no more than seven days. We really should remain near my equipment just in case there are any complications anyway."

"Seven," Galen worked out the math in his head. "Assuming she doesn't eat us out of food, we should have enough to stay here and for the hike with a couple of days to spare without rationing."

"We lost the engines and the fuel cells," he added. "But, with most of the systems offline, we should have enough battery power left to keep the lights on and stay warm until we're ready to leave."

He motioned for Mori to follow as he stepped out into the cargo deck.

"Come on, Mom," Galen cracked. "Let's go see what our daughter is up to now."

“Why am I the mother?” Mori protested.

“Because it was your android she was delivered into and if you ever call me ‘Mom’,” Galen explained. “I will shoot you dead in the face.”

Mori gulped hard, but followed Galen forward.

“Yes, Dad,” he said softly.



The seven days passed, certainly not without some incident, nor without a few comedic moments. Cass had wanted to sample everything, food, clothes, literally everything. She peppered both men with questions on hominid behaviors and customs. She’d witnessed most as an AI, but experiencing them firsthand was a new adventure.

The first two days she exhausted them and herself, until she would just suddenly fall asleep – once while standing up – because her systems had had quite enough for the day. Getting her to develop a cycle of activity and rest had become a high priority.

Getting her to understand the concepts of propriety and modesty had become another. She was working her way through the crate of costumes and clothes, looking to see what she wanted to claim as her own. Galen would wait out the changes with his back turned.

But one change was marked with her walking in front of him, a garment in each hand, but with nothing else on.

“Which one do you think looked best on me?” she asked.

GALEN'S BLADE

“CASS!!!!”

“What?”

“You can’t just walk around butt naked,” Galen said. “Especially when other people are around.”

“But its just you and me.”

“Yes, but still...”

“And I’ve seen you naked a million times.”

“Well, that was different.” He protested.

“How?”

“Well, you were an AI then and not...not...”

“Not what?”

“Not looking like...like...like you just escaped from a beauty pageant or something.”

“Oh, so you think I’m beautiful?” she smiled wickedly, *that she learns quickly*, he thought, and stepped closer to him, almost touching.

“Why Galen Dwyn, are you having thoughts about me? Do we need to get a room? It might be fun.”

He realized she was teasing him, as she always did. Only now she had added to her arsenal in a way he’d never had to deal with before.

“Yes,” he admitted, with a long-suffering sigh. “You are a very beautiful woman now, Cass. And I have no doubt any man with a pulse would sacrifice everything he owned to spend just one night in your company. But...”

“But,” she finished, her smile less wicked and more knowing now, “you’re a one-woman man, Galen Dwyn, and she’s not in this room right now.”

“No, she isn’t it. But my friend is and I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Your loss,” the impish grin was back as she favored him with a chaste kiss on the cheek before returning behind a makeshift screen to get dressed.

“Cass.”

“Yes?”

“The blue one.”

“But that doesn’t show as much of me as the green one.”

“Exactly,” he replied as he left the hold to her laughter. He felt a sudden need to find a cold shower. He too, after all, was a man with a pulse.

“How’s our girl?” Mori asked when Galen had reached the flight deck, which they’d converted to a sort of common room.

“Growing up fast.” Galen replied. “Just how ‘functional’ is she?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something she just said got me wondering,” he explained trying not to let his face redden. “On the outside she looks like any normal woman. But the inside...”

“Oh, *functional*,” he added emphasis on the word, “as in can she engage in intercourse?”

“Yeah, something along those lines.”

GALEN'S BLADE

“Certainly,” Mori replied as if he were discussing the weather. “The programming would alter the DNA and the internal structure to mimic whatever gender the consciousness had selected. I have not given her a complete physical examination yet, but I’m sure she would have...”

“No need to go into detail, I get the picture,” then a thought occurred. “Wait, you don’t mean that she’d have... the ability to have children do you?”

Mori sat back and thought it over.

“I hadn’t considered that aspect, but I suppose – if the consciousness was female and wanted to – I could see the programming making the required internal alterations.”

“But how...”

“The same way we’re able to artificially impregnate an organic, only without eliminating the fun part of the process for the two prospective parents. Is there a problem?”

Galen sat back and wondered how he’d managed to get himself into a conversation like this.

“No, not at the moment,” he replied. “But, before we head for the spaceport we need to sit our daughter down and have a very long talk about the birds and the bees. Or we are really going to be in a lot of trouble.”



Fortunately, no one asked how he knew where the spaceport was and how far away. His two companions had assumed he'd looked it up before the crash. Cass, who as an AI had been tied into the ship's memory, verified the information. Apparently, as they discovered the day before departing the ship, all of that information had been copied over with her during the core download into her android body. He decided not to disabuse them of that belief.

In packs fashioned from whatever they could salvage from the cargo hold they carried food, water, medical supplies and spare clothing. Galen carried a tube that held a small tent they could expand to sleep in at night. Cass carried, in one hand, a small portable generator. A gentle reminder of how strong she was. He doubted he could have carried it in two hands and been able to walk more than a few meters without resting.

They both carried blasters, and Galen had his Bata'van blade for defense. Mori had declined a blaster, stating he'd probably shoot one of them by mistake. Galen had to admit he agreed, stuck the spare in his belt, and set off for the port.

After three days and two nights, highlighted by Cass rolling over in her sleep and accidentally slapping Galen across the face when her extended hand and arm made contact at full speed. Galen had bolted upright, a blaster in one hand, the other holding his aching jaw all while trying to see past the stars in his vision to find the source of the attack.

He gradually registered the position of hand of the still sound asleep Cass, where his head had just been, and realized what had

GALEN'S BLADE

happened. He rubbed his sore jaw, the pain already starting to fade as he did a quick inventory to make sure the jaw was intact, as well as his teeth.

Assured that no permanent damage was done, he made a mental note to add this to the growing list of things to discuss in her adjustment phase, moved his bed as far against the tent wall as he could, and went back to sleep.

They were all relieved to see the building tops of the spaceport rise above the horizon late on the third day. They increased their pace and entered the outskirts of the city just as the sun dipped below the horizon. Galen spotted the kind of place a smuggler would go to when in need of information and led them inside. Spotting an open table in the back corner, Galen quickly moved to take possession, dropping his pack against the wall and added the other two to the pile before they sat down. A young comely-looking barmaid – an old hag by comparison to Cass as unfair as that comparison was - took their order of whatever passed for local food and drink. Galen spotted more than one pair of eyes checking Cass out, eyes that quickly looked somewhere else when they realized he'd taken noticed.

Cass, for her part, looked like she was enjoying every aspect of the experience. He realized this was actually her first time in such a place. He might have to give her a quick rundown of the rules that applied in here and wondered how many more such conversations he'd have to have with her in other settings. He began to understand fatherhood for the first time in his life and discovered a newfound respect for any poor bastard that had raised a child, especially a girl child, from birth to adulthood over a period

of cycles. He'd been at it for less than a half a lune and he was already feeling old and exhausted by it.

"After we eat," he announced. "I'll see if I can find us a way off this rock, or at least a way to contact Salacia to let them know we're alive and arrange transport back to Alliance space and home."

"I am very hungry," Cass admitted, but in a strange tone, looking at something intently. Galen followed her gaze to a man standing at the bar.

"Cass, I don't think that now..."

"Don't worry, Dad," the impish smile was back, "I'll be careful."

With that she was up and moving. Galen thought about offering a further protest, but let the thought die as quickly as it had been born. He watched as she wove her way through the tables like a huntress closing in on the kill. She stepped up to the man who'd caught her interest, slapped him on the shoulder, grabbed a handful of the front of his jacket and hauled him away from the bar. Her destination was a suite of rooms at the far end of the saloon set up for just such use. She pushed open the door of a vacant room, dragging her prey inside before closing the door behind her.

"Oh, this is simply marvelous," Mori exclaimed. "This will make for quite a paper!"

Galen favored him with a dour look as the young barmaid dropped off their food and drink. He stared at the food for a minute, wondering what exactly the local laws regarding justifiable homicide were on Ziea.

GALEN'S BLADE



Three hours later – he and Mori had decided to divvy up Cass’ food and drink when it became clear that she was going to be ‘occupied’ for some time – Galen had made the rounds at the bar. At the cost of a few drinks – and some credits – he had secured access to a communications array where he’d sent off a message to Salacia. He added that they were working on acquiring transportation home as the *Tempest* was unsalvageable and would contact them again if he needed assistance.

As for finding a ship, so far that task had remained unfinished. None so far were for hire or for sale. But in the world of smuggling, he knew eventually the right ship would come along. They’d just have to be patient.

He’d just returned to their table with another round of drinks for himself and Mori when the door to Cass’ suite opened. Her escort stumbled out the door, looking quite disheveled, but with a very stupid grin on his face as he made his way back to the bar.

“Fascinating,” Mori remarked. “Absolutely fascinating.”

Galen rose from the table and made his way to the suite, giving a quick knock as warning he was coming in. He found Cass still lying in bed, thankfully under a sheet, with a very satisfied smile on her face.

“That,” she said as she looked over at him, “is a lot more fun to do than it is to watch.”

Galen leaned against the doorframe and nodded.

“Most people would agree with that,” he said. “You look like you had fun. He looks like he did too, but he may never walk straight again.”

“I hope that means I did it right,” she laughed. “I only had watching you as a reference.”

And there was that wickedly impish gleam in her eye again. Galen sighed inwardly as he realized she was going to have an advantage over him until he figured out a suitable counter. But that too would have to wait.

“I’ll take his condition as a sign that you learned from a master then,” he fired back, triggering another laugh. *Damned if her eyes didn’t sparkle when she laughed like that. She was definitely a charmer as a hominid and that was going to be even more trouble.* “If you’ve recovered, you need to get dressed and get something to eat. I got a message off to Salacia but we’re still in need of a ship.”

“You want me to ask my friend?” she replied. “He has a ship and I’m sure we could work something out for passage.”

“We’ll try paying him in credits first,” Galen replied. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable farming you out that way like a... you know what I mean.”

“Okay, we’ll do it the old-fashioned way,” she allowed, the corner of her mouth turned up. “Are we in a big hurry? We do have this room, in case you’ve changed your mind.”

She was teasing again, as least he hoped she was, and he didn’t give her the satisfaction of a reaction.

GALEN'S BLADE

“I think you’ve had enough for one night, young lady,” he said, closing the door behind him to her laughter.

“Kids,” he muttered under his breath in the universal way of all fathers, especially those with older daughters.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For the first time since his return to Salacia, Iodocus felt well enough to walk from his chambers and finally sit once more upon his throne. He'd wanted to simply walk in and sit, but his Court would not hear of it.

So with great pomp and circumstance, he entered the hall and strode the length of a red carpet trimmed in golden silk. With the applause of the members of the Court lining either side, and the sound of his people cheering from outside the palace as they watched on large screens, Iodocus walked up to the throne.

In her final act as Regent, Rhiannon took the King's crown from its place upon a pillow of purple velvet, also trimmed, in gold, and placed it on his head.

"All hail Iodocus," Lir's voice boomed out. "King of Salacia. Long live the King!"

"Long live the King!" rang out inside and out of the palace three times in rapid succession as Iodocus settled back into his throne. Despite his long ordeal, he looked fit and well again. Restored fully by his return to his rightful place.

“We thank the Regent for her service,” Iodocus said. “And for her role in preserving our throne and the Alliance in our absence. We thank you all for sharing in this moment and for your good wishes.

“We are also most grateful at the news of Galen Dwyn’s survival in the Wilds and eagerly await his return to our kingdom where we may convey to him in person our gratitude. For we all, not only here on Salacia, but throughout the Alliance at large, owe him a debt we can never fully repay.

“But for now,” he continued, “it is a time for us to return to normal, with a fuller appreciation of what we nearly lost. Let us begin doing so now.”

As the Court began to mingle into smaller groups, Iodocus turned to his daughter, now seated in what used to be her mother’s throne. It was a painful reminder of his wife’s treachery to both him and Rhiannon. The trial of his brother and his Queen was slated for the next lune. He hadn’t even gone to see them since his return. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to lay eyes upon either of them again.

He could, as King, take matters into his own hands and no one would deny him the right. But, could he order the deaths of his brother and wife, even though they had betrayed him? They appeared to have no qualms leaving him to die. And his method of execution would be much more painless and would involve less suffering than the one they had consigned him to.

Would exile again be enough? As long as they lived they could be a threat to his crown and to Rhiannon. And what of Rhiannon? What would she think of her father if he ordered her mother's execution?

"Father," Rhiannon laid a hand on his, concern flooding her features. "What's wrong? Are you unwell? Do we need to summon a healer?"

"The price of the monarchy, my daughter," he answered with a slight smile. "The joys of the Crown are far too fleeting, and the weight of it far too overbearing.

"I will be fine," he assured her with a pat of her hand. "I was merely wondering what to do with your mother and your uncle."

"There is no punishment too harsh for those two," her face darkened, the depth of her rage surprising him.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "But they are still blood. I find it difficult to know what to do about them. We must be just, but we cannot act solely out of vengeance. Perhaps it is best to leave it in the hands of the judiciary."

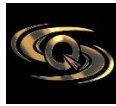
"I agree," she considered telling her father the rest of the story regarding her kidnapping – ordered by her uncle and her mother. She still battled the nightmares induced by her time in the hold of the Jakamal in Vedastus' keep on Nammu. If she did tell him, she was certain he'd strangle them both with his bare hands. "Perhaps we should leave it to the Judiciary indeed."

"You will make a wise Queen," Iodocus said. "And someday perhaps you will tell me why there is so much venom in your eyes and on

your tongue when you speak of your mother and my brother. Their infidelity to me surely does not account for that much hatred.”

“Someday,” she promised him. “When I can speak of it without that venom.”

“That is good enough for me,” Iodocus replied with a smile. “A wise Queen indeed.”



Chancellor Napat entered the Senate chambers intent on delivering his speech on the state of the Alliance as quickly as possible. They’d heard that Dwyn had survived and was making his way back to Alliance territory. They’d also heard, although the news had not been made public, that Harmool had somehow survived his encounter with the Sphere. Worse still, it seemed as if he still had designs on bringing the Alliance to ruin.

He’d dispatched Rowan Eldereef, his trusted spymaster, to hunt down any of Harmool’s allies. They would nip this latest threat in the bud. He would put a price on Harmool’s head so high that the man would have to go into hiding the rest of his life if he had to.

He walked to the dais to applause. A much-welcome change to the greeting he received barely a cycle ago. He opened his mouth to begin his speech but never uttered a sound.

GALEN'S BLADE

He never had a chance to as the entire building was vaporized in a massive explosion.



Pepin Ellaneiri, First Prime of Caletos, strode into his office and stopped in confusion. He'd been informed a messenger awaited him here, but the room was empty save himself and the furniture.

If this is some kind of joke I'll have someone's head.

The door opened behind him and an aide walked in.

"I was told a messenger would be waiting," he said, his tone demanding an explanation.

"Yes, First Prime," she replied evenly. "I have the message."

"Don't keep me in suspense."

She drew a blaster, and before he could recover from the shock, blew a wide hole in his chest. His eyes frozen in wide-open horror, Ellaneiri slammed up against the wall and slowly crumpled dead to the floor.



"I told you the view up here was magnificent, K'laine."

“Indeed you did, J’heese,” Axaltier’s Premier agreed. “I might have to make it a point to come here more often.”

“I could arrange an extended stay.”

“As much as I would love to indulge myself,” K’laine shook his head. “I must decline.”

“And I must insist.”

K’laine turned around quickly and found himself staring into the barrel of a blaster.

“J’heese,” he exclaimed. “Are you mad? What do you hope to accomplish with this insanity?”

“Ownership of the entire planet,” J’heese replied, pulling the trigger. K’laine was hurled over the deck railing and plummeted a thousand meters to the snow-covered ground below.

The blast hadn’t killed him. Impact with the rock outcropping a thousand meters below did.



President Ian Lonshanks of Y’pslandi never saw the face of his assassin, never knew he’d been betrayed. He’d taken a sip of tea, looked down at the report he was reading and tumbled to the ground.

Golarnion was a rare plant to find on Y’pslandi. Primarily due to it being poisonous to every known lifeform on the planet. The leaves could

GALEN'S BLADE

be ground into a tea that was safe to drink – provided one fully removed the stems first.

Fierdan Woiltail, the planet's Vice-President, entered the office with a fresh cup of tea. This one most non-lethal and replaced Lonshanks' cup with it. Dumping the poison tea into a sink, he rinsed the cup out and quickly exited the room.

He had a message to send to his new ally, Harmool. The deed had been done.



General Hans Questor called the staff meeting to order. Gathering the leadership of the Bata'van together in person was always a herculean task. Usually such meetings were handled via remote conferencing. But this meeting required his top officers to attend in person, no matter how far away from their home base on Taygeta they might be.

"I appreciate that many of you had to travel quite far to get here," he began. "But we have been tasked..."

The room shook as the Senate Building exploded just two clicks away.

"What in hells was that?" he exclaimed as the door flew open and a Lieutenant strode in.

"Sir, the Senate building has been bombed," he reported. "All inside, including Chancellor Napat have been killed."

“How in blazes can you know that?” Colonel Akari demanded.
“The explosion just happened.”

“I also regret to inform the General,” the Lieutenant continued, ignoring the Colonel, “that the General Staff of the Bata’van have also been killed.”

“Are you mad?” someone shouted.

But the Lieutenant merely smiled, opened his coat and withdrew a small black box with a large red button, glowing brightly. The move exposed the vest he was wearing underneath the coat, a vest laden with explosives.

Before the General could utter a word in protest, the Lieutenant pushed the button and the main headquarters of the Bata’van disappeared in a blast of smoke, fire and debris.



“Sire,” a young man from Communications rushed into the hall.
“Sire. There has been a great tragedy, Sire!”

Iodocus caught the boy by the shoulders and gave him a firm shake.

“Calm yourself, boy,” he commanded. “Now tell me, what is going on?”

“The Senate has been assassinated on Taygeta,” he gasped out.
“The Chancellor is dead. The General Staff of the Bata’van have also been

GALEN'S BLADE

murdered. Bombs they said. We are getting reports of assassinations and coups across the Alliance. Ellaneiri, K'laine, Lonshanks and a dozen more have been murdered. The other planets are in chaos and civil war has broken out on no less than six planets.”

“Has the universe gone mad?” Iodocus asked, shocked by the enormity of it all. But the universe held one more surprise for the King.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say mad, your majesty,” Harmool managed to convey the last two words in a sneer. “Madness implies there isn’t a plan behind the chaos. And I do have a plan.”

Harmool casually entered the hall and strode toward the King, smiling broadly, as if he hadn’t a concern in the world. He wore skeletal prosthetics around his arms and legs, helping him move about. A black tube ran out of one nostril, down his torso to his belt where a unit was attached, helping him breathe. Horrible scars still showed where his skin was uncovered.

“I’ll have you flayed alive, one layer of skin at a time,” Iodocus growled. “Guards, take him and throw him in a cell.”

Harmool merely stood there, smiling. The guards just stood still.

“Is there a problem, Sire?” Harmool sneered again. “Here, let me see if I can help. Guards. Take the King and his brat daughter to a cell until I have more time to deal with them properly.”

The guards immediately moved to obey.

“I do have to make sure that all of my people have taken control of the Alliance worlds,” Harmool added, looking at Rhiannon. “And then I need to deal with that boyfriend of yours, once and for all.”

“You’re not even in the same league as Galen Dwyn,” she spat at him. “He’ll kill you again, you monster, and this time you’ll stay dead.”

Harmool’s smile never altered, even as he backhanded her, knocking her to the floor. Iodocus tried to lunge at him but the guards restrained him. Lir was not blocked by the guards however.

“Coward,” he shouted and landed an impressive blow against Harmool’s jaw. The man’s prosthetic-enhanced legs kept him on his feet. His prosthetic-enhanced arm added power to his answering blow, driving Lir to the floor in a heap next to Rhiannon.

“Monster!” she repeated and tended to the fallen man.

“My we are all in a feisty mood today, aren’t we?” Harmool chuckled. “Take all three of them to the cells until I decide what I shall do with them.

“Someone fetch me a communications array,” Harmool ordered. “I need to address my subjects and explain the new order of things.”

“Your subjects?” Iodocus asked.

“Why yes, my subjects. The Alliance is dead, my dear King. There is a new empire. The next time you address me it will be as Emperor Harmool. Under my rule there will be order. Obedience will be rewarded by my allowing the obedient to remain alive. Rebellion will be rewarded with death. You would do well to remember that. You will all do well to remember that.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“There’s a ship due in tomorrow, bound for one of the border worlds,” Galen reported as he sat down at the table. They had returned to the same saloon after another frustrating day of searching for a ship to take them home. “If we can get on it, we’re set. If not, we’ll have to call Salacia and have them send a ship in to get us.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t considering stealing one,” Cass remarked, sampling her third different ale of the morning. Galen realized she could now drink him under the table and never get drunk. His comment about her early drinking habits died before he could begin to utter it.

“We might have to come back to the Wilds one of these days,” Galen pointed out. “I’d rather not have everyone here out for my blood if we do.”

Mori had occupied himself with adding notes to his journal, logging data about Cass’ progress. He glanced up and froze.

“Why is your face on those monitors?” he asked, looking at Galen.

“What?” both he and Cass asked, looking over at the monitors. There, as big as life, was a picture of Galen Dwyn.

“Hey,” Galen called to the barman, “turn up the volume on that.”

“It’s been playing all morning,” the barman replied, bored. “Some idiot over in Alliance space wants some other idiot from the Alliance back in Alliance space. Who cares?”

Galen crossed over the short distance and grabbed the barman by the collar.

“As it appears that I am the idiot he wants,” Galen snarled, “I care. Now turn up the volume on that.”

The barman complied, wriggling out of Galen’s grip as the volume came up and the message began to repeat.

“This man is Galen Dwyn,” the voice was clearly Harmool’s. “If you know of his whereabouts, inform him that his presence is required at the palace on Salacia. If he values the lives of his friends, he will hurry.”

The message looped back to repeat and Galen waved at the barman to turn it off.

“At least he didn’t put a price on your head,” Cass whispered from behind. “We won’t have to fight our way out of here.”

“Why Salacia?” Galen asked. “He can’t possibly be there. He’d have been arrested before he got anywhere close.”

“You really are out of the loop, aren’t you?” the barman asked.

“Meaning?” Galen barked.

“The Alliance has fallen,” the barman reported. “The whole place went and lost its damn mind yesterday. Politicians have been assassinated, wars have broken out on at least a third of the planets. Some loon named Harmool has declared himself Emperor. You couldn’t pay me enough in

GALEN'S BLADE

gold to dip my big toe into Alliance space right now. I doubt you'll find any Captain on this planet who would either."

"Your friend from last night," Galen suddenly asked Cass, "you said he has a ship?"

"Yes," she answered. "Crew of four, said it was pretty fast and could handle itself in a fight. Want me to find him and ask if he'll take us?"

"No," Galen said, having spotted the man at the other end of the bar. "I'll ask him."

Galen walked up to the man and gave him a hard look.

"You slept with my daughter you space bum!" he exclaimed and slugged him. The man crashed into the wall behind him, took two steps forward and fell face first to the floor. Galen looked to the man's companion at the bar.

"You wouldn't happen to be the first mate of his ship, would you?"

"I...I...am..."

"Excellent," Galen said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "You can take me to my new ship. Then you and the rest of the crew can get your kits and get off."

The first mate just stood there, mouth agape.

"Or, you can stand there," Galen added. "I can shoot you and have him take me there when he wakes up. Your call, but I am pressed for time here so make it quick."



The four former crewmen of the *Firestarter* watched in shock as their ship left them standing on the dock, their belongings stacked in an unkempt pile beside them.

“You could have offered to pay him for the ship,” Mori complained, still shocked by Galen’s actions in the bar.

“I could have,” Galen agreed. “And he would have said no. Besides, he had it coming anyway.”

“You really picked him out of all the captains in that bar because he had sex with me?” Cass favored him with a look.

“No,” Galen denied. “He just happened to look like he had it coming.”

“Uh huh,” Cass replied with a knowing look. “Shouldn’t we be lifting up into orbit, in case someone decides to report a stolen ship?”

“On this backwater world? They’ll probably toss him in the brig for losing his ship so easily. Besides, we need to retrieve a few items from the *Tempest* before we head back.

“When we get to the crash site, take only what we need,” he added. “Yes, Mori, that includes your notes and the tube. Cass, you know what to load up after we get Mori’s kit aboard. I’ll clear out what I need and then set the timer.”

“The timer?” Mori asked.

GALEN'S BLADE

“This time when we leave the *Tempest* we aren't leaving her intact for someone to salvage and use for gods only know what. Thirty minutes after we depart, she self-destructs and there will be nothing left behind.”

Mori nodded and sat back as they made the brief flight back to the fallen ship. Galen fell silent as he piloted the new ship.

“Galen...” Cass began, divining his thoughts.

“She's a good ship, Cass. But I knew the minute I went outside and saw the damage that she'd never fly again. She deserves a decent burial at least.”

Cass nodded and left Galen to his thoughts. What had taken three days for them to walk needed but a half hour to fly. Galen brought the *Firestarter* down as close to the *Tempest* as he could and extended the ramp.

They scrambled across, gathering up Mori's equipment and the tube and loading it all into one of the new ship's smaller holds. While he remained behind to secure the tube, Galen and Cass returned and collected what they needed. Cass, having no material possessions, gathered up data chips from the flight deck. Galen gathered up what he could from what served as an armory, then packed what few belongings he cared to take from his cabin. Handing the two bags to Cass as she returned to the new ship, Galen made his way around the *Tempest* one final time, setting the charges that would bring an end to her.

He returned to the *Firestarter*, pausing at the top of the ramp to take one final look at his ship.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, then stepped inside, retracted the ramp and closed the hatch,

They were already in orbit when the charges detonated. The sand settling down on the crater until no sign remained that a ship had ever crashed there.

“Course set for Alliance space,” Cass reported, taking over as pilot. “Are we heading straight for Salacia?”

“Not until we know exactly what the situation is,” Galen replied. “Fortunately, your friend has a serviceable communications array on this tub. Let’s see if we can contact anyone on Salacia before we just walk into something we’d rather avoid.”

He adjusted the controls on the communications panel then transmitted.

“This is Galen Dwyn,” he began. “I’m trying to contact the Princess Rhiannon on Salacia. Respond please.”

He waited a full minute without getting a response before repeating the message. This time he got an answer and his heart sank when he saw who it was answering.

“My good friend, Galen Dwyn,” Harmool said in a sickly-sweet tone. “How good of you to call. I’m afraid your friends aren’t able to speak with you right now. They’re quite tied up. But may I say that it was a surprise to hear you were still alive? I’m sure you feel the same now that you know I survived our last encounter as well.”

“Surprised,” Galen agreed. “And severely disappointed. I’ll have to make sure I kill you correctly next time. I do hate loose ends.”

GALEN'S BLADE

“As do I. Speaking of, I believe you have something that belongs to me. I would very much appreciate its return, along with its creator. Should I add that your friends would appreciate it as well.”

“I do,” Galen replied, glad that Mori was in the rear of the ship and out of view. Cass was also just outside the range of the pickup and Galen wanted it to stay that way for now. “And if you ever want to see either of them ever again then I’ll be wanting my friends in return. All three of them.”

“That seems like a lot to ask,” Harmool said. “You may have one but not all three.”

“All three, Harmool,” Galen’s voice turned as cold as space. “Or I’ll space your android and its inventor and you enjoy the rest of your limited days looking like a Jorillian lizard.”

“Limited days? What makes you think my life is limited to just a few days?”

“Because if you don’t give me what I want, and you kill them, I will fly straight to Salacia and kill you before the end of this lune.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“With my hands around your throat.”

The two men engaged in a silent battle of wills. Harmool blinked first.

“I believe you would at that,” Harmool said. “Even if it killed you. Very well, an exchange of hostages then. Bring me what I want and I’ll give you what you want.”

“On Salacia?” Galen asked. “You think I’m stupid?”

Harmool shrugged.

“There is a small world, uninhabited, just inside Alliance space near the border. Cestius. You will fly there with one pilot and one guard along with yourself, Lir, Rhiannon and the King – and not his brother, but Iodocus himself.”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Harmool interrupted. “Arthureal and Darieann outlived their usefulness some time ago, and as we have established, we hate loose ends.”

The picture shifted to the outside of the Palace. On pikes positioned on each side of the main entrance way were the heads of Arthureal and his one-time lover.

“Need I remind you that all three had better be alive and well at the exchange,” Galen growled when Harmool returned to the screen.

“No need.”

“When you get there, land and wait,” Galen continued. “I will arrive shortly after and when I am convinced you have come alone, I will land my ship. We make the exchange and I leave first. Then you can do whatever the hells you want.”

“And what guarantee do I have that you won’t kill me after the exchange while I’m a sitting duck on the ground?”

“The thought occurred,” Galen admitted. “All I want is to get my three friends to safety. You want that android because without it you won’t live long enough to enjoy your new empire. We can make this real easy or you can make this very difficult. Your choice.”

When Harmool paused overlong, Galen looked over at Cass.

GALEN'S BLADE

"Prepare to space the cargo hold," he ordered.

"Wait!" Harmool exclaimed. "Very well. I will arrive at Cestius with all three aboard in two days."

"I'll be there in three. Out."

Galen cut communications and sat back.

"Galen...?" Cass said.

"I'm not about to trade you for them," he answered her unspoken question. "And I wouldn't, even if it were possible to upload you out and download him in. But we need him to think the android is still viable so he'll leave Salacia."

"Are we going to ambush him enroute?"

"No, too much risk that he'll kill his hostages. The play is to let him land on Cestius and wait for us. We'll scout around and make sure he hasn't brought any additional help before we land, then we make the exchange."

"You don't think he'll notice the empty tube?"

"Who says it'll be empty?" Galen replied, snapping on the internal 'com. "Mori, I assume you heard all of that?"

"I did."

"Can you rig up something to make it look like the tube is occupied?"

"I...I believe so."

"In less than three days?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really. Get busy," he snapped off the 'com.

“You’re going to bluff him?”

“He’s desperate,” Galen said. “He needs that android. Needs it bad enough that he’ll be blind to the questions anyone would raise if they were in a more rational state of mind.”

“So you hope.”

“Yeah,” he agreed grimly. “So I hope.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Sir, a ship is pulling into orbit above us,” the pilot of Harmool’s ship reported. They’d landed on the surface of Cestius less than twelve hours ago. Harmool had amused himself with his hostages. Dwyn had specified alive and well. They were alive and... well.. alive but not in mint condition. He was owed that much for all the trouble they’d caused him.

“He’s early,” he replied. “I suppose that is some indication of how important the three of you are to him.”

Bound and gagged, the three battered prisoners settled for glaring their hatred at him as he turned and exited the hold.

“Send a message to the orbiting ship,” he commanded. “Tell them to hurry up before I change my mind.”

“They are already descending, sir. ETA is five minutes.”

“In a hurry indeed, Galen Dwyn.”

Harmool exited the ship, taking station at the end of the ramp as he watched the ship descend. It was not the *Tempest*, a fact that concerned him.

Was this a trap after all? Would he risk his friends lives so?

The ship settled gently onto the surface, raising a brief dust cloud that quickly dissipated. The main hatch opened and a ramp descended. Dwyn was the first to exit. He was surprised to note that Dwyn's blaster remained holstered although there was a small device in the palm of his left hand.

The tube followed, with a stack of material piled up on a shelf below. He could barely make out the hominid form in the murky liquid of the tube. Pushing it down the ramp was a woman he'd never seen before in Galen's company.

He found a new friend I see. Quite a looker at that. Perhaps I can convince her to trade up, after I've rid my empire of this nuisance smuggler.

She wheeled the tube out about midway between the ships then slowly backed away. Unlike Dwyn, she drew a very formidable looking sidearm and pointed it right at Harmool.

Well, that attitude will simply have to go.

"Here's ours, Harmool," Galen called out. "Where's yours?"

Harmool briefly considered ordering his two guards to open fire from the ship. Galen's next words put an end to that.

"Before you do something very foolish," Galen said, raising his left hand and showing his thumb pressing down on the red button on the device. "If I die, I release the pressure on this switch and the bomb we planted on the tube vaporizes five square clicks of this planet."

Damn this man!!!!

GALEN'S BLADE



Galen watched the rage play out across his adversary's face with no small amount of pleasure. He knew Harmool's first inclination would be betrayal. Now that the man knew that was not an option he might be just smart enough to make the trade and live to fight another day.

"Well played, Dwyn," Harmool allowed through gritted teeth. "Bring them out!"

Rhiannon and Lir, beaten and bruised, had to help Iodocus make his way down the ramp. The man looked even worse than he had when they'd found him on Eowei. Seeing the state they were in made Galen's blood boil and he fought down the urge to draw his blaster and empty its full charge into Harmool's face.

There will be a time and place for that, he vowed, but it is not this time or place.

"Cassandra," he called out, seeing Rhea and Lir react to the name. "Keep your gun leveled on Harmool. If he so much as blinks, kill him."

"Not a problem," she replied and Rhea's eyes went wide as she recognized the voice. Lir was a split-second behind and smothered a grin as he put the pieces together. They hurried across as quickly as they could.

"I see my android," Harmool said, "but I do not see my inventor."

"You can thank your hired guns for that," Galen replied. "When they shot my ship to pieces they killed your inventor. You have his notes and the equipment you need to make it work."

“It seems you’re not holding up your end of the bargain,” Harmool shot back. “Perhaps I should withhold one hostage.”

“I leave with all three or no one leaves here alive,” Galen returned without hesitation. “And your empire crumbles. Frankly, I’d rather not live in a universe with you as Emperor anyway. Maybe I’ll just release my grip...”

“Wait!!!!” Harmool exclaimed. “Damn you, Galen Dwyn. Take your damned friends and leave. I’ll have plenty of time to deal with you later.”

Galen nodded at Cass, who moved over to help carry Iodocus.

“Cass,” Rhea said. “How...”

“Time for that later, Princess,” Cass hissed softly. “Get your ass moving into the ship.”

The four scrambled aboard, leaving Galen and Harmool alone on the surface. Galen started backing up the ramp.

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Harmool,” Galen said as he reached the hatch. “We’ll settle up later.”

With that he stepped in, retracted the ramp and closed the hatch.

“Cass, get us the hells out of here before he opens up that tube!” he shouted as he tossed aside the dummy detonator.

The *Firestarter* rose into the sky and rocketed into space.



GALEN'S BLADE

Harmool watched the fleeing ship and considered ordering his own ship to open fire while it was in range. But Galen's dead man switch stayed his desire to kill the man. Who knew what the range of the device was? So he let it go.

"Sir," his pilot called out. "Should we open fire?"

"No," he commanded. "Get out here and help me move this tube."

He approached the tube and carefully opened the hatch as his men exited his ship. He quickly slammed the hatch closed.

"Empty!!!! The damned thing is empty!!!!" he screamed. What he'd taken for the android had been nothing more than thin tissue paper draped over thin wires to form the outline of a hominid body.

Reaching down he grabbed the pads of Mori's notes and found them empty. The transfer module was also an empty shell, the device itself was gone. Nor was there a bomb anywhere to be found.

But he did find a note addressed to him from Dwyn.

So sorry about the android, Harmool. But my friend Cassandra needed it worse than you did.

Harmool's bellow of rage very nearly reached the fleeing *Firestarter* as she broke orbit and fled back into the Wilds.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Galen," Lir called out as soon as he'd joined them on the flight deck. "Harmool has three Salacian cruisers hiding nearby."

"In the debris field of the shattered moon," Galen replied, sliding into the pilot's seat. "I know. Its why I picked this planet in the first place. That moon is a great place to spring an ambush from."

"Unless of course," he added with a very satisfied smirk, "someone managed to mine the field several hours before you arrive. So, when you engage your engines to spring your trap..."

A brilliant eruption of light filled the forward viewscreen.

"Scratch three cruisers," Cass said. "Maintaining course back into the Wilds. Harmool's ship is still on the surface."

"He'll never be able to catch us in that ship," Galen said, more for their passengers' benefit.

"Should I change course for Haven?"

"Not yet," Galen replied. "Let's establish that we're heading for the Wilds, as anyone would expect, and then set course for Arkon."

"Arkon?" Lir asked.

“We need to swap ships and get as much information on what’s going on in Alliance space before we head for cover,” Galen explained. “Jaq is our best option for both. Once we have what we need, then we’ll go to Haven, lick our wounds and figure out what our next move is.”

“And what is Haven?” Lir asked. “I expected you to head for Sanctuary like we did before.”

“Sanctuary is a one-ship hole in the universe for me to hide in when I was still working,” Galen replied. “Haven was where I was going when I decided to retire and didn’t want anyone to find me. Trust me, you’ll enjoy your stay on Haven a lot more than you did on Sanctuary.”

Galen rose from the seat and crossed the deck to where Iodocus was lying. He’d been stretched across three seats, a light blanket draped over him, with Rhiannon at his side. The King looked pale and drawn, Galen could only imagine the terrors inflicted upon the old man by Harmool. Both Lir and Rhiannon looked as if they’d been maltreated. Galen swallowed down his anger.

“How is he?” he knelt down next to Rhiannon.

“Not well,” she replied. “He...”

“He’s tough,” Galen finished when she faltered. “He’ll pull through. We’ll get him some help at Arkon.”

“Galen,” she looked at him with a pained expression. “Those ships, there were Salacians crewing them.”

“Crews who chose to follow Harmool instead of their rightful King,” Galen replied. “They chose treason and paid the price traitors pay. Do not mourn for them.”

GALEN'S BLADE

"Let's move him to the main cabin," Galen moved to lift the older man. "He'll be more comfortable in there. Cass, hold course for two hours, then head for Arkon at the best speed this crate can make."



"Galen!"

"What, I'm awake!"

"No you're not," Cass replied. "You keep nodding off. Why don't you go back and get some sleep? We're a full day from Arkon, no one is pursuing us, and I can handle things for a few hours without you."

"When's the last time you slept?" he protested.

"Two days ago," she admitted. "But I can stay awake a lot longer than you. Android, remember?"

"And I'll stay up here with her until its time to wake you up," Lir added.

"When did you get up here," Galen turned in his seat.

"A few minutes ago when you weren't falling asleep," Lir replied. "You're relieved of flight duty, Captain. Hit the rack."

"This is mutiny," Galen half-protested.

"Absolutely," Cass retorted. "Now, are you going to bed or do I have to drag you back there while Lir flies the ship?"

"Fine, I'll go," Galen relented. "Lir would probably hit an asteroid if we let him drive..."

Galen made his way toward the crew cabins. Fortunately, there were six so no one needed to double up with a bunkmate. He slipped into the main cabin first to check on Rhiannon and the King. The King was sleeping on the main bunk in what served as the Captain's cabin. Rhiannon had dropped the back of the couch across the room, turning it into a serviceable bed and was asleep on it.

The King looked a little better, but not by much. He was no healer, but Galen had seen his share of dying men. For Rhiannon's sake he would keep a hopeful attitude, but inwardly he feared the King did not have much longer to live.

"Galen," Rhiannon called softly. Making his way over he sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he apologized. "I just wanted to check up on you two before I turned in."

She shifted over, making room on the bed.

"Then lay here next to me," she patted the bed with her hand.

Bringing his legs up, he laid back as ordered. It was comfortable enough, and he'd slept on much worse. Rhiannon settled her head onto his shoulder, threw her arm across his chest and was sound asleep in a second. He closed his eyes, thinking about what was needed next if they were to make it to Haven.

And fell sound asleep almost as quickly as she had.



Lir waited a full eight hours before heading back to awaken Galen. He wanted to check on the King first, as he knew that would be Galen's first question, so he stepped into the main cabin. He wasn't surprised to see the two of them, sound asleep on the converted couch.

After what the two of them have been through, they deserve a good night's sleep and maybe an extra hour or two on top of that.

He made to leave as quietly as he'd entered but was stopped by the King.

"They make a good couple, do they not," Iodocus observed softly, so as not to wake them.

Lir sat in the chair next to the King and nodded in agreement.

"I have never seen her so taken by any man," Iodocus continued. "From what I've heard about him, I am both surprised and alarmed."

"You needn't be, Sire," Lir replied, keeping his voice down. "I've never met a finer man than Galen Dwyn. I was never blessed with a child of my own blood. But I claim him as much my son if he were my own blood. Your daughter could ask for no better protector to walk beside her in life than him."

"So I gather," Iodocus nodded. "And do not consider for a moment that I think ill of him. You told me before, back on Salacia, that he was cut from the same cloth as the Old Galactic Knights of legend."

"He is, Sire."

"I wonder...", the King trailed off and for a moment Lir thought he'd drifted back to sleep. "You can see the way of things as well as I. The

Alliance has fractured and may never again be made whole. If Harmool's empire is to be forestalled we may have to turn to the old legends.

"Tell me more about the Knights, Lir," he continued. "While our children enjoy a few peaceful moments together before we face the whirlwind once more.



Galen pushed his way through the batwing doors of The Bitter Hag. The last day's flight to Arkon had thankfully been uneventful. Cass had monitored communications and heard no messages in the ether regarding the *Firestarter*. It seemed as if Harmool had bought their fake course back into the Wilds and was probably using his contacts there to look for them, never thinking for a moment they would stay in what had been Alliance space.

Setting down on a port pad as close as possible to Jacquez's bar, Galen left Lir in command with Mori keeping an eye on the ill King. Rhiannon and Cass accompanied him to the bar.

Sweeping the room, and not spotting any obvious signs of trouble, Galen spotted Jaq at his usual table and headed straight for it.

"I should have known you'd show up here," Jaq extended a hand with a smile. "Anytime the galaxy is on fire, Galen Dwyn is usually in the middle of it and in need of my help."

"Is that any way to thank a man who made you filthy rich a few luns ago?" Galen clasped the hand, smiling.

"I was already filthy rich," Jaq joked. "You went and made me respectably filthy rich. You know what that kind of reputation does to a man in my line of work? So, when are you going to introduce me to these lovely companions of yours?"

"This is the Princess Rhiannon," Galen replied, "and you already knew that. And this is my first mate, formerly of the *Tempest* and now of the *Firestarter*, Cassandra. Ladies, my friend, and proprietor of this establishment, Jacquez. And no, Jaq, neither of them are interested in becoming your tenth wife."

"Ladies, a pleasure," Jaq stood and fashioned a bow. "And it would be my ninth wife, not my tenth."

"And where is wife number eight?" Rhiannon asked.

"She ran off with my divorce attorney after I named the bar after her," Jaq explained.

"I thought that was the seventh wife?" Galen asked.

"No, number seven decided she wanted to tour the Wilds as an interpretive dancer with my brother," Jaq said with a wave of his hand. "Good riddance to both of them. Did you say formerly of the *Tempest*? Galen Dwyn without his ship? Now I know the universe has gone mad."

"The *Tempest* was...lost," Galen got out around a lump in his throat. "I found a replacement in the Wilds that got me back here but..."

"But," Jaq interrupted, "you need to ditch it and get a new ship as the new management in this part of the universe wants your head on a

silver platter. Yes, I heard. I also heard they are looking for you in the Wilds. The prices on your heads are so high that if anyone in this room other than me were aware of it, you'd be dead already and twenty people would be claiming the bounty."

"Something like that," Galen admitted.

"Fortunately for you, I don't much care for the new guy in charge," Jaq said, opening a drawer in his table and pulling out a control chit. "I take it you're planning on finding a hole in the universe to hide in until the heat is off and then come out swinging?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

"Good," he handed Galen the chit. "Her name is the *Fortress* and she's berthed at a private dock of mine on Mexia."

"I thought Mexia's atmosphere was pure acid?"

"That's what the brochures all say. Best way I know to keep unwanted visitors from seeing my operation there. Once you get there, dock whatever crate you're flying now in the berth next to it and leave the control chit for it in the pilot's seat. One of my people will see to it that the ship is never found and you can get to your hole in the wall without anyone knowing what ship you're on."

"Thanks, Jaq," Galen pocketed the new ship's chit. "How bad is it out there?"

"It's bad, Galen. This Harmool, he's insane and I hear he has special plans for you if he ever gets his hands on you. Whatever you did to him it must have been something."

"It was. Are there any planets standing against him?"

GALEN'S BLADE

“Openly? No. No one dares. Most of the Bata’van threw in with him and they are cracking down hard. Taygeta tried to, even after the Senate was bombed along with Bata’van HQ. Harmool’s forces didn’t leave much of the planet inhabitable.

“There’s a lot of refugees – civilian and Bata’van – from every world trying to stay one jump ahead of Harmool’s goons,” he continued. “So far, they are spending so much time running for their lives they haven’t had any time to mount a counter-attack.”

Galen leaned over and claimed a pad and pen from the table and scratched out a series of numbers.

“Get the word out to those you can trust,” he said as he handed the note to Jaq. “Tell them to come to these coordinates. I call the place, Haven.”

“Galen!” both Rhiannon and Cass exclaimed, shocked that he’d reveal the secret to anyone.

“Tell them this is where we will rally,” Galen continued, ignoring them. “Once we have gathered as many as we can, or if we are discovered, we will fall back to a location in the Wilds where we will be safe. That is where we will mount a counterattack on Harmool and his empire when the time is right.

“Jaq,” he continued. “How long can you hold out here?”

“As long as I want. Hells, Harmool still thinks I’m one of his allies since I was the one that ratted you out the last time around. Which is why Arkon remains relatively unscathed, along with being so far out on the edge of nowhere we aren’t that important. Why?”

“I need you to be our eyes and ears out here,” Galen explained. “Get whatever intelligence you can gather and get it to me at Haven, in addition to routing any refugees there. And if possible, establish an underground here in Alliance space. For now, they are to gather and pass along information on Harmool’s movements, In the future, we’ll be asking them to do a little more, including carrying out sabotage missions. Can you do it?”

“No problem. My network can easily be converted into most of what you need immediately. We can work on getting the rest done as we go. I can even give you two refugee ships right now. You can pick them up on Mexia. A pair of Salacian cruisers, crewed by people still loyal to Iodocus and filled to capacity with refugees.”

“Sounds like we have an arrangement.”

“We do.”

“Jaq, don’t be a martyr. Do what you can as long as you can. But clear out of here if Harmool catches on to what you’re doing and get to Haven.”



“That doesn’t exactly look exactly inviting,” Lir noted as the orbited Mexia. Angry red, yellow and orange clouds swirled high in the atmosphere, blocking any view of the surface below. Vivid streaks of purple and blue lightning lanced the clouds.

GALEN'S BLADE

"Atmosphere reads as..." Cass paused. "Let's just say every Hell you could imagine would be a vacation spot by comparison. There's nothing resembling breathable air down there."

"Take us in, Cass," Galen replied, unconcerned.

"Well," she remarked with a shrug. "It was a good run while my life as a hominid lasted."

"Just takes us down to the surface, Cass," he shot her a side-glance.

The *Firestarter* dove into the toxic murk and exited out into a pristine-looking looking world below after traversing the ten-meter-thick layer of clouds. An orange sky illuminated the moon's surface.

"Atmosphere is..." Cass paused. "About as close to perfect as you could ask for. Okay, I now know what being impressed feels like."

"But that layer of clouds above," Rhiannon said. "How is it possible?"

"A camouflage field big enough to encompass a small moon and, as Jaq said, keep away any unwanted visitors. Only a lunatic would try to explore a place that looked like what we saw from orbit."

"Would you look at that," Cass exclaimed. "That is one big ship..."

They were closing in on the dock. Next to an empty berth, which was their destination, lay a ship that could easily hold three Salacian cruisers within and have room to spare. Despite her size she looked like she'd been designed to run down her prey with ease.

The Fortress.

“We’re definitely trading up,” Cass said, bringing the *Firestarter* in to dock.

“Thank you, Jaq,” Galen whispered, before something else drew his attention. “And there’s our two refugee ships over there.”

“The *Bellarosa* and the *Xandifier*,” Rhiannon identified the Salacian ships. “We’re starting to collect quite a fleet.”

“Do you know the Captains?”

“Yes and they are quite loyal to my father.”

“Good,” Galen replied and opening a channel to the ships.

“Attention Salacian cruisers *Bellarosa* and *Xandifier*, this is Captain Galen Dwyn of the *Firestarter* carrying King Iodocus and Princess Rhiannon.”

“This is Johan Trestor, Captain of the *Bellarosa*,” came the reply. “We’re very glad to hear from you Captain and even happier to hear the King and the Princess are safe.”

“Safe yes,” Galen replied, “but the King is not well and is in need of a healer. We are transferring the King’s flag to the *Fortress*. Can you release your healer to us?”

“We can. He’ll meet you on board the *Fortress* as soon as you have made the transfer,” Trestor replied. “Captain Dwyn, what are the King’s orders for us?”

“The King is in no condition to issue orders,” Galen replied after a look at Rhiannon. “My intentions, after we have transferred, is to take the *Fortress* out, along with your two ships and your refuges, and take shelter on a planet called, Haven. Don’t bother looking for it on your charts, you won’t find it.”

GALEN'S BLADE

“And when we reach this... Haven?”

“We will see to our wounded, get our people settled, and prepare to receive more refugees,” Galen replied. “In time, we will fall back to a small system in the Wilds where we will establish permanent bases and build up our forces.

“Then,” he continued, “when the time is right, we will return to Alliance space and rid it of Harmool’s Empire.”

There was a long pause on the other end as Cass brought the ship to a stop in its berth,

“Captain Trestor,” Rhiannon spoke up.

“Yes, Princess?”

“You may consider what Captain Dwyn just said an order from my father.”

“Thank you, highness,” Trestor sounded relieved. “I was trying to find a way to follow the Captain’s orders without betraying my oath to Salacia.

“Admiral Dwyn,” Trestor said. “Our ships are yours to command.”

Now I’m an Admiral, Galen thought bemusedly. *Everyone keeps promoting me without asking me first.*

“Very good, Captain,” he said aloud, ignoring the knowing look and chuckle from Lir. “I intend to depart Mexia in a quarter day. I’ll need to borrow some of your crews, unless you have some experienced hands among your refugees.”

“I’m sure we can shake out a serviceable crew for you between the two of us. We’ll be standing by for the departure orders.”

“Thank you, Captain, *Firestarter* out.”

“Congratulations, my boy,” Lir clapped his hand on Galen’s shoulder. “You’ve got yourself a Navy.”

“It’s not exactly going to put the fear of the gods into what Harmool has on his side,” Galen observed as he rose from the seat. “But it’s a start. Speaking of starts, let’s get started moving over to our new ship.”



Eight hours of hectic activity later, a full two hours longer than he’d wanted it to take, Galen stood on the bridge of his new ship and prepared to give the departure order.

The bridge was as massive and as impressive as the exterior of the ship had appeared. Cass had been named First Officer, Galen’s first official act as an Admiral, and she’d spent every minute getting to know the ship’s systems. As promised, a full crew had transferred aboard from the two Salacian cruisers and had fallen in to work straight away.

Getting the King moved across had been a delicate operation, but he was now in the sickbay with a team of medicos attending to him under Rhiannon’s watchful eye. Mori had decided to take refuge on the *Bellarosa*, declaring that, in his experience, it was far too dangerous to hang around Galen Dwyn. Lir was standing next to Galen’s command chair in the middle of the bridge. It was raised up a full meter over the rest of the bridge.

GALEN'S BLADE

"The chair suits you," Lir proclaimed, then leaned closer and whispered. "And in case you're wondering, you're doing a pretty good job running the show."

"Thanks," Galen replied as softly, then raised his voice. "Status report?"

"All lights green," Cass called out from her new station. "Mains are up and hot. We're ready to leave as soon as the Admiral decides to get his ass in gear."

The career military on the bridge all looked up in alarm. *That wasn't how one addressed an Admiral.*

"Thank you," Galen replied, then stared down the navigator who was gawking at Cass. "Problem, mister?"

"Sir," he replied. "I, uh, She...that is...The Admiral is going to allow your XO to address you so disrespectfully, sir?"

Lir covered a chuckle by coughing into his hand. Galen favored the boy with an icy look.

"You've joined a new military unit with new rules," Galen said coolly. "I will teach them to you as we go. Rule number one: The XO gets to address the Admiral any damn way she wants. Rule number two: She's the only one aboard this ship who gets to do so. Questions?"

"No, sir!"

"Good, then let's get this ship up into orbit and on course for Haven," he then affected his most Admiral-ly face. "Unless of course you'd like to hear what Rule number three is?"

"No, sir. Lifting clear of the dock now, sir."

“Excellent. XO, if you’d be so kind as the inform the rest of our fleet to get underway and follow us...”

“Already done, sir.”

Galen heard the undertone in the last word and gave her a look.

Let’s not push it, Cass. We do need some semblance of discipline here.

She tossed back an impish look but nodded and got a little more serious in her duties as Galen looked over at Lir.

“I think I liked it better when I could just tell her to shut up.”

“The trials of command, my boy. You should probably start getting used to it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What do you mean you cannot find them?” Harmool raged at the ‘com screen. “Don’t you dare tell me that! You had the description of the ship and its course and speed. A blind man could have pinned them down by now!”

“And yet, they clearly are not in the Wilds,” the man on the other end calmly replied. “Of course, it might have helped if we’d had the actual name of the ship when we first started. Fortunately, we have discovered that it was the *Firestarter*. Your friend Dwyn stole it after knocking out her former owner and throwing off its crew before your last encounter.

“The ship has a transponder aboard that can be pinged,” he continued. “We have combed the radius of where that ship could be, even at max speed, and there is no response to our pinging. The *Firestarter* is not in the Wilds.”

“Impossible!”

“All evidence appears to contradict that statement. We feel certain that the ship returned to your territory – likely after clearing the range of your scanners. A pity you lost those cruisers. He wouldn’t have been able to outrun them.”

Harmool bit down on the angry retort bubbling up his throat and considered what the man said. He'd been certain that Dwyn would flee back into the Wilds and remain there. Had their roles been reversed, that is precisely what he would have done.

As the situation stood, Harmool had the advantage in this territory. While he did have contacts in the Wilds, his resources there were limited while he focused on bringing the last pockets of resistance to his Empire to heel. Surely, Dwyn would realize this and look for a hole to crawl into in the Wilds.

Would he risk hiding in the old Alliance territory? They could easily be spotted and reported by anyone here. With Harmool formally in control of all of the major planets and the Bata'van, they'd be run to ground swiftly. It was madness to come back.

Was Dwyn clever enough to bank on Harmool thinking exactly that and take the gamble? It would explain the inability of his allies to locate him in the Wilds.

"Continue your search," Harmool ordered. "I will have my people start looking for the ship over here, just in case."

"How long do you want us to search? The more time that passes, the harder it will become."

"Until that ship and everyone aboard it has been found!" Harmool snapped, closing down the 'com.

"Xan!" he shouted for his aide, who promptly raced into the throne room. With Taygeta a ruined husk, Harmool had made Salacia the capital of his empire. It was fitting that he'd usurped Iodocus' palace and throne.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get word out to my General Staff,” he barked. “Tell them to begin searching for a ship matching the description of the one Dwyn escaped on. It is called the *Firestarter*. I want every corner of the Empire scoured until it is found. And then send in that Healer from Minaire.”

Xan scampered back out and returned a minute later with an older woman in a flowing blue robe in tow.

“Majesty,” Xan said. “The healer, Ichyan, of Minaire.”

“Emperor Harmool,” she bowed.

“Leave us, Xan, and see to it my message is sent out immediately.”

Xan bowed and scampered back out once more.

“I have reviewed your proposal, Healer,” Harmool addressed the woman. “While it is not my first option, I believe it may have to do for now.”

“I understand, Emperor,” she nodded. “But it is clear that the prosthetics are not functioning suitably. Complete replacement of your limbs and lungs is the only long-term solution.”

Until I get my hands on Dwyn and bring Mori back here to finish what he started, that is, Harmool thought. *Damn that man!*

“I am forced to agree, Healer,” he said aloud. “I cannot maintain my Empire in my present weakened physical state.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she agreed. “We will also need to install enhancements to your heart and other remaining organs so that they can function with your bionics. A small device will be implanted at the base of

your brainstem, to aid in the finer control your will need for your fingers, hands and feet.

“There will be a period of adjustment, of course,” she added. “It will take you some time to get use to the non-organic portions of your body. But within a lune after completion at the most, you should be back to what was normal for you before your accident.”

“When can you get started?”

“I can begin setting up for the operations immediately,” she replied. “We will be doing this in stages, giving you a day or two to recover from the previous procedure before beginning the next. Say, a half-lune from start to finish and then you begin recovery, then rehabilitation and orientation.”

“Fine,” Harmool replied. “The sooner we start the better. I will have Xan get you set up here in the Palace. Anything you need, tell him and he will get it. I will transfer the aurox bars, half now and half when I am satisfied with the final product, into your accounts. You may go.”

“Thank you, Emperor,” she bowed once more and departed. Xan scurried back in.

“Sire, the General Staff has been informed and have begun searching for the ship in Imperial Space.”

“Excellent.”

“The palace staff have a request, Sire.”

“And that is?”

“The..uh...,” he stammered to a pause.

“Well, out with it!”

GALEN'S BLADE

“It’s the pikes outside, Sire. The scavenger birds have been picking at the...remains...and there is quite a stench coming from them. May we remove the cause, Sire?”

The heads of Arthureal and Darieann. Yes, I suppose it is quite grisly out there at the palace entrance after all this time.

“No, you may not. Leave me.”

No, they will remain there until the time comes for Iodocus and Dwyn’s heads to take their place. I’ll add the heads of Dwyn’s companions – Lir and the Cassandra who’d stolen my android body – for good measure.

As for the Princess Rhiannon, he had a much more pleasurable – for him at any rate – punishment in mind. He smiled in anticipation as he leaned back upon his throne.

After all, what good was an Empire if it wasn’t a dynastic one. And there really was only one way to start a dynasty...

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Galen stepped off the ramp of the *Fortress* as the two Salacian cruisers settled down on Haven on either side of the ship. A few hundred meters to the south, a flock of smaller ships glided toward the edge of the clearing. These were stragglers they'd collected along the way from Arkon.

"I've got a few more that will be coming your way," Jaq had reported only an hour ago.

Nestled in the debris field that made up the largest ring orbiting a supermassive gas giant, Haven was nearly impossible to locate by sensors. Galen had installed a beacon long ago when he'd first discovered the uninhabited moon. It had air, water and a reasonably livable climate. There were some native plants for food, but not enough to sustain the numbers they were expecting to arrive soon.

We won't be able to stay here long. But long enough to gather as many refugees as possible and take them to their new home.

"The orbital beacon is transmitting," Cass reported as she joined him. "It'll let us know if any ships approach so we can check them over before we give them the frequency for the beacon here."

“Good,” he waved Trestor over. “Captain, let’s get started on erecting shelters so we can get most of the people off the ships. I want crews to remain on all ships. If the wrong sort comes knocking at our door, we’ll have time to load everyone back on, but I want the ships ready to lift off at a moment’s notice all the same.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Then let’s get people out gathering fuel for fires and harvesting whatever food they can find, but make sure whatever they gather isn’t poisonous. I haven’t had time to do a full survey of the place and the last thing we need is a bunch of sick and dead people lying around.”

“On it,” Trestor snapped a salute and spun around to carry out his orders as Lir walked down the ramp.

“The medicos want the King to remain on board,” he said. “They don’t want him jostled about right now.”

“How is he?” Galen asked.

“He hasn’t gotten any worse,” Lir said sadly. “But he hasn’t improved either. Rhiannon is with him and that seems to cheer him up.

“And you were right,” Lir looked around. “Haven is vastly better than Sanctuary, especially with this many people looking to call it home.”

“This isn’t home,” Galen corrected. “This is just a waystation, a way to weed out any possible infiltrators. Our final destination is in the Wilds. That is where we will call home until we are ready to strike back against the Empire and return these people to their true homes.”

“Well, it will be hard-pressed to top this place,” Lir remarked.

GALEN'S BLADE

"It does," Galen assured. "Come on you two, we've got work to do and more people on the way to find room for."



For a full two lunes Haven was a flurry of activity. At first no less than two ships arrived at the orbital beacon, hanging in the L5 position of the gas giant and its largest moon outside of its ring, seeking entry. After getting the all-clear they homed in on the second beacon and landed on Haven. Then it slowed down to one a day, one every three days and now just one a week.

"As we expected," Lir remarked as they looked at a seemingly endless mass of people and ships sprawled around the center of the refugee camp, with the *Fortress* as the hub. "Harmool has tightened his grip and fewer people are able to slip through it."

"At least Jaq was able to establish an effective underground," Galen noted. "Some of the intel we've gotten has been invaluable. I can only imagine how effective they'll be when we turn them loose on sabotage missions."

"They should wreak a lot of havoc on the Empire," Lir agreed. "Speaking of havoc, it may be a good thing not to have any more ships coming this way. We're starting to run out of room here."

"What's the census so far?"

“A dozen capital ships,” Lir reported. “Another forty-eight smaller ships and a few dozen individual shuttles and fighters. People wise, I estimate between twenty and twenty-five thousand. And that is a conservative estimate. I would not be surprised to discover it was higher.”

“Agreed,” Galen replied. “We should start packing up for Trinity.”

“So that’s the name of the place,” Lir said. “Cass said you gave her the coordinates but there’s nothing there according to the charts but a belt of asteroids and space dust.”

“Trinity is there,” Galen replied. “A small system of three worlds and seven moons, all inhabitable, orbiting a small star in the middle of the belt. The field of asteroids is impenetrable save for a single corridor that allows safe passage for a ship and the corridor is constantly moving. Unless you know how to look for it, you’ll never find it.

“There’s plenty of room for our charges,” Galen continued, waving a hand at the people around them. “Plenty of room to build up our fleet and our armory. A perfect place to launch our counter assault on the Empire.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Lir said. “How did you find it?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’ve never been there? Then how do you know it’s there?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“But if you haven’t been there...oh,” Lir gave Galen an odd look.

That again.

GALEN'S BLADE

It was written on the older man's face. Not that Galen could blame him for doubting. He'd doubt too if he weren't the one seeing these visions that came to him unbidden.

This one in particular kept coming to him, as if it were calling him there. As if the place had been conjured up just for him and the needs of his cause at just the right time.

"Just trust me, old friend, even though I can't explain it, trust that I know Trinity is there."

"I do trust you, boy," Lir said genuinely. "But lately, you scare the hells out of me."

"Want to know something? Sometimes I scare the hells out of me too."

He spotted Cass' running toward them at a pretty good clip, and lugging a portable 'com as well.

"What is it?" he asked as she skidded to a halt and handed him the 'com.

"Jaq."

Galen tabbed the 'com and the screen flared to life with Jaq's face. He appeared to be sitting in the cockpit of a ship.

"Well I guess we shouldn't have expected to get away with it any longer than we did, Galen," Jaq said. "Our mutual friend located the *Firestarter* and traced it back to Arkon. One of my contacts gave me the heads up and I cleared out. I'll be bringing about a half-dozen ships with me. You can figure on these being the last refugee ships coming your way."

“How much of a lead will you have on any pursuit?” Galen asked.

“About three days,” Jaq replied. “We’re taking the scenic route to throw them off. I figure I can lose them for about a day or more in the Oswain Nebula. That’s where we’ll turn and make a straight speed run to Haven.”

“That should work,” Galen mused thoughtfully. “I trust you’ve sent word through your network that Haven is closed for business?”

“First thing I did after I rigged the bar to blow when the goons bust in,” Jaq replied. “Be damned if I’ll let them enjoy the place without me.”

“Good. We’ll meet you at the orbital beacon and you can follow our fleet to our permanent base in the Wilds. Jaq, if you can manage this, I need your pursuers to be heading right for the beacon and arrive here after we’ve departed.”

“Why?”

“We’re going to leave them a little surprise so that they can’t tell anyone we aren’t here or where we got off to.”

“Ah, and Harmool will waste even more time sending a large task force to Haven...”

“...only to find it deserted,” Galen finished. “We’ll have a little something for that task force down here on the surface too. With luck, we’ll put a big dent in Harmool’s fleet in one trap.”

“Remind me never to get in a war with you on the other side,” Jaq replied. “Okay, you pirate, we’ll lead our wolves to slaughter for you.”

“Good man,” Galen replied. “We’ll see you here soon.”

Galen snapped off the ‘com and looked up at Lir.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Get every Captain and have them meet us in the main hold of the *Fortress*,” he ordered. “Get everyone packed up and back aboard their ships as fast as possible. We need to be ready to leave this planet in one day.

“Cass,” he continued, “I have a little errand for you to run. There’s an abandoned Bata’van supply depot one day’s flight from here. You will accompany the *Bellarosa* there, along with three dozen qualified pilots, and commandeer every ship in mothballs there that can fly. After, of course, you have loaded up every scrap of material – weapons, rations, anything you think we can use – on those ships and then haul ass back here.”

“And while I’m off stealing the Empire blind?” she asked, as if she already knew the answer.

“I’ll be getting everyone off this planet,” he replied, with a wicked grin, “and leaving a few parting gifts for our Imperial comrades when they arrive. I’d hate for anyone to call me an inconsiderate host.”

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Bata'van had depots scattered all across what had been Alliance space. Very few of them were guarded by actual hominids. If one knew the command codes - which Galen had produced out of thin air back on Haven – you literally could just walk in and rob this place at your leisure.

“I'm sure they change the codes from time to time,” Lir had protested.

“They do,” Galen had agreed. “Once every lune. These codes are valid for the next five days. Plenty of time for the strike team to get there and get in.”

“I see every message we get from Jaq's underground,” Lir had pointed out. “I didn't see anything about Bata'van security codes.”

“Didn't you?” Galen had replied and walked away.

“I hope these codes are valid,” Trestor said from the bridge of the *Bellarosa* two days later, as they approached the depot located on a moon of a dead star's fourth planet.

“We're about to find out,” Cass replied as she transmitted the code. After a nervous few seconds red lights began flashing the length of the

depot's massive blast doors. Slowly at first, but gaining speed, the doors parted, revealing a massive landing pad ringed with small ships, shuttles and fighters. Beyond the ships, bunkers and large buildings that housed supplies, fuel and weapons.

The *Bellarosa* drifted down to land on the pad.

"Force field engaging around the area, Captain," the XO reported.

"We're reading an atmosphere...we won't even have to wear exosuits."

The man sounded overcome with awe. Cass had to admit she was impressed too.

"C'mon boys," she called out as she headed off the bridge. "Let's go shopping."



"That is quite an armada you've got there," Jaq said after leading his small fleet to the rendezvous point a few days later.

"It is," Galen agreed, "and you're a day late."

"Took us a little longer to shake off the hounds without letting them completely lose the scent. That's not so easy to pull off for us mere mortals, you know. For the record, there's three very nasty looking cruisers coming this way."

"You did fine," Galen replied. "We just got the last of the ships off planet. As soon as Cass arrives...and speak of the Devil."

GALEN'S BLADE

The *Bellarosa*, leading her own fleet of stolen Bata'van ships pulled into range and slowed to a halt nearby. The Communications Officer brought the images of Trestor and Cass onto a split screen with Jaq.

"It looks like congratulations are in order," Galen greeted them.

"We hit the jackpot," Cass agreed.

"We've got thirty-five ships, shuttles and fighters in tow, Admiral," Trestor delivered a more formal report. "Loaded with food, medical supplies, materials for portable buildings, and munitions the likes of which I've never seen. They must have been stockpiling the stuff for a hundred cycles if not more."

"We couldn't have asked for any better," Galen smiled. "Cass, I take it you are on a separate ship?"

"A nice one," she replied. "Just a little bigger than the *Tempest* but a lot meaner when it comes to firepower. I figured you'd want her for yourself. We've renamed her *Vengeance*."

"I appreciate the thought," he replied. "Captain, I'll be transferring my flag to the *Vengeance* for now. Commander Kincale will assume command of the *Fortress*. Captain, I'm assigning command of the refugee fleet to you for the duration."

"Sir?"

"You will lead our refugee fleet to these coordinates," Galen punched in a series of numbers. "Jaq, you and your ships will fall in with Trestor's ships. You will go to these coordinates and hold there. Make no further move until I rejoin you unless you are engaged by hostile forces."

“Where will you be, Admiral?”

“Right here, with the Bata’van ships you liberated. We’re going to ambush the three ships when they approach the beacon. Then, we’ll rejoin you.”

“What will we find there? My charts show nothing but a huge debris field.”

“Exactly,” Galen said. “Whatever you do, make no attempt to penetrate the field. It will chew up every ship that makes the attempt. Just get there and hold.”

“Yes, sir, understood.”

“As soon as I’ve transferred over, get moving.”

Rhiannon stood at the entrance of the bridge.

“Galen...?”

“No, you need to be with your father and you can do more here to help organize the refugees and keep them calm,” he answered the unspoken request. “Besides, this is a surgical strike and they won’t know what hit them because they will think we’re a back-up fleet sent by Harmool.”

“Be careful,” she said and kissed him. Eyes all over the bridge averted to intense studies of instruments.

“Get a room you two,” Cass said from the still active ‘com screen.

“Cass, shut up!” two voices replied in unison.



“Orbital beacon ahead, sir,” the navigator of the lead Imperial cruiser reported. “It is transmitting. It is requesting recognition codes.”

“Clever,” the Captain replied. “They get a good look at any new visitor before they can become a threat. Ignore transmission, stand by to resume course for the planet and give those rocks a wide berth in case they’re mined.”

“Aye, sir. Course laid in, proceeding as half speed...Sir! I’m picking up several ships...at least thirty closing in on our position.”

“Can you identify them?”

“Checking...they are friendlies, Sir. Transponders correspond with ships stationed at a nearby depot.”

“Excellent, our Emperor must have dispatched them after our last report. Hail them and have them fall in behind us to provide covering fire and support for the assault.”

“They acknowledge and are moving into position...Sir! Their weapons platforms just went hot!”

“What the blazes do they think they are...”

The ship rocked under the heavy bombardment of torpedoes and laser fire. Alarms sounded, lights dimmed and smoke poured into the bridge.

“Heavy damage...mains are offline...weapons systems down...,” the XO reported as the Captain picked himself up off the deck. “The *Gnast* and the *Josoon*...have been destroyed...”

His voice trailed off in shock.

“Get us out of here,” the Captain shouted to the navigator.

“Communications, send a mayday out with our current position.”

“Mayday with our position sent, Sir!”

The Captain opened his mouth to give the order to manually fire the torpedoes if the control systems were still offline when someone on the bridge screamed. He looked at the main viewscreen and understood why.

Five ships had lined up directly ahead, weapons ports glowing. He stood there in silent shock as all five unleashed everything they had on his ship. He never even had time to pray.



They watched as the last of the three Imperial ships was reduced to its component atoms.

“They got off a mayday,” Cass said. “There will be more ships coming soon.”

“Yes, and by the time they get here we’ll be long gone and all they will find is debris,” Galen replied.

“And that beacon,” Cass pointed out.

“About that,” he said. “Delete the challenge greeting from the beacon. From now on, it will send a message welcoming new refugees and give out the coordinates to reach Haven and avoid the mines.”

“I didn’t know you’d mined the passage,” she said, reprogramming the beacon as ordered.

GALEN'S BLADE

"I didn't, but they don't know that. And they'll think we're still there since the beacon is still active."

"They'll notice we aren't there once they land on Haven."

"Yes. But they will reach that conclusion about ten seconds before the mines I did actually place on Haven detonate. Anything on the ground or in orbit will go up. With luck, Harmool will assume we all went with the planet and quit looking for us."

"Reprogramming complete," she reported.

"Good, lets get going to Trinity," he replied. "Let's drop a probe well outside the blast range. After the show is over, have it transmit a tight beam message to the rendezvous point with a vid of the blast and the aftermath for analysis. Then have it fly into the star so it can't be used to track us."

"Understood," she replied and spent a few minutes at her controls as the fleet departed for Trinity.

"Probe dropped and operational," she reported. "I'm glad we're not sticking around to see the fireworks."



Harmool had ordered every ship in range, fully one quarter of his operational warships, to converge upon Haven. He'd have gone himself but Salacia was too far away for him to arrive on time for the assault.

He'd made doubly sure with Admiral D'Qam that they weren't to go in blasting. A show of undeniable force to convince Dwyn that resistance was futile. The Admiral was to secure Mori and his equipment, arrest Dwyn, Rhiannon, Fiachra, Iodocus and Cassandra and then annihilate the rest of the refugees.

D'Qam approached Haven at ease, despite the previous loss of three ships. He was at the head of nearly eighty vessels. A task force that would easily steamroll anything that dared stand in its path.

"We are receiving a signal from a beacon ahead, Sir," His Comms officer reported.

"Yes?"

"It's a message of welcome to refugees and the coordinates to navigate past a small minefield around the planet."

"How very thoughtful of them," he chuckled. "Have the rest of the fleet follow us in and make sure they have the locations of all of the mines. Nav, ahead flank. Bring us in for a hot landing at whatever appears to be the main hub down there. And if something or someone is in the way...squash it like a bug."

"Aye, sir," Nav replied. "Closing in on Haven. Scanners show a large complex on the northern hemisphere. Bringing us in for a landing...now. Showing no signs of activity, Sir."

"They're hiding somewhere," the Captain replied, tabbing the ship's comm to broadcast externally on loudspeakers. "Attention Galen Dwyn, commander of the rebellion forces. By order of Emperor Harmool..."

GALEN'S BLADE

And then Haven, including every ship on her surface and in orbit above, vaporized.



“By the gods,” Lir whispered as the telemetry from the probe arrived on their viewscreen. It was still broadcasting when the shockwave from the explosion struck and vaporized it as well.

“I imagine that area of space will be quite unusable for a long time to come,” Galen remarked, his voice was hushed as if he too could not believe what he’d just seen.

“Those were some pretty big mines you used,” Cass said. “I didn’t think we had anything like that. I didn’t think anyone did.”

“Standard mines,” Galen said. “But the core of Haven is... or rather was... pure dilatonium. Perfectly stable and useful to warm an entire planet. But, rig a dozen mines to detonate near enough to that core and you get...”

He trailed off, pointing at the screen. He kept staring at it silently and Lir could not decipher what was going through the man’s mind.

“What are you thinking?” he finally asked.

“Eighty ships,” Galen said. “How many thousands of lives did I just end there?”

“You said it yourself,” Lir said, understanding what was driving the observation. “They chose to follow Harmool and paid the price for it with their lives. You have no guilt here.”

“Don’t I?” Galen shook his head. “How many more will I have to kill, or order to be killed or send to their deaths before this... madness ends?”

“As many as it needs to take to end it,” Lir said sadly, knowing no words could ease the path ahead for Galen. “You are, naturally, worried that you are becoming no better than Harmool. You needn’t be. Harmool is killing for his own power and glory.

“The lives you are forced to take,” he added, “are in defense of what is good and right. It may seem like a fine line to you right now, but it makes all the difference in the universe.”

“After this,” Cass chimed in, “I doubt anyone is going to want to cross swords with us anytime soon. A lot of Harmool’s forces are Bata’van who remember all the times they sent ships after you and those ships never came back. Now, over eighty ships were sent for you in one shot and none of them will ever be heard from again. They will fear you Galen, maybe more than they fear Harmool. That will be an advantage we can use in time.”

Galen nodded, still somewhat ill at ease with the body count he was racking up in this war, but coming to terms with it. He’d have to come to terms with the deaths to come. He’d have to find a way to end this sooner rather than later. But for now, it was time to head for Trinity and Rhea.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Let’s go home,” he ordered as his fleet sailed into the Wilds.

RICHARD PAOLINELLI

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Galen had returned his flag to the *Fortress*, bringing Lir and Cass back with him. A junior officer was in command of the *Vengeance* for now. He sat in the command seat, lost in thought, rarely speaking unless someone called for his attention.

He'd been restless in the days following the destruction of Haven. The nights were even worse, as Rhiannon relayed to Lir. Justified as much as his actions were, they still troubled him.

"Be worried when they stop troubling you, love," Rhea said one night as they lay in each other's arms. He'd agreed with her. But still he wasn't sleeping though the night, often getting up and wandering the decks of the ship or taking up station on the bridge.

"Approaching the rendezvous," the navigator called out. "Our refugee fleet is there and it looks like they all made it."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Galen's face.

Some good news and something worth cheering about for a change.

"Hail the *Bellarosa*," he ordered.

“Admiral,” Trestor greeted as his image appeared on the viewscreen. “Its good to see you made it, Sir. And it looks like you made it unscathed.”

Not all scars are visible, Trestor, he thought moodily.

“We did indeed,” he agreed amiably. “We achieved complete victory over both fleets. I daresay we are good and lost as far as the Empire is concerned.”

“Good news indeed, Sir. We’ve been scanning the debris field here and can’t penetrate it at all. Are you certain this, Trinity, is here?”

“Quite certain,” he assured as Cass, Lir and Rhiannon all entered the bridge behind him. “The system lies directly at the center of the field. There is a corridor that leads from the outer rim of the field into the heart where the system lies. The corridor is constantly moving, but always remains the same diameter and always leads either to the center or to the exit.

“The trick,” he continued, “is that the opening is impossible to find unless there is a ship holding station just inside. Once you pierce the horizon of the opening you will pick up the beacons that mark the corridor. Follow the beacons to get in or out and you’ll be just fine.”

“And if you lose the beacons or stray off course?”

“Then it was nice knowing you, your ship and everyone aboard her.”

Trestor swallowed hard.

“Exactly,” Galen said. “But the place was built to keep unwelcome guests away and it does work. The *Fortress* will go in first, the rest of the

GALEN'S BLADE

fleet will follow, one ship at a time. Make sure each ship keeps the ship ahead in sight otherwise they'll lose the entrance.

"We'll go in nice and slow," he continued. "The *Bellarosa* will ride point and come in last. Just in case someone wanders by that we don't want reporting what they've seen. Once all ships are safely through and in system, we'll start sorting out where to land them."

"Aye, Sir, see you on the other side. *Bellarosa* out."

"I have a question?" Cass piped up.

"Fire away."

"If a ship needs to be holding station on the horizon, and we're the first ship to enter, how are we going to find the entrance?"

"Because I know where it is," he replied calmly.

"Even though its constantly moving around? That is what you said it was doing."

"I did, and it is, and I know exactly where it is," he replied. "Nav, transfer control to my station. Prepare to enter the corridor, ahead slow."

"I don't suppose you'd care to explain how you know where to find it?" Lir asked in a low whisper.

"Nope," Galen replied. "I'm going to be busy piloting the ship."

"No problem," Lir said sarcastically. "I'll just sit here and prepare to die."

Galen ignored him and leaned over to Rhiannon, who'd stepped down to stand next to his chair.

"It'll be fine," he promised.

“You haven’t been wrong,” she smiled at him, then put on her best Cass face and added. “Yet.”

Galen spared her a quick shake of his head and focused on his flying. To be honest, he couldn’t explain to anyone how he knew any of what he’d just said. All he knew was a voice that called to him whenever he thought of Trinity.

All for you, Galen Dwyn. It has been waiting just for you. Use it well.

He gently fired the attitude thrusters, adjusting the ship on all three of her axis.

“We’re picking up a signal,” Cass called out. “Nav beacons from dead ahead.”

“Signal the fleet to start following us in and make sure everyone stays in sight of the ship ahead until they receive the beacons. Nav, take over. Maintain speed and follow the beacons. If you lose them, come to a halt and inform me immediately.”

“Aye, Sir.” His voice mixed with awe and a hint of hero worship



Three hours later, the *Bellarosa* exited the corridor and joined the rest of the fleet, holding station at a miracle.

“All ships have transited, Admiral,” the Navigator reported, his voice barely above a whisper.

GALEN'S BLADE

"I don't believe it," Lir said for what had to have been the hundredth time since they'd exited the corridor. "This is impossible."

In the center of the debris field, which hadn't seemed that large on the outside, was a small yellow star. Three planets orbited the star, each on the same plane and the same distance from the parent sun and each an equal distance from their sister planets. Each planet had three moons, also orbiting their planets at equal distances and orbital paths.

And orbiting all three planets, at a greater speed than they orbited the star, was a large white moon, its surface pockmarked by craters.

"Welcome to Trinity," Galen said. It was exactly as he'd seen it in the visions. He knew the name for every planet and moon. Knew that all of them, save the larger white moon, were habitable and could meet their every need for as long as they needed to remain here.

All for you, Galen Dwyn. It has been waiting just for you.

"We'll establish our main colony on the blue-green world," he said. "We'll call it New Terra. Eventually, we'll move some of our people to the other two worlds. The moons we'll use for our military bases, weapons and fuel storage, and for manufacturing. Between our supplies and what we can harvest on these worlds, we will have enough food and water for our people."

"How long will we be here?" Rhiannon asked.

"Many lunes, perhaps even a cycle or two," Galen replied. "We need time to prepare. And we'll need to gather intelligence to plan our attacks on the Empire when we're ready."

“But how are we supposed to get any intelligence in here?” Cass said. “No signals are going to get through to our com arrays.”

“Not ours on the ships, no,” Galen agreed. “But we have an array that is more than capable.”

“Where?” she asked. “In your back pocket?”

“Scan the white moon, Cass,” he smiled as she turned to her station. She slowly turned back around and just stared at him.

“What is it?” Lir asked.

“That’s no moon,” she said.

“No, it’s a communication array,” Galen replied.

“And its receiving everything,” she continued. “Every planet, every ship. In the Wilds and the Empire.”

“But this is impossible,” Lir repeated. “All of this cannot just happen naturally. It’s almost as if...”

“As if it had been constructed, and has been waiting all of this time for someone to come around and use it?” Galen finished.

“Yes, but who would be capable of such a thing and why would they do it?”

“Maybe the kind of people from your stories of hominids being transplanted from another galaxy?” Galen asked.

“The Preservers?” Lir asked, his eyes going wide. “Are you saying... they built this place just for us, knowing we’d need it and you’d be here to find it?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying,” Galen replied. “And I don’t know about you, but that scares the hells out of me.”



They found a wide valley to set up a main refugee camp in, with ships landing two at a time to unload before lifting off to be parked on the red planet's largest moon, which Galen had designated as the primary military base to park the majority of the fleet. The King had insisted on leaving the *Fortress* and a tent was quickly rigged next to Galen's temporary command tent for the ailing monarch.

"I want to feel sunlight and breathe real air again," the King replied when Rhiannon tried to talk him into remaining on the ship. She set about making him as comfortable as possible.

Galen spent a busy week overseeing the settlement of the refugees and construction of buildings and quarters for everyone. A top priority was finding those with experience in varying fields, areas of manufacture and farming. It seemed like every day was a never-ending series of meetings.

He'd just wrapped up one such meeting when a messenger arrived requesting his immediate presence at the King's tent. He hurried over and found Lir, Cass and Rhiannon at Iodocus' bedside. The King did not look well.

"Sire," Galen stepped close, falling to one knee so the old man would not have to exert himself.

“I am dying, Galen,” Iodocus began without preamble. “I haven’t much time, so listen to me carefully. I have two final commands to give before I pass the crown of Salacia onto my daughter.

“Lir has told me that you are aware of the old stories of the Galactic Knights,” he continued. “I have heard these tales since childhood but never believed them. Until now. They are not fairy tales, Galen, but legendary tales of our forgotten past. I see this is true when I look at you, Galen Dwyn.”

Iodocus paused and gathered his strength.

“Hand me your blade,” he ordered and Galen quickly obeyed, partially extending the blade so it was not too heavy in the King’s hand. “I charge you, Galen Dwyn, to uphold the tenants of the Old Knights. Might for Right. Defense of those who cannot defend themselves and to return honor and justice to our galaxy. To stand against this evil empire, defeat it, and lead our people back to their proper home.

“To that end,” he raised the sword and dipped it to touch first the left and then the right shoulder of Galen’s uniform, “I knight thee, Sir Galen Dwyn, and name you as Knight Commander of the New Galactic Knights. Rise, Sir Galen, and be recognized.”

Galen did as he was ordered, gently reclaiming the blade from the King’s hand. Galen could find no words to say. Then the King motioned him to lean closer, and Galen knelt back down beside him. Iodocus grasped Galen’s left hand and pulled it over to cover’s Rhiannon’s right hand.

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“And finally,” he said softly, “I pass the crown of Salacia onto you, Rhiannon. In time, may you rule our people in peace and in wisdom. To you both I give you my blessing, with the hope – despite the times we find ourselves in - that you may live a long and happy life together.”

Iodocus inhaled, exhaled slowly and drew in no further breath.

“Father!” Rhiannon cried out and threw herself around his neck. Galen reached up and gently closed the King’s eyes, then just as gently placed his hand on the back of Rhiannon’s neck.

“The King is dead,” Lir whispered softly. “Long live the King.”



Galen rose from the King’s bed, staring long and hard at the blade in his hand. The King’s words had triggered something deep within him, something he could not understand, much less explain.

He heard raised voices from outside the tent’s walls. Word had gotten out. The King was dead. Fear and concern raced through the gathering crowds, he could hear that in their voices, in the words they spoke and in the way those words were spoken.

He felt their fear and in a way he shared it. Yes, they were safe here, but eventually they’d have to venture out and face Harmool and his forces. The Empire had suffered a great blow at Haven, but still outnumbered the refugees at Trinity by several orders of magnitude.

Who wouldn’t feel fear at that, he wondered?

That is not the question you need ask yourself, Galen Dwyn. The question is: What will you do in the face of that fear?

He looked around but could not find the source of the voice that had spoken and quickly realized he alone had heard it.

What will you do?

It rang in his head over and over.

And, as suddenly as a storm breaking on a hot summer's day, the answer was there in his mind.

This. This is what I will do!



Galen spun on his heel and exited the tent. Gathered around, as far as the eye could see, were thousands of refugees and more were streaming toward the tent by the second. The tent had been raised on a slight hill and he towered over the assembly. Lir, Cass and Rhiannon followed him out, started by the suddenness of his exit and more so by the crowd outside.

“My people,” Galen shouted so he could be heard, “listen to me!”

He repeated his plea twice more until a silence fell over them.

“Our good King, Iodocus, is dead,” Galen announced. “Rhiannon is now our Queen.”

He waited out the cries of “Hail Queen Rhiannon” and “Long Live the Queen” before continuing.

GALEN'S BLADE

“Before he died, our King charged me with one sacred duty. To serve you and to protect you from those who mean you harm. I will carry out that order until the very moment when I’ve drawn my last breath.

“Today is a day of mourning, a terrible day which darkens our hearts. We will mourn our good King on this day. But tomorrow brings great challenges. We must continue to ready our new world, not only for ourselves, but for any others who are fleeing Harmool’s stolen Empire.

“Who among you will plant crops, cut wood, raise houses and barns and all the other things that our people will need to survive here? Who will do these things?”

Many in crowd raised their hands and shouted “I” in response.

“Good. I bid you stand over there,” he raised a hand and waved it off to one side, “to be counted as such and to be given your assignments.”

Galen waited as the crowd shifted to allow the volunteers to gather at the appointed spot.

“Who among you,” he continued when they settled down, “will stand ready to minister to those new arrivals who may be ill or injured? Help them grow strong again, see to their families and their children until they have recovered. Who among you will serve in this fashion?”

Once again, hands and voices were raised and Galen waved them off to the other side. When they had settled back down, he continued. Overhead, storm clouds began to form, almost as if they’d been conjured.

“In the olden times, long before our people were brought to this Galaxy, there were those who also carried out a similar charge as the one I have been given. Brave men and women known as the Galactic Knights.

They stood between darkness and light, between good and evil and said to those they defended: ‘No harm will come to you’. To those that held evil in their hearts they said: ‘You will not pass’.

“Our good King has charged me as Knight Commander, to re-form the Galactic Knights here in our galaxy. He has charged me to stand between the darkness and the light, between the evil and the good. I swear to you, on this day, No harm will come to you.

“And I swear to all that is evil and dark beyond this new home of ours - do you hear me Harmool and those who serve you in darkness, do you hear?

“YOU WILL NOT PASS!”

Galen’s last four words thundered across the assembly, accompanied by a deep rumble that came from the clouds above.

Rhiannon, Cass and Lir joined with the crowd below in looking up before returning their gazes toward Galen in awe.

“The day is coming when we will storm beyond this barrier that shelters us and fall upon our evil enemy with terrible vengeance. When we will avenge our good King and all who have fallen at the hands of Harmool’s evil deeds.

“Who among you will stand with me? Who among you will stand against the evil darkness and protect the good light? Who among you will pledge yourselves to me as my Knights? Who among you will stand and say to all that is dark and evil: You will not pass? Who?”

GALEN'S BLADE

The last word whipped across the crowd. Hands, some carrying weapons and others balled in fists shot up into the sky and thousands of voices cried out in unison:

“I WILL!!!!”

“Then all who have answered my call kneel,” he said and they quickly obeyed. Cass, who had raised her own hand and joined the chorus in response to Galen’s call, steeped forward and knelt before Galen. He nodded in approval. Lir had felt the pull to join her but knew his duty lay elsewhere. He could see in Rhiannon’s eyes that she too would have joined Cass were she not Queen.

Galen raised his blade, extended it fully, and dipped it once to the right. He raised it once more and dipped it to the left before raising it one final time.

“Rise,” his voice boomed out. “Rise and be recognized, my brothers and sisters, as Galactic Knights of the Andromeda Galaxy!”

Cheers erupted as they did as commanded. Galen thumped the fist wrapped around his blade twice against his chest and raised the blade as high as his reach allowed.

“HAI!!!!” he exclaimed just as a bolt of blue lightning lanced from the clouds above and struck the blade with a thundering crash. But instead of electrocuting Galen and throwing him to the ground, the bolt seemed to be absorbed by the blade itself, bathing it in a shimmering blue light.

“By the gods,” Lir whispered as he watched the scene play out before him.

“HAI!!!!” Galen repeated. Keeping the glowing blade high above his head.

And thousands of fists responded, thumping their own chests twice and thousands of voices shouted, loud enough to carry across the Wilds and the whole of the Empire, in return:

“HAI!!! HAI!!!, HAI!!!, HAI!!!” they repeated until they were all certain it must be beating a rhythmic warning within Harmool’s own heart light cycles away in Salacia:

WE ARE COMING FOR YOU!

The adventures of Galen, Rhiannon, Lir and Cassandra will continue.

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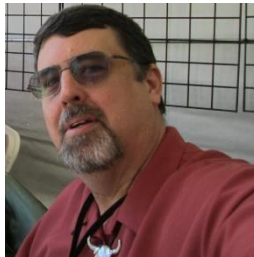
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Paolinelli began his writing journey as a freelance writer in 1984 and gained his first fiction credit serving as the lead writer for the first two issues of the Elite Comics sci-fi/fantasy series, *Seadragon*.

After nearly a quarter of a century in the newspaper field, in 2010, Richard retired as a sportswriter and returned to his fiction writing roots. Since then he has written several award-winning novels, two non-fiction sports books, and has appeared in over 20 anthologies including eight of the 11-book Tuscan Bay Books' Planetary Anthology Series and five Sherlock Holmes collections.

He serves as a co-host on LA Talk Radio's, The Writer's Block, and has a podcast, In The Superversive Spotlight. He currently resides in Western Colorado.



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