

# **PRAYER FOR THE TECHNOCRATS**

## **A Tech Infantry Novella**

by

Marcus Johnston

Copyright © 2002, 2011

### **Chapter 3: Sic Transit Tempus**

[\(click here for galactic map\)](#)

Edo, August 11th

Ivan hadn't slept for two days. Although his fighter chrysalis could feed the stimulants needed to keep him conscious, the mental drain of flying a craft manually through hyperspace pushed him to the breaking point.

Finally, as he reemerged into normal space, Sun found himself in the Edo System, on the edge of Federation space. A wave of relief swept over him as he finally reached safety.

A comm screen activated in front of him and the face of an LI officer appeared. "This is Edo System Control. Identify yourself."

"Lieutenant Commander Ivan Sun, Lightning Squadron Leader, *TFS Ares*. Serial Number: 8X93E9238002."

The orbital traffic controller looked confused, then typed in the information. When the interface reported back to him, the officer replied, "ID confirmed, Commander Sun. May I ask why you're so far from your ship?"

"I'll need to speak to the system governor about that."

"Well, sir, I don't think—"

"I *need* to speak with the governor! This is an emergency!"

The controller was flustered. "Well, I'll send a comm to his office."

"Good! I'll arrive at the orbital station in three hours. Discom."

*If only I can warn them, the fighter pilot thought, we can stop them... I hope.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later, his fighter docked at the small orbital station holding position over Edo 3. Once his mechanical exoskeleton had landed, Ivan popped the hatch and severed his interface.

Although he usually felt disoriented after traveling in his fighter, this time, exhaustion fell on him in waves. At first, he wasn't able to get up. Then, when he tried to stand, Sun collapsed face first into the deck.

When he woke up, the commander was lying in a hospital bed planetside. He knew this because the blinding sunlight coming through the windows. Ivan shifted his head into his pillow to hide the glare. Once he did, the pilot heard the door slide open. *Must be the doctor*, Ivan thought, and said, "Hell of a sun you've got here."

"You could have told *that* to the tourist committee," an annoyed voice shot back.

*Not the doctor*, his mind revised before turning his head. Before him was a rather large man, somehow shoved into a business suit, and looking incredibly pissed off to see him. *Guess I have that effect on people*. "How long have I been out?"

"A day, I guess." The man huffed over to a chair and slumped down. "You fly in, scare the hell out of traffic control, and interrupt my afternoon nap. *And* you have the *indecent* to just collapse when you get here! *Now*, do you mind telling me what this is all about?!"

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was sitting before him. "Governor, the entire Ares Battle Group is lost."

"Lost?"

"Well, not exactly lost," Ivan backpedaled, "but taken over..."

"Commander, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that something took over the *Ares* while I was on it..."

"And you escaped."

Sun nodded.

"So..." the governor groaned, "what do you want me to do?"

"Warn the Federation. We need to stop these things before they take over."

"Take over? Who's going to take over?"

"I tell you, I don't know!" Ivan shot up in bed, propelled by his anger, but the sudden wave of nausea dropped him back down.

The governor was not impressed by his little display. “You say we must warn the Fed, but you don’t tell us what from. If I was to transmit that, my next assignment would be to govern the prison colony on G2!”

“I don’t know what to call them. Ghosts, maybe... or some sort of demonic possession...”

“Of an entire fleet?”

“That’s what I saw.”

The governor sighed and leaned back in his chair. “M. Sun, I’m have serious doubts...” As the planetary leader was about to launch into another rant, an aide rushed in. “What?”

“Sorry, sir. System Control reports that the *Ares* and its fleet have just jumped in. They want to speak to you.”

“Ghosts?” the governor snorted at Ivan, then turned to his aid. “Patch it in through here.”

The aide ran out while the governor activated the room’s hologram generator, delicately pushed out of Sun’s view. Within a few seconds, they heard the chimes of an activated transmission.

“Governor Stark,” came the voice through the comm, “this is Admiral Montambo, commanding officer, Ares Battle Group. Sorry to burst in here unannounced.”

“Not a problem, admiral. How can we help?”

“My sailors need some down time... shore leave. Do you mind if we drop on down and let my boys and girls relax? I’ll make sure to send some Marines in with them to keep ’em in line.”

The governor beamed like he had a choice. “Of course, admiral. I’m sure our local merchants wouldn’t mind servicing your fine sailors.”

“Excellent. We’ll be in orbit within a few hours. *Ares* out.”

As the governor turned away, he just shook his head at Sun and walked out.

Ivan wasn’t about to wait for them to land. As soon as Stark left, the pilot managed to pull himself out of bed. A few more tries got him to his feet. Once he grabbed the suit from the closet, Sun struggled for the door, his strength returning with every step.

*If I can just reach the spaceport, he thought, a small freighter will do me fine. All speeds are the same in hyperspace. It’ll take a while to take over Edo, which will buy me enough time to get to the next system. Maybe if enough people die... maybe then they’ll listen.*

Avalon, Patton Base, August 12th

In the end, her job was simple; find the Orb. *No, Miranda thought, find Pollos and you'll find the Orb. No, it's a bit more complicated than that. Find Pollos, a former free-range assassin who's been on the run for twenty years, and convince him to give up the most powerful object in the known universe. Oh, sure, it's all for a good cause, saving humanity... but this guy doesn't sound like the charitable type.*

The doctor's head slumped from her hands to the table. *God, I'm tired*, she thought. *I'm sick of having the fate of mankind on my shoulders.* Her extensive search engines had been grinding away for some time trying to answer her first problem: Where is Pollos?

They were compiling all known data from every scan, report, hint, and odd occurrence from the entire Federation. Having the highest of all clearances helped to speed the process along.

Of course, the fact that the best bounty hunters and military brains couldn't find this guy did nothing to dissuade her. In fact, it only whetted her appetite. A challenge of this magnitude was a hunger growing inside her that went beyond food, sleep, or any other distractions.

She shifted through the results with her scrutinizing eye; a feature that even the best AI couldn't quite duplicate. There were many false leads and dead ends but, bit by bit, the assassin's trail was piecing together.

Pollos had kept busy; every six months he'd move to a new system, always to the other side of the Federation. He would follow this pattern regardless of what war zone he'd have to cross. Referencing military archives, anything that tried to stop him got obliterated.

*He didn't care*, Miranda realized. *He was the baddest motherfucker in the universe and he knew it. Which is why he kept moving.* Within six months, someone who *didn't* know it tried to challenge him, and would end up destroying that part of the planet.

The last report of a Pollos sighting was out in San Angeles. The former assassin was camping out on one of the fourth planet's moons. Apparently he didn't ask permission from the Tremontites, the religious cult that owned the moon. Three months ago, they tried to get rid of him; most of that rock had vaporized, the rest of causing meteor showers on the planet below.

Miranda knew that Pollos tended to skip to the other side of the Fed, which meant that he was somewhere galactic west of Avalon... or on Avalon itself.

After she eliminated all systems on that end of the great empire from her search, the process of searching went a lot quicker. With the statistics of the man already confirmed, he could be locked down every time he passed by a scanner.

Within an hour, scanner traces led to one place: Jennifer's Star. She activated the vidphone and called Vin Dane. He would know how to stop Pollos... she hoped.

### Jennifer's Star, August 10th

The second Demar saw the colonel, he knew their vacation was over. The platoon lieutenant led the way with the brass in tow. "Ten-HUP!"

Palencia's platoon rose to attention, a bit sluggish after killing their brain cells all weekend, but he pretended not to notice.

"All right," the lieutenant announced, "I'm afraid we're being called back into the firing line again. This is Colonel Dane, he'll be explaining what's expected of you."

"I've heard you're the best," the man with the stretched face said, "so I came here. Informants have spotted a man by the name of Xavier Pollos here on Jennifer's Star. This man is armed and *extremely* dangerous. Local law enforcement is unable to handle this guy, so it's up to the Tech Infantry to get him. That's why I called on you."

Private Phillippe didn't seem that impressed. "Mage, wolf, leech..." he said, running through the standard questions.

"He's awakened and *very* powerful. He's committed crimes across several systems."

"Why haven't we heard about him then?" another trooper asked.

Vin Dane was not phased by the question. "He's very good at escape, which is why once he's located, maximum firepower must be unleashed on him. Make no mistake. The Federation considers M. Pollos to be a threat to the further well being of its citizens. We want him destroyed."

*There's something wrong here*, Demar thought as he listened to Vin speak. *There's something this pale-skinned colonel isn't telling us*. He knew this Dane guy wasn't his divisional commander, so he asked, "Sir, why doesn't your unit execute this operation?"

The lieutenant grinned. "Colonel Dane is the head of Military Intelligence."

*Oh shit*, Palencia thought, suppressing a groan, *we're going to die*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later, they were all suited up in their gray nanotech power suits, their chameleon circuits turned off to conserve power. Demar was checking his platoon's suit stats, making sure there were no irregularities. The sergeant was trying to keep himself busy. He thought he would retch if he kept watching the lieutenant brown nosing the colonel. *He thinks he's going to get a medal out of this*, Palencia thought, with bile building in his throat. *He doesn't know that this colonel isn't a field commander; he's a politician. Dane could have got the Raptors to do this work, after all, they're better qualified. That means the colonel's aiming for a promotion himself... or it's something he wants to keep quiet.*

*Either way, we're going to die.*

The command circuit clicked on. "Sergeant, get the men moving. There's a utility aerodyne waiting for us over at Gate 7. The colonel's had a Pollos sighting over in Simmonston. Time to bring this guy down."

"Yes, sir," Palencia answered, with no enthusiasm in his voice.

The power armor could have made Simmonston in a few hours on their own, even though it was on the other side of the planet. The utility aerodyne, though, would save their suits' power and get them there faster. Plus, it was the perfect disguise; power armor at full speed tended to be noticed.

"Move it, grunts!" Demar shouted, then led the way towards the aerodyne.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, they had made a landing in a discreet location outside Simmonston, a regional spaceport with convenient warehouse facilities. Once they had stopped, the platoon disembarked and Dane stopped. Demar knew why; he was checking his information off the local database. *Sloppy*, he thought, *any officer doing that in combat wouldn't live long enough to do anything again.*

The colonel switched on the platoon circuit. “Sensors have Pollos heading east, out of town. The tactical computer has located the optimal placements for an ambush; these squad locations are being downloaded to your suit comps.”

Palencia felt like his brain was in a fog; following orders that made no tactical sense. *At least it's outside the city, he thought. Fewer civilians would die that way. Still, we're going to straight to hell... and I can't stop it.*

The platoon quickly dispersed to their ambush points ahead of the target's projected path. Then the waiting... every second added dread to the sergeant's soul.

Then he appeared. There was nothing magnificent to his appearance; he looked like any person you might pass on the street. His jacket and pants were dusty from too much travel. A mane of long black hair seeped out from beneath an equally dusty hat. Xavier Pollos carried no obvious weapons, no pack... nothing but the clothes on his back. The only sign of possessions was a simple gold ring on his right hand; Palencia could see it with the zoom function on his optical sensors.

Pollos walked without a care in the world, oblivious to the sixteen heavily armed troopers waiting for him. Waiting to *kill* him.

Demar watched his heads-up display as the former assassin walked perfectly into the computer-projected kill zone. Another step and “Fire!” blared out from the lieutenant's speakers.

In that brief pause between the order and the massive barrage of interlocking fire, Xavier Pollos looked up. The sergeant watched his face; there was no shock or excitement in his expression, just mild annoyance. The assassin managed to raise his right hand before the deadly rain fell.

So much ammunition was expended in five seconds that one couldn't see the target from the cloud of smoke and fire that bellowed out. When the “cease fire” signal was transmitted, the smoke cleared, and Pollos had disappeared.

The cheer of victory rang out over the amplified speakers of the power armor. In that surreal release, only Palencia noticed the flash of metal off to the side. Demar tried to signal a warning through his dentcom, but all his actions seemed slow compared to what happened next. As his tongue changed frequencies, a trooper was sliced in half. As his jaw came down, another soldier was impaled. Demar bit on the warning signal; a trooper got a brief glimpse of the

destruction behind him before the invisible enemy bisected the armored trooper like he was made of tinfoil.

The alert signaled and the platoon stopped cheering, looking for the threat. Then the screams began. Demar grew angry at Pollos... it *had* to be Pollos, killing his boys. *His!* The animal within him raged, transforming his body into his lethal alter ego. Those in past times called them *werewolves*; now they were simply *changelings*.

Demar's power armor, designed to take the stress of the change, shifted with him. In his rage, though, Palencia couldn't have cared if he was fighting naked. The sergeant rushed forward, every footstep speeding his movements to match those of the invisible assassin.

The suit's comp kept up, giving him the approximate coordinates of Xavier's location. By the time Pollos had dissected his fifth trooper, Palencia was next to him... and leapt.

Changeling flesh in a nanotech shell slammed into the invisible foe, knocking him into the ground. The suit extended its armor around the claws he grew and Demar struck...

...hitting ground. Pollos was on the move. The sergeant leapt; the whoosh of air left by passing blades beneath him was registered by the armor. Palencia tried to land on his foe but only found dirt. The suit told his animal brain that the assassin was straight ahead; the sergeant went for the legs.

The invisible blades threw up dirt behind Demar, but by then the werewolf had Pollos' legs. With the impact, Xavier was knocked to the ground. Palencia went for the kill, but Pollos was faster. In a blink, the assassin's hand appeared. A wave of visibility rolled across his body, knocking the sergeant off him. Once Demar flipped back to his feet, he saw Xavier with a sword in his left hand, and a ring reappearing on his right.

They faced each other and began to circle, looking for an opening they could exploit. Stunned troopers, given time to realize what happened, wheeled their weapons towards the now-visible Pollos and opened fire. The intensity of the blast forced the sergeant to step back, but he saw the ring expand into a sphere around him, absorbing the energy of their plasma weapons.

The platoon backed off as Pollos gave a deadly smile. The sphere shrank down into a sphere in the palm of his hand. "You want this, do you?" That predator's smile grew larger as he taunted Demar. "You think you can take my Excalibur away from me?" As the assassin said the name, the sphere changed into another sword.

The sergeant took that moment to step forward.



It was a bad move, he knew it, but it was one he did on purpose. In the innards of his animal, his brain simply hoped to keep him fighting, so that his own rage wouldn't die.

Pollos' blades flew like lightning as he advanced, trying to trap the sergeant into his killing zone. Palencia, however, knew this dance all too well; he bobbed and weaved in time to the deadly swords, matching the assassin's pattern perfectly. To the outside onlookers, they were a blur of metal and man.

Then when Xavier leaned too far forward, Demar lunged at the opening. The sergeant raced towards his foe's chest, unaware that 'Excalibur,' having overextended his master's hand, now coiled around Demar like a snake and held him inches from Pollos' body.

"Now you've lost, my—"

Before the assassin could finish gloating, Demar leaned forward, extending his hands and claws, and pierced his flesh. The scream was horrible; the coiled sword reacted to its owner's pain and uncoiled like a spring, launching the source of his pain away.

Sergeant Palencia saw the ground shoot away from his body and stars soon replaced the sun as he reached orbit around the planet.

*Great*, he thought, as his calmed back to human form. *What am I going to do now?*

#### Avalon, Archimedes Orbital Station, August 14th

The bums all wore uniforms now, but it was still a slum in space. Minister Kait was revolted by the patchwork of impromptu welds and shoddy workmanship. There were no proper techs to do the maintenance, she knew, but on the Ark, there never were. Since the Five Acts, all the civilian orbital stations were turned over to the military... but that didn't mean they were tended any better. Archimedes—or the Ark, as it was better known—had been built over a hundred years ago. *It should have been scrapped*, she thought, *but the demand for transfer platforms to shuttle down to the capital was too great. At least they cleared out the shanties.*

Amanda held her nose against the smell of burning wire and made her way towards the docks. Under a burnt-out sign, she found the entrance to the *TFS Nicodemus*.

Through the umbilical, her steps felt light as she walked between the artificial gravities of the station and the ship. Finally she reached the end, guarded by the two fully armored TI

soldiers. Their chameleon circuits weren't active, so they were rather intimidating at eight feet tall.

Kait showed no fear as she handed over her ID. The multiphase card made them stand at attention... once they saw *who* she was. Once the identification was made, an ensign emerged from nowhere and guided her through the labyrinth of the dreadnought.

The *Nicodemus* was half as old as the Archimedes, but you could never tell. As Amanda walked through the corridors, she could see plenty of modern upgrades, with everything as clean as a museum piece.

Through several passageways and a transit tube, the Minister of Production finally reached her destination, the flag bridge. At one time, the *Nicodemus* was the bright star of the Fleet. Now it was just another aging hulk. *It should have been decommissioned years ago*, Kait added in her mind. In its heyday, however, they provided for admirals' accommodations.

Kait stared calmly at her now-evident rival, the rail-thin, lightly graying, Admiral Nirav Patel. His skin was a stark contrast to his smile, reluctantly given when he saw her. "Ah, Minister Kait, I'm glad you accepted my invitation." He turned to the guide. "Ensign, you are dismissed."

The young officer saluted and walked out, leaving them alone in the empty flag bridge. Once the door slid behind them, Amanda just stared, waiting for him to explain why he dragged her to this rust bucket.

Admiral Patel looked back at the hologram, detailing repair schedules. "I'm surprised you're here, Amanda. I thought you would have spit it back in my face."

"I was curious," she said, walking closer to her foe. "What do you want, Nirav?"

"You... off my back."

"Why, admiral," she said, batting her eyelashes, "whatever do you mean?"

"Word is that you're turning the Grand Council against me."

"Depends on whose *word* you hear."

"Hmph, nice try." Patel turned to look at her. "What are you up to?"

"Trying to protect myself."

"Protect?"

Amanda slunk a little closer. "What do you call that report you sent to Chairman Clarke?"

“A legitimate concern. Surely you can see the number of broken ships we have in orbit.”

“You’re in Fleet, Patel, you understand the chain of command. You have a problem with Production, you talk to me. You knew *exactly* what that report would do... it was an attack on ME!”

“My fleet is in ruins, minister. On paper, I have four battle groups—but in reality, I’ve got two of them in dry dock, one scattered around the Federation, and another blasting the Bugs. To get the other two moving again, I need those parts!”

“Which you can get if you simply release enough freighters to pick them up.”

“Yes... *now*. Not before!”

Amanda crossed her arms. “It’s not my fault if you don’t check your own stores.”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

“Nirav, listen. I didn’t come here to be yelled at. You can do that just as well in the council chambers.” The admiral opened his mouth to protest, but Kait didn’t leave him a chance. “Now why don’t you cut the crap and tell me what you want?”

He sighed. “An alliance.”

Kait repressed her laugh. “Really? After what you did to me?”

“A miscalculation. Before that report, I mistook you for some upstart. After all, we get so many in the Council. Now I know differently. You’re a power to be reckoned with... I would rather have you on *my* side.”

“As what?”

Patel leaned against the rail. “What do you want?”

Amanda paused before she spoke; she knew that Nirav wanted what she did, the chairmanship. “To keep my position,” Kait said, even though it was only half true, “but more importantly, to be able to *do* my work.”

“Without interference?”

“Without ridiculous restraint. You can’t build more ships without more shipyards, even if that means a decrease in ship production in the short run.”

There was a pause, as if Patel was waiting for her to say more. “That’s all?”

“Well,” she shrugged, “obviously if we’re talking about an alliance, we’re talking of *shared* power. The chairmanship can no longer be absolute.”

“Of course.” Nirav smiled.

“And my allies would demand the Five Acts removed.”

“What?” Patel bolted upright.

“The wars are over, admiral, and the Federation is exhausted. The draft can stay, but its duration will have to be greatly reduced.”

“You’re talking about eliminating my manpower base.”

“Nirav, you don’t have enough ships for all your personnel!” The admiral backed off as the minister continued. “With more manpower in the workforce, we’ll be able to repair your ships, get the parts you’ll need, and restore the Fed back to the way it should be.”

“The way it should be,” Patel echoed. “You’re talking about dismantling our whole way of life.”

“Tell me, Nirav, could we hold off another invasion with the fleet we have?”

The admiral paused for a second, pondering the question. Then he shrugged. “Maybe. I’m sure I could probably scrape together enough...”

Kait stared at him. “Come on...”

“It’s a rhetorical question, Amanda. It all depends on many things. Ships, equipment, the technology level of the enemy... a thousand variables. Every enemy the Fed has met has been different.”

“But you couldn’t just swat them down like the wrath of Clarke.”

Patel smiled. “Probably not.”

“And no more spies, that’s the other condition. No more Raptors or Internal Security.”

“You can’t be—”

“You said you wanted an alliance? Those are the terms. Then once Clarke leaves, we’ll support you as Chairman. Face it, you need us.”

“You need the military; without us, the Federation falls.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Do we have a deal?”

Patel nodded. “Deal.”

Amanda smiled as she walked out the door. *After all, with a smooth transition after Clarke dies, and the draft lowered, it’ll only be a matter of time before Patel’s power base is weakened. Then, she knew, it’s my turn.*

**[Love it? Hate it? Comment in the Forum!](#)**