

PRAYER FOR THE TECHNOCRATS

A Tech Infantry Novella

by

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Chapter 7: Truth Will Set you Free

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Avalon, August 24th

Miranda grew more concerned about Dane. The Orb was his constant companion; the glove never left his hand. The Vin that she knew had been boisterous and playful. In these last few days, he had become so focused. He had a concentration so intense, she was afraid if he smiled the earth would split underneath them.

Yet her thoughts were more disturbed. *Did I ever really know him? All these years, he lied to me... to everybody... I thought it was just his job!*

The four of them had gone back to Dane's ship after retrieving the Orb. Mayfield was overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all. *After all, she thought, it's one thing to find out that your friend's an alien; it's another thing to be confronted by the reality of it.*

Dane spent most of the time in communication with other Horadrim. He was trying to convince more of their ships to join the battle. One didn't have to understand their language to see that he wasn't having much success.

Palencia spent much of his time with his new sword. Demar never had much need for antique weaponry... but Kuar was different. This sword had a mind. It taught him how to use it; how to move, react. Kuar thrilled the sergeant with new possibilities. It made him realize how slow and clumsy his earlier movements had been.

Ivan was bored. His initial shock at killing Xavier Pollos had gone, but he was left with a dull ache inside. No matter how he rationalized it, Pollos' eyes continued to stare at him whenever Ivan closed his eyes.

He wanted to do... something, *anything!* *The Caal are going to be here soon; why are we waiting here?* Sun watched the news through the doctor's cybermodem; it wasn't good. The

Ares Battle Group, his old ship, along with its own fleet of transports, had bypassed Wilke's Star completely, entered the New Paris system, and were hours from the digital gate to Avalon.

Unlike a jumpgate, a digital gate sent matter as a dense beam of energy and information, sending it through a tachyon pulse and rematerializing it at another gate. Instead of two days of hyperspace hauling between New Paris and Avalon, it took seconds.

It was impossible, of course—but that didn't stop a bunch of engineers and mages from building it. Once it worked, plans were made to span the Federation with a whole network of them. One thing stopped them: the price. They cost a hundred times more than a normal jumpgate. So eventually the network was abandoned, and only three gateways were ever built. One had been destroyed, leaving two... and now the Caal were going to ride it into the heart of the Federation.

As the last frantic broadcast ended, Dane appeared in the doorway. "It's soon, isn't it?"

Sun nodded, turning the cybermodem off. "Not long now. How many of your friends did you get to come?"

"Ten. Hopefully it'll be enough."

"I thought you said the Orb would tip the balance."

Vin looked at the glove. "It's hard to... to use. There's power, but I only have the faintest idea of how to use it."

"Great," Ivan moaned, "so what good is it?"

"If all else fails, I can take it out of here. The Caal might ignore the Fed and chase me instead."

"And run forever?"

Dane gave a glimpse of a smile. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"So we wait for the Caal to arrive?"

"No, we need to coordinate with the Home Fleet. We can cause more damage working together than separately."

"How're you going to do that?" Ivan smirked. " 'Oh, by the way, the Horadrim fleet's going to fight with us?' Who's going to go along with that?"

"Clarke."

"You've told the Grand Council Chairman that?!"

"No, but I'm about to. Prep the shuttle, we're going to the capitol."

As the colonel left, Ivan took the cybermodem and walked down to the bay. He tried not to think about what might happen when they arrived. *Sooner or later, he knew, if I keep riding with Dane, he's going to get me killed.*

Capitol Executive Building

Since he had trashed the council chambers, Clarke had them meet in his office. Of course, in such an enclosed space, the chairman didn't trust them. Therefore, four of his personal bodyguards stood watch, all of them changeling veteran soldiers. *There isn't much to say, Amanda noticed, just the final review of the Home Fleet dispositions.*

"Our defense," Admiral Patel answered, "is based around the planet itself. The planetary battlestations will provide added firepower..."

Suddenly, the doors opened and four people walked into the office. The bodyguards formed a wall in front of the chairman, which Clarke pushed aside. "What is this?!"

"My apologies, honored chairman," Vin Dane replied, "but we've run out of time for niceties."

"Colonel Dane?" the chairman growled. "I thought you were dead."

"No, sir. As you can see, I am very much alive."

"What do you want then?!"

"I'm here as a representative of the Horadrim Empire. I have managed to convince them to send their fleet to Avalon's defense, however, we'll need to coordinate—"

"You did *what?!?*" Suddenly Clarke was a fountain of rage, contained no longer, fully released at Dane. He didn't care that the Horadrim were coming to save them. The chairman had been fighting aliens and rebels all his life; *nothing good could come from either.* Frustrated at being unable to fight the Caal, helpless to stop his Federation from falling to the threat... all these worries had blossomed into a rage that was barely controlled. The mere mention of Horadrim help was the last straw. "TRAITOR! You sold us out to the damned *Horadrim?!?*"

"I did no such thing," Dane tried to explain. "I'm trying to save—"

"I've heard enough of your *lies!*" the chairman roared, pulling a red dagger from his belt. In a blink it expanded into a sword as he rushed forward. Amanda watched in horror as Clarke prepared to throw away their own glimmer of hope. Strangely, she thought she saw an

expression of joy on his face. In his mind, the old werewolf knew that *this*, at least, was a fight he could win!

Or so he thought; Vin's glove formed back into a sword and met the chairman's slash. Clarke's rage only grew at the resistance, and he transformed into the full height of his changeling form.

The bodyguards tried to help, but Demar saw them coming. Kuar leapt into his hand and pointed at them. "Don't..." Palencia growled. Sun managed to draw his plasma revolver and aimed it as well, keeping them at bay while Dane and Clarke fought.

Metal rang against metal as the two men dueled each other. Excalibur in Vin's hand glowed like a star, thrilled to fight such a worthy opponent. Clarke's own sword glowed in its hideous red tone, the blood of his long-dead son having stained the sword forever. Everyone else in the room was afraid to move.

Vin soon realized he wasn't controlling his sword arm. The Orb had a will of its own. It knew this deadly dance better than the colonel did, and it sang to him as they fought.

Dane soon became a blur of flesh and metal; Clarke, a blur of metal and white fur striped with black. They were both equally matched—and had no intention of stopping.

As they fought, the Orb began to see the impass. The challenge was thrilling to it... but it had to end. Once its sword avatar came from another pass, it molded itself into a deadlier edge. WHACK! Clarke's sword was nicked. WHACK! A gouge formed in the red blade. WHACK! The red sword cracked in two, falling apart in Clarke's hands.

The chairman had no mind for disbelief; he was pure rage. He threw down the sword and lunged forward...

...right onto Excalibur, piercing his body. Dane kicked him off the blade, and Clarke dropped to the floor. Vin went to finish him off, but stopped. Before him, the werereature formed back into a man.

In his last moments, Clarke's eyes stared at Dane. "You can't do this..." he croaked.

Dane kneeled down and shook his head. "Why did you make me?"

"You came to destroy us... destroy the Federation. I couldn't allow... it's all we have left..."

"We cannot live in the past," Vin offered, "it's over."

The chairman spat in his face. Blood ran down the alien's cheek. "Power is damnation." Clarke smiled. "See you in hell."

There was a last gasp, then silence.

Clarke's sword had managed to reform, and before Dane's eyes, the red sword was now striped with black.

Vin lowered his sword and it formed back into a glove. He turned to face the Grand Council, Clarke's blood splattered across his chest. The Councilors were all terrified at seeing their leader, the man they had feared for twenty years, murdered before their very eyes. Naturally, they assumed they were next.

Amanda Kait felt the specter of death fall across her as well... but she'd be damned if her life ended like this. So she stepped forward and said, "We are yours to command, Colonel... Chairman Dane."

Vin held out his hand. "No, I am not the chairman of this council. But I will lead this fleet into battle... and we *will* defeat the Caal. And I'll need your help to do it." He looked directly at Amanda. "Organize a Galactic Net override to broadcast as soon as possible."

Kait looked over at the Minister of Information. "Do it."

He nodded and walked over to the chairman's desk. Tapping several buttons, there was a flurry of holomaging equipment suddenly becoming active. Finally, after centering the signal on Dane, he said, "Sir... go ahead."

The colonel straightened before he spoke. "My name is Vin Dane. With the recent death of Chairman Clarke, I have been chosen by the Grand Council to lead us. However, there is no more Federation. What remains is humanity, a desperate race trying to survive extinction.

"Ours is a holy crusade against pure evil. The Caal *must* be stopped. To that end, the Horadrim have agreed to join with us now, united against our common enemy. For the empire of Man to live, the Caal must die. I *will* destroy them, this I promise you."

Vin looked over at the Information Minister and he cut the transmission. Then he looked at the rest of the Councilors huddled along the walls. "I'm dissolving the Grand Council as of now. The Federation no longer exists. However, I'll need you to maintain order until I return. Admiral Patel, report to your flagship. You will be my liaison with the Home Fleet."

The minister looked down at the Net hologram still hovering over the chairman's desk. "Sir! The Caal are coming through the digital gate!"

Kait reached into her pocket and pressed a button. She watched the hologram... and nothing happened.

“Sir, I’m getting reports that the local jumpgates are exploding... everything except the digital gate.”

Amanda silently cursed herself. She had told her team to get detonators on all the *jump* gates, not the *digital* gates.

Who knew technicians would be so literal?!

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