

HEART OF THE BLACK SUN

By Matthew S. Thomas

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Prologue

::Milky Way Galaxy, Outer-Medial 'Western' Spiral::
::Unoccupied Urcanna Space, Asteroid Gannae2367::
::Interior; STATION DESIGNATION MCID-7::
::Security Level; Blackout::
::Threat Level; 10{Maximum}::

"It's working! You son of a bitch, it's working!"

The other man smiled at him, eyes glinting.

It was cramped inside, in the hollow of the asteroid, no one but the two of them and the shining blue-black egg shaped cylinder that thrummed with vigor. Outside the barren asteroid, a telemetry satellite kept them company as it rotated slowly around them, intermittently beaming its data back twenty light years to the nearest planet.

They were in the darkest, loneliest part of space.

A hell of a place, Aran Daniels mused, to manipulate the power source that began the universe.

"If Leon Ott said it would work," Aran said, "it will. It's just taken us time, and a little E-matter."

Hale Cooley clapped him on the back, "I don't care who thought it up! You made the SOB work!"

Aran smiled at his rambunctious partner, one tooth nibbling at the inside of his lip as he studied the fluctuations on the screens. His palms were sweating as he watched the unbelievable power surging against its repellent-force chains. Drying his hands on his white lab

coat, his eyes nervously scanned the banks of monitors and indicators, wary for any anomaly.

In the rough hewn rock walled chamber fifty feet from the two men, a blue-black shimmering chrome egg, six feet by four feet, was elevated on a table. Three wardrobe sized generators stood together against the ragged back wall with the blue-chrome cylinder in front of them in the center of the room. Multi-colored ribbon wires were attached to metal pads on the outer surfaces of the cylinder, but none went inside.

Nothing broke the surface of the perfect, supra-dense alloy. No holes, no openings, yet inside the egg-shaped cylinder the incredible was happening.

Hale, the more vocal and excitable of the two men, ran his fingers delicately over the keypad. "I can't believe it's holding. It's like repulsion and attraction have formed a union ... the event horizon is stable!" He shook his head at Aran, awe in his voice. He looked a bit puzzled though. "This is totally amazing..." His voice trailed off. Uncertainty crept into his face as he said "But I still don't really get what this does to help us get into the Heart? I mean, this thing," he lowered his voice, as if there was anyone else around to hear, "is a bomb."

Aran's brow furrowed and he shook his head as if scolding a child. "Come on now, Hale. We can't possibly figure out how to get inside The Heart until we figure out how it works, yes? This is showing us how it works. Military funding is almost always needed to make these kinds of scientific advancements."

Hale shrugged noncommittally. "If you say so. The real thing though, The Black Sun, is ten times larger than any populated planet. This thing", he gestured at the egg, "is shorter than I am!"

Aran laughed out loud. "I doubt the Ancients built it like that on their first try. They had to start somewhere too." Hale looked a bit sheepish, still focused on the egg-shape in the chamber across from them. With a facade of calm, Aran said "Look, if Leon Ott could have gotten a hold of some E-matter before he died, he'd have started this experiment a long time ago. We will find the way to build a bridge inside to the Heart of it. Right now ... this is what we have, and it is a good start. It's too bad Ott couldn't live to see this day."

Hale nodded his head a moment in sorrow for a lost scientific hero whom he'd never known. With head tilted, his eyes caught a strange motion on the grav-monitor.

"Aran," Hale said, "what do you make of that fluctuation in the northern hemisphere?"

Aran looked up briefly, then pulled himself back in his chair to take a long, studious look.

"Possible sensor failure. That G-reading is pulsing like we're getting interference. Run a trace on that line."

Hale shrugged, set the comp-trace in motion with a few key punches. One thousand line checks in two seconds, and he had an answer.

Shaking his head, Hale responded, "Negative. Line traces clean."

Aran, the older of the two, the one who had sat in Leon Ott's lecture classes, locked his eyes on the G-meter while sweat formed on his upper lip. He stood abruptly and paced back and forth in the tiny little lab. The rock walls felt confining to him, reminding him of how isolated they were, so many light years from any help.

He stopped in his tracks, a queer look growing on his face. "What is the Rad level in the cube room?"

Hale Cooley checked his instruments twice. "Escalating. Right now it's within tolerance, at just twelve units above normal, but it's climbing."

"Shit," Aran whispered.

Hale's face went white. Aran never cursed.

"Check the southern hemisphere now. What do you see?" Aran asked.

A moment of strained silence. Then, "It's ... starting to pulse just like north."

Aran jumped back into his seat, sweat now sliding heavily down his face. "Start shutting this bastard down! I want the RFRs jumped to maximum, and the E-matter catalyst system closed."

In the jagged rock room, the most incredible thing began happening inside the chrome cylinder.

Something which had not happened, in theory, for a very, very long time.

As the two men were struggling at their keyboards, the top wall of the cylinder began to pull inward, clawing at the molecular fabric of the supra-dense alloy. On the stenciled steel nameplate, the words "Matter Compression/Implosion Device-test number 7" were stretching wider as the alloy around them reached in toward the core of the egg.

The bottom of the egg-shaped alloy began to crumple inward, followed at a rapidly escalating pace by the sides. The air crackled with ozone and the sound of metal screeching. From the three Repellent Force Reactors stacked behind the egg cylinder, a grinding noise emanated, a thrumming roar of engines unable to keep up with their task.

The last words out of Aran Daniel's lips were "In the name of the Holy Church ... "

At first, when the seam of the cylinder split, folded in and was swallowed by the inside, the sound was deafening. It was followed by an instantaneous and surreal silence as the very sound waves themselves were sucked into the cylinder's raging black center.

The alloy walls of it rippled like heat waves off hot gravel, then disappeared into the dark whirlpool of force inside. The table liquefied, molten metal pouring upward into the swirling mass like an inverted water fall. Molecules strained at their atomic bonds, ripped apart in energy flurries and were drawn into the irresistible tide that flowed into the torrential vortex where the cylinder had been.

It took but seconds.

Aran was jumping up from his chair to run for the Emergency Evac chamber.

Then his eyes flowed from his skull, bursting their viscous fluid into the air. Every cell in his epidermis ruptured at once, his skin dripping from him like liquid wax, mixing into the frothy red mist of his now atomizing body. The air rushed out of his lungs, collapsing them before they exploded out of his back into fragments flying toward the violent maelstrom behind him.

His arms managed to flail outward one last time before separating from his torso into the molecular whirlwind that swallowed him and everything around him in a bright but silent fury.

The rock walls shattered, the glass melted into bubbling liquid pellets before blasting inward. The computer console exploded

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backward, saturating the matter stream with radiation and electromagnetic fury. Hale Cooley had been closer than Aran to the all-devouring cyclone of inrushing matter and his body had vaporized instantly with the console's explosion, dragging his molecules into the blast, intermixing them, casting them both combined into the silent, vicious blackness.

It had been two or three seconds of white hot fury.

Then one striking, blasting, pitch-black instant as light perished in a reverse photoflash, sucking everything into the hole.

And finally peace.

The exterior of the asteroid remained intact, sitting still in space. In orbit around it, the telemetry satellite heard a continuous stream of pulse code interrupted by a burst of pure white noise.

Followed by nothing but silence.

Meaningless electrical crackles filled its comm-line. { RTR? RTR? RTR? } the little satellite asked.

Ready To Receive?

There was no answer from inside the now empty core of the hollow asteroid.

Ten seconds passed. Ten trillion unanswered queries.

Per program, the satellite began its backup broadcast beamed through a hole in space.

One hundred light years homeward.

CHAPTER 1

"It is the marriage of fate and planning
which reaps the grandest rewards."

-- Stedor Rok Suen, Urcanna philosopher, 16484 gsm
Library of the Galactic Seat, Seatworld

::Bourbon Cross Imperium::

::Planet Bourbon Prime::

Slick etched stone glistened beneath his feet, wet from after the rains, the careful lines of age-old craftsmen glowing under the orange city lamplight and making the streets look like a shimmering sheet of fire. Fire, Thomas, thought bitterly. How thickly that foreshadowed his task tonight. His breathing was shallow, hushed, his huge partner beside him silent as well but for the echo of his padded boots exaggerated on Thomas' ear-amplifiers.

They paused at the exit door into the alleyway, the solid darkness of their electro-mag suits blending them fluidly with the walls and Thomas Chance took the moment to stare at the hazy glow of the orange bulbs lighting the facade of the Parliament building across from them. The main traffic square was nearly empty now, the rains and the late hour having sent most of the politicians and civil servants home to their cozy wives and lovers while Thomas stood out here, in the dark, in

the cold, and began an endeavor to destroy what Terrans had fought so long to build.

He cursed himself again, for the thousandth time, for mentioning the idea to The Grand Duke in a drunken jest, and now here he was about to do it, to commit the most heinous crime of his long tenure as a rogue and ne'er-do-well. Thomas Chance, he sneered, a name more likely to go down in the annals of criminals rather than fools, as he'd rather have preferred. The thought bit into his mind, of slaking himself in drink and the silk of a woman's body rather than doing this stupid thing, no matter what the cost.

"God damn this," he whispered.

Next to him, his giant companion's face was blank in the darkness of the e-mag mask. "I don't want to hear it again, Chance. We're here. We do the job."

Thomas shook his head. Being involved in committing a crime against his own government was one thing, but to be forced to work with Admiral Anthony Loric was just too much for him. He wanted to burst, to scream, to get caught before they finished the job. Maybe the courts would go easy on him.

Hah. He'd be hung before dawn, most likely.

"I will do it," Thomas hissed, "but I'm going to hate it all the way, you understand? This is a stupid idea."

"Yes, and it was yours. You're the Grand Duke's First Officer, his advisor."

"All the more reason it's stupid! I didn't think he'd take me seriously!" Thomas shouted. "It's our own parliament building, damn it!"

Loric's wide hand came down fast over Thomas' mouth, his bulk pushing Thomas' smaller, leaner frame against the intricate stonework of the alley wall. Their e-mag fields slid against each other, slippery, like frictionless oil, the suit generators humming in combat with each other.

"I'll kill you now if you shout again," Loric breathed right into Thomas' ear-amp. "Do you get it? If we're caught we both die. It's all been set-up, just like you said, all the people believing in it, all the dupes ready to confess, all the machinery in motion. It can't be stopped. If the place doesn't blow, we'll still be caught and fried for the attempt. Do

you hear me? I'm ORDERING you to follow through with this, *Vice-Admiral* Chance. ORDERING."

Thomas stopped his writhing underneath Loric's grip. He couldn't see Loric's eyes, but he knew the look of them. Old, war-haggard, always hateful of Thomas and his youth, his disrespect for authority, yet never able to touch him because Stafford, the Grand Duke of Bourbon Prime, was Thomas' best friend. Thomas considered for a moment the possibility that he could beat Loric here and now, in hand-to-hand combat in the streets and forget the whole thing, leave Stafford to his grand schemes and find some far-off Outland planet, some exotic women and strange wine. Nobody but Stafford was better than Thomas at close-combat. He could take Loric out. Thomas was younger, faster, meaner.

But not stupid. Or not that stupid, anyway.

"Yes, sir," Thomas grimaced, no respect in his tone. "I do see your logic. I am an unfortunate victim of my own absurd mentality. It would be perhaps both ironic and infinitely karmic for me to die by my own scheme tonight."

Loric released him. "You'd better not die, you SOB. As much as I hate you, someone has to watch my back."

With that Loric spun away, slinking against the walls around the city traffic square, the waning light now gone from the sky allowing the eerie orange glow to guide them to Sewer Cap 117TC. Loric acid-washed the lock, allowing it to dissolve slowly, the special chemicals bleeding into the electrical alarm receptors, fusing them in a loop. There would be no signal of entry. Thomas followed Loric down the ladder into the darkness, reverse-locking the sewer cap above him.

Their boots made no sound as they softly padded down into the water. UV-lenses allowed Thomas to see ahead of him, although Loric was just a fuzzy cloud of barely white mist to him. He bumped gently into Loric's back as Loric undid the side grating that would allow them access to the Royal Parliament building's underground system.

Through a tight, dry, tube at last they slipped into the sickening purple-light glaring from the bare argon bulbs set into the cavern walls. On his ear-amps Thomas picked up the sounds of patrolmen marching, far-off, maintaining a vigilance for the intrusion that Thomas had set up

to be leaked to them. The number of voices he heard indicated that he may have done too thorough a job with his leak.

Before Loric said it, he picked it up on his amps.

"RP Guards, coming this way!" Loric sub-vocalized.

Thomas was already pulling up the rusty grating on the floor, he and Loric slipping underneath them into the shallow murky water. He set the grate back on above them, pressing himself flat and unmoving on his stomach. They were crunched in uncomfortably, their faces mired in shallow lichen covered water that trickled down past them to a sinkhole somewhere behind. Inches above them, the crossbars of the floor grating dripped other less tasteful slime onto their backs as the thrum of footsteps rattled across the oxidized steel.

They both lay silent as another set of Royal Parliament guards marched over them, the hard soled boots knocking lichen down into Thomas' hair. Vibrating just above the level of the E-M field, the lichen slid off his head and plopped into the water in front of him.

Thomas' shook his head at his plight, longing again for wine, women and song, but most especially for women. And in close second, wine ... specifically Hennex cognac and Clara champagne-liqueur. There was so much fun to be had out there, so many women to taste, so many parties to attend. A sorrow drifted over him, reminding him that he had done very little of that lately, his duties wrapping him up in a constraining bog thick with places he had to be and events he was in charge of controlling. He yearned be at any one (or all) of several meaningless parties right now, dancing, drinking, laughing without care. Instead he lay here, beneath his own Parliament building, prepared to blow it up for his best friend Stafford Benet'. Ah, friendship, he thought. Worlds are built and crushed on its heels.

Loric's huge, scarred hand was pressed against his ear, his massive naturally bearded head tilted upward toward the wet cavern ceiling above him.

Loric whispered, "Nothing on the amplifier right now. Let's move while we've got the chance. I do not want to sit here in slime forever."

Silently they pushed the grating up with their backs, kneeling first and then standing in the weak purple light. When their ear-amplifiers picked up only the lonely dripping of water and distant

footsteps leading away, they laid the floor grating back down then pressed themselves against the moist wall of the tunnel, allowing the suit to adjust its color to the frosty purple light and the dark brown of the craggy rock.

The caverns underneath the Royal Parliament building were cut hundreds of years ago from solid rock, and poor excavation had allowed ground water to bleed into them. The walls were ragged, the corridors two yards wide, three yards high and lit sporadically by what Thomas had always thought were annoyingly cheap argon bulbs, this having the effect of making the whole place both eerie and surreal. Purple shadows nauseated him.

Loric studied a low light phosphorous blueprint of the caverns. In a baritone whisper, he said, "We go southwest, take the second right hand offshoot, then move straight up into the access tunnels."

Thomas had taken to leaning casually against the wall, feeling more at ease as his devil-may-care sensibilities settled over him like an old habit, reminding him of how many times he'd been like this, in stupid situations where his life was on the line and finding that the best way to face it effectively was to make light of it. Relax. After all, he mused without sincerity, you can only die once. He began rocking back and forth to a sonata he was writing in his head, when he reconsidered what Loric had said.

His left eye narrowed on Loric. "We're going into the tunnels already? Taking a few risks are we?"

Loric moved over toward Chance allowing his barrel chest to come within inches of Thomas' face.

"Your name is Chance, isn't it?" Loric asked with a teeth-gritting sound, "This was your idea, wasn't it? Frame Stafford's worst enemy for a crime so vile that even if he's not convicted, he'll be sure to lose all face, all power? I'm as sick of this thing as you and I'd like to get it over with."

Thomas smiled. "You don't like me much, do you?"

"If Stafford Benet' was not your friend as well as my Duke, I would have had you killed long ago."

Thomas thought a moment of kneeling the enormous man in the groin, but he held himself in check, still smiling.

"Not my friend," Thomas continued, "Our friend. If this works, he'll be the most powerful man in the Cross systems, its first absolute ruler. For three hundred years we've been a bickering assembly of duchies and baronies and now Stafford will lead us to a unified glory in all the classic royal tradition." He poked his finger into Loric's chest. "And you want in on that, don't you Admiral? Commander of the legions and all? Head of the armada?"

Loric squinted, stepping back. "I know what it could mean, Chance. I wonder if you do. You seem to switch back and forth from regret to understanding like you are some kind of child."

Loric spun away from him down the corridor, his black e-mag suit causing him to disappear completely into the smoky purple shadows. Thomas couldn't really deny that observation. He always felt like a child in a man's body. He followed on behind in Loric's footsteps.

Their boots made no sound against the draining grates along the floor, their bodies all but invisible hazy shadow flitting along the craggy walls. I've schemed one too many times, Thomas acknowledged as he watched the purple bulbs flit by. Went too far.

But war is hell, including this secret civil war. A war needn't be declared to be brutal or bloody. Thomas had masterminded plenty of schemes for Stafford, schemes that would cost life and limb yet netted Stafford greater powers and therefore netted Thomas greater rewards. Schemes that did not stop at inter-planetary intrigue, but stepped farther beyond the four Bourbon Cross systems and into the galaxy beyond. Not fifteen light-years distant, Thomas' long-term plan for the Rigen systems was well on its way to disintegrating all form of government on the homeworld of Rigen-5, despite constant interference by the mysterious counter-revolutionary woman bent on stopping him. A holy woman, a leader of her people. A woman appropriately code named JEAN... as in Jean D'Arc. Joan of Arc.

Yet here he was, an appointed bishop of the Holy Church himself, indirectly causing deaths in the name of Stafford's power, going so far as to have ordered the capture (at any cost) of this holy woman. He, Thomas, a gamesman who did not believe in the God whom he represented, he was ordering the capture (or possibly the death) of one who does. A fool meddling with the wise.

Time and again his conscience attacked him for callous execution of plans such as this, and at each attack he would remind himself of Stafford's growing power, a power to change, to break the inter-stellar stagnancy promulgated by the bureaucratic Urcanna. That was the sole thing that assuaged his heart. Thomas was above all a lover of life, and the Urcanna had boiled it all down to diplomatic bickering and boredom. Better this way than theirs, he reassured himself halfheartedly.

"Ahead," Loric's whisper came back to him, loud and clear through his ear-amp.

"Ack." Thomas responded. Acknowledged.

At an intersection of two cavern corridors, a ladder bolted to one wall led up into a dark hole. They began their climb up the pitted rails, moving vertically thirty yards as quickly as they could. Above him at the top of the ladder Loric paused while their suits adjusted to the bright indirect lighting flowing in through the panel, then Loric dissolved the lock from the bottom, leaving its appearance unchanged if viewed from the top.

"Subvocalize," Loric said, his lips barely moving.

"Ack."

"South wall, poorly shielded comp-lines. RF interference good cover."

"Ack."

They emerged fluidly into the light, sliding like snakes across the white crystalline-plastic floor of the access tunnel. Their suits had now polarized to muted white, identical to the wall and floor coverings, the E-M haze around them blending their bodies into the wall as they crawled just under the computer lines attached to it.

They both froze in synch.

Loric's hand moved up near Thomas' face. The hand symbols flurried. Four. Correct/five. North. Fifteen meters. Silenced.

Thomas had picked them up also. RP Guards. Just a hushed whisper in his ear-amps, but there. Thomas moved his hand slowly in front of Loric's face, a simple signal, known and feared anywhere in the military.

Ambush.

The circle signal from Loric. Ack.

Thinning himself against the cold crystoplastic, Thomas laid flat on the floor and slid invisibly along the electromagnetic cushion provided by his suit, moving like wisp of white colored wind across the floor to the wall opposite Loric. The two of them flowed without sound toward the RP Guards stationed in two facing alcoves.

As they came closer, the subvocal whispers of the guards could be understood.

"Still no sighting, cavern area L and N."

"Entry not confirmed?"

"Spoor unavailable. Exception, floor grates ajar, area O-7, area M-4, area K-1"

"Path trace, same areas?"

"ETA, 8 minutes, all possible paths."

"Damn. Stay hot on this."

"Ack."

Excellent luck for he and Loric. They would have eight minutes before the next mandatory report. Of course, at any time between, an unexpected call receiving no answer would mean an early discovery and alert.

Thomas saw Loric's back hunch off the floor, then followed him in even rhythm. He surged upward from in front of the guards, appearing as if the floor itself had come alive before them.

The first man's head snapped violently as Thomas' right foot crashed up beneath his chin sending him reeling backwards into his two surprised partners. Pulling back his leg instantly from the kick, Thomas replanted it on the ground and moved into the man still toppling backwards.

He grabbed the man's crotch with his right hand and his throat with his left, wrenching him out of the alcove and crashing him onto the floor head first. The two other men, still unrecovered from being pushed back into the wall, now fell forward just outside the alcove. Thomas twirled in a lightning fast pirouette, the spin kick forcing his heel into the left guards face. As the left guard fell and the right one moved toward his comm link, Thomas stopped him with a solid back hand punch to the nose. The man choked out a small cough, then slumped down against his fallen partner.

Only seconds had elapsed. Thomas checked briefly to see that they were still alive and mendable, noting with slight regret that the one man's orbit was crushed. He would never use his left eye again. He quickly administered somatadone to keep them unconscious, then he turned to check on Loric.

From his position he could see that the two men in Loric's alcove were beyond repair. One's neck was crushed, his head hanging by flattened skin, the other had lost his face. Blood slid like steaming oil down the side wall and puddled at Loric's feet.

Thomas grimaced, tasting bile.

He crossed the floor quickly, low to the ground.

"Those were your men, too," Thomas whispered to him viciously. "They would have been safe from the blasts down here. They didn't have to die."

Loric glared coldly back at Thomas' fiery eyes, his voice hissing through his teeth. "Would Gosfard have killed these men on his way up, or would he be gentle and kind? If we're to convince a tribunal that Gosfard did this, it had God damn well better look real."

In Loric's eyes there was no room for debate. "This mission is military espionage," he spat. "I am in command here. You will follow my orders or I repeat to you that I will see you die here and are indicted posthumously as one of Gosfard's conspirators. I am not afraid of you, Chance, and I never will be. Are you with me?"

The tiniest fraction of Thomas' lip curled, all the frivolous devil-may-care humor drained from him.

"Yes, Sir," he hissed. "Shall I slit the throats of those three I mistakenly left alive?"

There was no answer from the giant figure of Loric. He had already resumed the slow progress along the wall, blending in, invisible, gaining distance from Thomas quickly.

With a quick glance back at the injured and dead, Thomas moved to follow him.

CHAPTER 2

"Whenever God erects a house of prayer,
The Devil always builds a chapel there;
And 'twill be found, upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation."
- Daniel Defoe, Terran, 16242 - 16310 gsm
Seatworld General Document, 9008.4522

::Rigenate Republic::
::Planet Rigen-5::

The smells were filling her nose, wafting into her lungs, filling her heart and making her head light. The tree's musty leaf smell mixed in her nostrils with the crispness of wet pine, the warm thick air humid on her skin, combining her sweat with his as they hugged each other tightly atop Mount Sulo. His musky scent aroused her and his smile made her feel bright. Behind his tanned face she could see the beauty of the lush Sulo Valley spreading out for miles, the hundred thousand trees, the smoke from the hearth fires, the marble-white Cathedral spires glinting on the hilltop across from her, each silver-topped tower seeming like so many rays of light reaching toward the heaven they had told her about. They, the Terrans. And he was one of them.

Elan'ya smiled at him, loving the way it made his face light up.

"You are so beautiful," Daimon whispered to her, his hands beneath her robe, caressing her back. It made her feel like purring, to be this way, in his grasp.

It had never been like this for her, ever, having a man hold her just for the sake of holding her without demanding her sex, taking it from her like a thief whether she wanted to give it or not. With Daimon, he let her set the pace, assured her that he would rather have her heart than her body ... but when he took her body, it made her heart sing. She felt his lips touch her neck, felt her grow with heat and she loved that she felt such need and that she finally had someone who would sate it. They'd known each other for only a few weeks and she'd already felt him inside her, literally and emotionally.

"Stop it, Daimon," she whispered, not really meaning it.

He laughed, tousling her sunny-white hair. "Do you know how beautiful your face is, like this? The humidity clings to your skin, and in the sun, with all that gorgeous hair around your face, I swear you look like an auburn-skinned angel."

Blushing, Elan'ya shook him off her and stood up to stare out over the deceptively peaceful view spreading out all around her. She whispered, "I thought all angels were alabaster white."

She could tell he'd heard it. His silence told her so, and she was sorry she'd said it.

His arms wrapped around her waist, and he rocked her gently to the tiny breeze, following her eyes out there into the sea of green, capped by the silver-white spires of the gigantic Cathedral towering above it all.

"In my dreams," he said gently into her ear, "all the angels have auburn-tanned skin and shining white hair. And, you know what's funny? They all look like you."

It made her giggle, which in turn made her giggle more because she could not remember the last time she giggled before. Locking her fingers in his, she rocked with him, felt him against her back. She nuzzled her bottom against his groin, laughing. It was so fun to have such a power, now that she wanted to use it, now that it was a gift.

"I'm sorry I said that," she said, her head turned so her lips moved against his as she spoke. "I know you're not like the rest of them."

His lips froze. Pulling his face away, his eyes were filled with rebuke.

"Don't say it that way, damn it. It's dangerous as all hell for the first thing, what with this counter-revolutionary movement paranoia going around, but it also offends the shit out of me. I'm Terran too, and I'm not ashamed of what we do."

She shrugged out of his arms, walking away up the ridge. This Mountain was the second highest of those that surrounded the Sulo Valley, a precipice from which she often viewed a little part of her little world of Rigen-5, and thought of all the death that now filled it because of the war.

Daimon came up behind her, but didn't touch her as he passed by to sit on a rock that jutted out along the ridge. She didn't try to get closer to him. On this one point the two of them might never meet, but it was so important to her, and so was he, that she had to try.

"Look, Daimon," she said earnestly, straining to keep her voice calm, "you can't say that the Holy Church starting this war was right, can you? I mean, I know I'm a follower and all, and you're ... something, some un-official official of the Church ... and I know we both don't see the same things all the time, but how can you justify the bloodshed?"

He shook his head, eyes downcast. "You really preferred to live in slavery to the Urcanna trader-princes? Slaves to that Jump-Gate orbiting your planet? How long would that have gone on without Church intervention?"

She felt her voice rising now, the control slipping away, the memory of his arms fading. "Daimon, at least we weren't dying by the thousands under the traders! Its Rigenals who are dying, fighting each other on behalf of the two of your damn governments while your generals stand back and survey the damage in terms of little numbers on some post-board!"

"Kellan save me!" he shouted back at her in exasperation. "The traders weren't going to give up this planet without a fight! They're still not giving up! If your other stupid Rigenal friends would stop listening to that blasphemous mystery woman or pandering to the money-grubbing whore traders and get behind the Church, this whole thing would be over and we could all get on with our lives!"

Moments ago she was hot for him, now her heart was burning with anger, her eyes reddening, her teeth gritted so tightly she was sure they'd break. "Stupid!" She roared. She couldn't stop now. She might have, seconds ago when she knew this was going to happen, when she knew it might ruin her chance to be made love to again on top of the mountain with the sun on her arching back, but her fury was peaked, and she couldn't stop no matter what.

The sound of her voice echoed off the mountain top, escalating quickly to a shriek. "Stupid! If we are then it is better than you Terrans, so Goddamn greedy that you would have everything your way, shape the whole damn universe into your image just because you think it's your 'Mani-fest' destiny! You think God is on your side? How could any loving God be on the side of such monumental mass murder! You showed us God alright, but He's not on your side! He's not on your side!"

She was fuming. She never cursed, never swore at anyone, but she was completely irrational with anger now. Then she saw something very strange in Daimon's face, his jaw dropping lower, his eyes growing wide with disbelief, and she realized what she'd just said. Her heart sunk into her stomach and her skin grew suddenly very cold. Those last words were the same she'd said thousands of times, secretly, to all the Rigenals in the movement. Her movement.

"My God," Daimon breathed, "it's you."

She swallowed hard, looking nervously around her, now both very confused and afraid.

"It's you," he whispered. "It's been you all along. I've fallen in love with the traitoress."

Ice. The heat of the sun was gone from her skin, the sheen of sweat on her body now thick and cold like chunky icewater. Again her eyes darted nervously around, seeing no one else anywhere. This was the top of a mountain, after all, empty of eyes to see, devoid of anyone who could help. Her heart felt hollow, and she knew she was very, very alone.

Daimon stood up, stepping toward her while she stepped back. "I don't believe it," he whispered again, his eyes distant, looking right through her, "I've fallen in love with my own target. And I didn't even manage to find you, not when you were literally right under my nose, I

was so blinded by your beauty, but it's so goddamned obvious. Who else could sway all those people, who else on this miserable little moss-covered rock of a planet could stir up such a hornet's nest of resentment toward us ... just you. Beautiful, passionate, brilliant. How could I have been stupid enough to believe you were only a petty church Acolyte."

He kept walking toward her as she looked around her for something, a stick, a rock, anything, but she saw only green grass everywhere, and pretty, purple-flowered bushes. They were a thousand feet above the timberline.

The smooth surface of a rock wall barred her backward progress, and she froze there until Daimon came within two feet of her.

His face was now sad, looking into her eyes. "I'm sorry Elan' ... I'm sorry you chose to believe what you do, but you're very wrong. God is on our side, and I'm not going to let you stop us, none of us are, and neither is He. I was sent here to find you, to find this mystery woman who leads the counter-movement, and to capture you. I've done the first part, and I have to do the second. Please don't make me do anything I'll regret any more than I already do. I'm sorry Elan'..." and he stepped toward her, his hands stretching toward her wrists.

Reflexes are amazing things. When trained sufficiently, and repeatedly, our bodies learn to do things that our minds would never consider, let alone conscience.

Her left hand shot out so quickly that neither she nor Daimon were even aware of it, it merely being a blur shooting out from her body. Her hand came right to the top of his forehead, a thick tuft of his hair crunching up tightly into her fist. The impact of the fist was minor, but she let her now-balled fist continue forward with his hair, bending his head backwards about thirty degrees, allowing her to see his shocked eyes as they stared upwards at Heaven.

Her right hand, flat and hard as carved stone, middle knuckles in a straight line, snapped outward so fast that and smooth that it almost seemed like liquid motion, until at just prior to the full length of its flexion her knuckles impacted Daimon's windpipe with an sickening snap. Her finger knuckles bent at the instant they'd imparted their maximum kinetic energy, then collapsed inward to allow the top knuckles a second blow which could barely be distinguished from the

first. Daimon's windpipe was fractured by the initial impact, and crushed completely by her follow-through.

But reflexes cannot be stopped. They continue their work long after their purpose is done. Her foot soared upward into Daimon's groin, then she side-stepped her current position and keeping her left hand locked around his hair she brought her right forearm across Daimon's face, locking his chin into the crook of her elbow, then jerked his head into a hard right angle from his body.

The man who was her only lover fell to the damp green grass with a muffled thud, his head askew, disgusting blood-choked wheezes coming from his body. He ceased moving, mercifully, after a few seconds. Perhaps her reflexes were kind to her in that sense, to have snapped his neck, because it takes a man a long time to die of a crushed larynx, but a broken neck is nearly instant.

The wind picked up then, drawing itself across her skin in a way that would have normally provoked a sigh of relief from the heat and humidity of her tropical world, but now her skin was clammy, cold and broken with goosebumps. Staring at Daimon's twisted face, his bulging eyes, she fell to her knees and vomited. She heaved and heaved until it was dry and nothing would come then she kept on heaving, thinking her ribs would burst and she would die there next to him, but at last it stopped. She lay there in her own vomit, and then the tears started to come. These, like reflexes, she could not stop. They poured from her like the heavings from her stomach, her body trying to expunge the pain, crying torrents until the tear-glands were dry and swollen, and still she cried.

She wanted to die. It was the only thing that would stop the pain. Daimon was probably right, anyway, that they would stop her somehow, and if it wasn't him then it would be whoever they sent after him, or after that. She could crawl over to the edge, and pitch herself off the side of the mountain. It could all be over so quickly, and the pain would stop.

And then her eye caught the sun as it began to sink behind the rock where Daimon had last sat. The sun. On her world, the Sun, though hot, was always gentle, giving life to the planet and warmth to its people. Then the Terrans brought God, whose symbol was the Rising

Sun. Wherever you may find yourself, they said, the Light of God would also find you.

She clasped the Rising Sun pendant which hung between her breasts, and she prayed for all she was worth that she be strong enough to get up from here and go on. Her people needed it, needed her. People everywhere did. People needed to know that God was not Terran property, not the property of the Dukes of The Bourbon Cross Imperium, to be abused and used as they wished.

She stood up on shaky legs, pressing her hand against the rock to support herself and she looked away from the body lying twisted on the ground. Without glancing backwards she walked numbly down the path, letting its winding way lead her farther and farther down the mountain, into the timberline, past the crooked waterfall, down past the little village of the backward mountain-folk, down farther still, dusk becoming night until hours later she was on the floor of the valley, still numb inside and now too cold and tired to care.

The logging trail was the only one easy enough to follow at night, and she stayed on it, her eyes vacuous and dull. Her brain couldn't accept what happened. Though she tried to prevent it, the picture of Daimon's eyes staring with such shock upward, always in her mind looking upward, as if God himself would strike Elan' down before she could take his life.

But God didn't strike her down.

Maybe God was cruel. Maybe the Terrans should have kept Him.

She continued walking well into the night, and very near dawn she arrived at the small wooden shack she sought, a shanty of sorts deep in the heart of the town of Sulo. Quietly she rapped on the door.

Warsaw was a very light sleeper, she knew, and he answered the door only seconds later.

"Who is it?" his gruff voice demanded.

"Me," she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

The door sprung open in an instant and when the giant, scarred face settled on hers, she couldn't help it. It all exploded again, all of it coming out of her in a torrent of tears and wailing that she wasn't sure she could stop.

Warsaw stroked her awkwardly, and she trembled in his arms.

"I killed him," she cried.

"Who? Who did you kill Elan'?" he asked, pulling her away from him to stare into her face without compassion. "You need to tell me now, I mean I don't know what you did or why but every second may count in my covering this up. I may have to transport you out of here, I may need to do a thousand things to conceal whatever it is you did, now tell me and cry later."

She shrugged his hands from her shoulders. "I killed a spy. And I don't think you need to rush. He's on Lookout Ridge, on top of the mountain."

"My God, " Warsaw breathed.

She sniffled bitterly, "I've heard that too much lately, and from people who don't even believe it sounds very, very wrong."

He stepped back from her. "I'm sorry. It's just a phrase to me, but I know what it means to you and I'll try not to use it again, but that is still not relevant at the moment. I'll get this man, whoever he is, and it will be made to look like an accident, but, if you could, I'd like to know what happened."

Daimon's eyes flashed in her mind, and she clenched her own against the tears that still wanted to come. "No. I don't want to talk about it. It was Daimon, and he was a Bourbon spy sent to capture me. Right now, I've got to get back to the Cathedral, or I'll miss my morning Finding and they'll get suspicious."

It didn't matter to her what Warsaw was thinking or what he'd have to do, when she turned her back on him and just walked out, because it was all she could do now not to break down completely.

As she approached the Cathedral in the early morning light, she was glad again for her white linen robe's ability to conceal her body while allowing the air to flow up inside and keep her cool in the quickly warming air of Rigen. More important to her now, the thin robe's loose fit hid the swell of her breasts and the curves of her hips from the prying eyes of the other Holy Acolytes, Acolytes who always made it so clear with their eyes how much they lusted after her. After last night, the prospect of men seemed both dangerous and repugnant to her.

On her way to the Cathedral dome she took a moment to pause for a glimpse between the open arches of the large gateway, letting the sight of the Sulo valley take some of the edge off the weight in her heart.

The Cathedral was built on the crest of a small mountain that stuck up in the center of the valley, gigantic snow capped mountains walling off the northern view and trailing off both east and west to the horizon. To the south, smaller pure-green mountains curved inward on the valley, cupping its infinite wealth inside, the mountain-to-mountain trees of delicate green, rich in fauna, verdant and miraculous to behold. The city of Sulo was spread out all along the valley floor, meandering with trails and sparsely built huts tucked away in the deep of the forest green, connected by the trader routes and a few giant logging roads that wormed through the tree filled valley like thick snakes.

If nothing else, she thought, the Cathedral was built with views to inspire faith in all the Followers of the Holy Tenets, as it had inspired her when she stood here almost two years ago, for the first time. Today, its beauty couldn't undo the pain inside.

A hand rested gently on her shoulder, startling her, her mouth open and slack from the changing course of her thoughts.

"Gran'dama, I'd like to speak to you," said a dry but powerful voice.

She spun around, fury and fear replacing her sadness. Her eyes flitted about frantically, scanning the trees and gardens around her for any other occupants of the Gardens. She calmed herself quickly, so as not to give herself away. "Never address me that way here," she hissed.

Grainger's face looked abashed. He turned his eyes down from her as he spoke, "I'm sorry. That was unthinking of me. I knew no one was near, but nonetheless I've jeopardized you. I could have another of our fellows assigned here, if I am unfit to serve you in your eyes."

She breathed deeply, using her StripForce warrior's training to place her body in a state of relaxation, containing any visible dissatisfaction. This was not the place to make a scene, given the relationship between their standings in the Church. She was a mere Acolyte, and Grainger was a full Curate of the Tenets, just a step below Bishop.

She calmed her face for him, let her gentle eyes soothe him. She couldn't allow anything, not even Daimon, to stop her and she needed help to keep doing it. "No," she said, "how long did it take us to get you transferred here from Jua? Six months? Almost a year? You must stay and do your job appropriately. No one must suspect my involvement in

the movement, let alone my command of it. That last order from the Bourbon Dukes put a price of one million on my head, and I've reason," she swallowed hard, continuing, "to believe I'm in serious danger. I need you to protect me, and if the time finally comes for us to take this place by force, I'll need you here."

"Yes ... dama Elan'," Grainger whispered.

"Good," she said. Grainger was kind, and a true believer in God's light, but he was none too clever, nor too strong, however she needed to take her help wherever she could and a Curate was her highest placed church-operative.

"Now what is it, Grainger? What did you need to tell me?" she said, impatient to get to her morning Finding so that she not be missed and suspicions be aroused.

"I wish more, dama. My information is nothing that will shake the earth, I'm afraid, but I've heard that we will be having a visitor from off-world and I know he must be very important because of the time and energy we're exhausting on preparations for his arrival."

"When?" she said, a hint of excitement slipping past her numb sorrow, "And where?"

"They won't tell us," he said. "They say it's a secret best left to the Elders of the Circle."

Her mind ticked off V.I.P.'s, wondering who might be coming.

Curate Grainger continued, "I've been trying to find a way to move your name in as a serving girl for the visitor, but ... " Grainger's voice cut off instantly.

A Deacon strolled toward them, his eyes alighting here and there on the many tropical birds flitting around the trees and ferns of the Garden. His face was ludicrously beatific, fulfilled to the point of silliness and when he saw them he glowed brighter.

"Curate Grainger! How good to see you this morning!" The Deacon called to him.

Elan'ya's eyes were downcast, staring at the resin-coated pebbles of the walkway.

Grainger stood tall now, his blue robe rippling in the tropic breeze. The Curate nodded his head to acknowledge the deep bow of his lesser.

The Deacon finished his sweeping bow and then glanced disdainfully at Elan'. "Are you disciplining this ... this Acolyte, or has she met your fancy?"

Grainger never looked at her. His eyes were now on the Deacon, an aura of authority surrounding him like a cloak. "That is no concern of yours, Deacon. We must teach the Acolytes to grow, as you know. These poor Rigenals are bereft of Godliness and so must be brought into the light of The Rising Sun. It is our task to assist them."

Deacon Louis' beatific face darkened at the rebuke. "Yes, your Holiness, I'm sorry for the intrusion." He began to walk away.

"Hold," Grainger said, "if you are bound for the Cathedral Hall, then take her with you. She is delinquent in her attendance this morning."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

She followed the Deacon to the Hall without speaking, managing to get there just as the last stragglers filed into the Cathedral Hall. The Hall was magnificent, like its surroundings, complete with hundred foot high vaulted ceilings made of the finest chiseled stones, colored glass cut into windows all across the top, triangular skylights of stained glass visages shining in the most beautiful rainbows down upon the angled pews.

The Cathedral Hall was not full today, this being the early Finding. Filing into a pew near the back, she knelt upon the hard stone tiled floor and joined the prayers in progress. The one saving grace of this remorselessly secular church the Terrans had brought them was this part, The Finding, during which her mind would go blank, and instead of filling with thoughts of the wars and death that her people now suffered at the hands of church and state, she would be freed into the realm of love given to her by this God. It even seemed to take the thought of Daimon's eyes from her, the Light from the Rising Sun now in her own eyes.

The Rising Sun altar glittered in front of her, a stunning pyramid of stone capped with a dais made up of black onyx upon which sat the pearlescent gold sculpture of a rising sun -- glistening, beckoning, overwhelming, rays of its shining arms spreading out the length of the dais, at least twelve feet or more, aglow with the colors from the light

drifting through the stained glass above. The first time she had seen it she had felt like crying. She felt like that again, now.

Time flowed by slowly, and then the chosen Divinate verbally declared an end to their silent prayers. "...and as it was then, so it shall be. Let the One God move into the hearts of all. Amen."

"Amen," she whispered with the rest of them, laying her arms across her chest in an "X" then unfolding them outward in the Holy Gesture of The Rising Sun. With her morning Finding done, she could go about her other duties, these thoughts filing her mind as she followed the other worshippers out of the church.

"Dama Elan'," came the cold voice from in front of her.

The other acolytes passed her by, grateful to have been ignored by the man who spoke to her.

"Prelate," she knelt quickly in front of him, eyes downcast.

Prelate Gaulton Adjianeaux of The Order of The Sacred Light was a small man, no more than the height of most women in the Rigenate. His teeth were winter white, bleached brighter than was natural, his eyes a calm, unwavering brown. A thin, ill trimmed mustache drooped from his lip then curled down to his chin, his black robes ornate unlike hers in plain white. An embroidered gold sash crossed his chest, then tied at his waist in a platinum Maltese Cross, the symbol of the four stars of Bourbon, and around his neck he wore a silver chain, clipping his cape together at his neck with small Cross-and-Sun pins made of a shimmering, multicolored alloy called Irinium.

"Dama Elan'," he repeated in his small, dry voice, "you appeared distant at today's Finding. As if your spirit was attending matters other than the salvation of the souls of The Rigenate."

Head still down, she spoke through gritted teeth, making her voice calm despite the revulsion rising in her heart. "I apologize, Prelate, I confess distraction."

His moist palm cupped her chin, drawing her head upward to look at him. She saw him study her features, drinking in her sensuous face with far more than holy intentions.

"This distraction," he said, tongue between his teeth, "wouldn't be related to the storming of The Pannua Glade?"

The image of the burning bodies flitted across her mind, but not across her eyes. It had been the thing she had been thinking about when

she began her last argument with Daimon, all that unjust death in the name of God. In her eyes, she displayed a vacuous piety, devoid of questions. "No, Prelate. It was simply another rumor of my parent's whereabouts."

His lip curled in a little snarl of distaste. "If you cannot free yourself of that infantile desire, then perhaps you would be more fit serving traders at WayStation? How would that be, if I sent you there?"

No control could mask a moment of fear in her face, her thin, dark eyebrows furrowing. "I ... I'm sorry, Prelate. This is the purpose of Findings, yes? To cleanse one's soul? To find one's path?"

When his eyes narrowed on her with hate for all things Rigenal, she feared she'd gone too far. Been too clever.

Then he relaxed, a wry smile on his lips. "Yes, Follower, you learn well. Perhaps you can be turned from the atheist beast that you are into a God-fearing soul. You may signal hope for Rigen after all."

With all her strength she concealed the relief from her face and let her grey-blue eyes be pious voids for his eager stare.

His hand traced her full lips for a second, drawing a tiny bit of wetness from there and bring it to his own lips. Grinning at her, he sucked at his finger, then nervously looked around him for bystanders. Only a mute cleric stood by the door in his robes of golden silk, denoting a Teacher born on one of the four planets of The Cross, a man who would say nothing at all.

"Dama Elan'," he said quietly, "you will come to my sanctuary at dusk. You will attend me during my meeting this night, and you will exemplify the obedient, pious Rigenal to our Cardinal and his most exalted guest. Is this understood?"

Her willing eyes nodded to him, then she kissed his ring, and she noticed his shock at her level of appreciation.

"Yes," he muttered with a slick wetting of his lips, "you may be worth something after all."

He spun away from her, not bothering to announce her dismissal. Technically, this meant she would remain here, on her knees, until she was dismissed by an appropriate member of the clergy. This brought her no undue anger. She could wait until precisely dusk, if necessary, when the Prelate's other instructions would override his failure to dismiss.

She was smiling beneath her cowl now, her beautiful face finally glowing with all its natural softness and glow. Oh, the Prelate might ... do things to her. Grim things, even. But she would sacrifice anything to be at that meeting. This was what Daimon had tried to prevent, that she might find a way to discover their most secret plans and turn those against them.

And now, Cardinal Avalon, Prelate Adjianeaux and an exalted guest would be in front of her very eyes. This could be exactly what she had been waiting for.

Startled, she looked up.

"Dama," Prior Angelo said. His old, leathery hand was extended to her.

"Prior, thank you," she said sincerely, her heart moved by him. He was virtually the only Terran she knew in the Church who really cared, one who knew that God was with all people including Rigenals.

Prior Angelo smiled a lopsided, innocent smile at her, his old eyes showing just a hint of sadness. The chalk colored robe on him was unadorned, like hers, but he wore the combined Bourbon Cross-and-Rising Sun symbol on a chain around his neck.

With little crinkles around his mouth, he said, "I'm sorry that the Prelate has called you to service. I was watching from a distance, and hoped it would not come to that. You understand that it is his right, though, as a Prelate of The Order."

"I'm fine, Prior. I'm a willing servant of the church."

With a sadly shaking head, he led her outside into the courtyard garden. The indigenous tropical birds chattered from their green-ferned perches, the small masonry and pebble path leading them through the immaculately attended foliage. Only the sound of the gurgling green-water fountains and the songs of the birds disturbed their privacy.

As they passed through an engraved iron gate, her eyes opened in small wonder.

"Aren't we in the Cardinal's Garden?"

The prior nodded. "I am the Prior of this cathedral community, these Gardens are mine to tend as well." His deep, crackling voice deepened with seriousness. "I am disturbed by your reaction to the Prelate. I know you, and you should be outraged and upset at this intrusion into your life, but you are not. Why?"

A bright blue and yellow Royal Partridge absorbed her attention for a moment as it sang its complex love song to an unseen mate. "To be attached to a Prelate would mean advancement in the church. If I could become a Deacon, I might be able to change things for the better."

The Prior also studied his surrounding with some fascination, choosing to stop before a marble statue of Saint Kellan DePassant. The elegant, Romanesque sculpture stood eight feet tall on a pedestal in the center of a small pond. The light green water carried many bright colored fish in it, and the damp ferns hung over the sides of the pond with a relaxed luxury.

"This man here," Prior Angelo said, "might not condone the acts of those within The Order. Saint Kellan was a peaceful man whose purpose it was only to bring hope to all those people out here who had no God. When he left his home in The Cross, he expected to find other false gods that our True God must compete with, but instead he found only empty souls, unending bureaucracy and stagnation. Saint Kellan brought the Light of God to them, to you all. Those within The Order seek the same goal, but with more vehemence, and with different methods. I, as a mere member of the clergy of The Great Church, cannot express my personal views on their actions."

Elan' looked into his eyes then, those wrinkled eyes filled with wisdom and sadness, and she remembered again why she had ever found hope here.

"I understand, Prior, but Kellan did bring God out here, a place where He hadn't been known before. But we know He's here now, and nothing can take that away from us." She clasped his hand. "Do you understand that?"

The Prior turned his head away from her, letting her hand go slowly.

"You are a wise child," he said. "I will pray for you."

"Every little bit helps," she whispered.

"Yes." His eyes came back to her, solemn. He paused a long time before he spoke again. "The storming of The Pannua Glade was a military necessity, I'm told."

"So I hear," she said. Her pause was long as she pictured the frightening images in her mind of blood soaked high-grass and bodies burning in the sun. The she saw just one body laying on the warm grass

in the sun. One she'd had to kill, in order that she might end the rest of the killing. She wasn't sure it made sense anymore.

"When the Church of The Terrans," she said quietly, her eyes unfocused, "the church of the Bourbon Cross, came to our planet, Prior, we were already slaves to the traders at Waystation, that much is true. The Offworlders controlled our politics, much of our land and most of our lives and we all should have known that Jump-Gate orbiting our planet would mean our doom from the start. I guess my mother must have been just a tiny child when it was built."

Prior Angelo's hand reached again for hers, but she slipped it away from him into the folds of her robe. Her voice was even softer when she continued.

"But the church came, God came, and it changed us, we gained hope, and now that same savior church has started the most bitter, bloody war on this planet in its whole history. Brother against brother, families divided ... and blood in every street. And blood soaks the warmth of Pannua Glade." She looked at him with frosty eyes. "Why does God do this to us? Why do so many have to die?" And why, she asked silently, did Daimon have to be on the wrong side.

The few white strands of hair on Angelo's head fluttered in the warm, damp breeze. "I ... cannot say what is in God's mind, child. But I know that the original intention of the church fathers was to free this planet from the chains of slavery that bind it to WayStation and the traders. It began as a movement of peace ... "

"And now Pannua Glade. Who wins in this war, Prior?"

With a chill to his voice, he spoke. "You must be careful, little one. Those in The Order would silence tongues like yours. The four systems of the Bourbon fathers is not so far away from here, and this unrest has spread to WayStation and to all the systems of The Rigenate. Your planet may be a tiny frontier world, but it is in an unpleasantly favorable tactical position within the Urcanna Empire, one which the Dukes of The Cross will not let collapse into either religious or secular anarchy."

"Tactical? Anarchy? Are these the words of God, Prior? Where in the Tenets of God does it say that?"

"We live in the real world, child, not in a book."

HEART OF THE BLACK SUN

"But Prior," she asked, her strong eyes wet now, "where does God live? Where?"

Prior Angelo didn't speak. Perhaps he'd forgotten the answer as well.