



James Evans

RELIGION
WITHOUT A
GOD

A Novel

RELIGION WITHOUT A GOD

JAMES EVANS

The HUMANI sequence

Prequels

Imperial Knight

Religion Without a God

Main sequence

HUMANI (forthcoming)

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ONE

“Where is Tarka?”

Luke turned to Sur’Sin, glancing up at the hulking Fader student. The Black Fader’s coal-dark face, predator’s hooked nose and red hooded eyes evinced a momentary irrational fear of malevolence, of animal ferocity, of *other*. The young human chided himself for the aberrant humanist thought and considered his best friend’s question.

“Meatballs.”

“Someone finally turned him into something useful?”

“He took off to that place around the corner complaining of systemic hunger.” Of course the real reason Tarka had finally moped off was because Emily was an aristocrat from the Northern continent and offended his egalitarianism. Luke had not wanted either of his friends there in the first place – the human with his ulterior motive to sour the budding relationship or the Fader who at least had his heart in the right place and had *insisted* on keeping him company out of some sense of loyalty.

“Oh,” Sur replied with a sudden magnificent smile, all perfect white teeth of the sharper Fader variety, making a commendable attempt to look like he actually believed the excuse. “Meatballs sound pretty good actually. You coming?”

Luke shook his head. He was definitely not hungry. Frustrated, yes, hungry no. And he had this guilt now for his evil humanist thought. Again. His best friend did not deserve such disrespect regardless that it was a silent, malicious secret in the sewers of Luke's mind. He intended to stay put at the corner of the street, beneath the brooding statue of the Sisterhood, the statue where Emily was supposed to be meeting him all of twenty minutes earlier. He would give her another hour. Perhaps waiting was penance enough...

"See you tomorrow then. I'll think of you when I'm eating my meatballs." Another blinding smile. *Was he being literal or had that been an actual attempt at humour?*

He waved his friend off and sat on the edge of the plinth with a determined scowl, arms wrapped around his knees, set for an hour of unrequited love, cold bottom and perfect boredom.

"The fuck I didn't!"

Luke's head shot up at the obscenity just a couple of metres away. A scrawny boy with bright coppery red hair of all things, and pale, pale skin, an indignant look to his eyes and paper bag in his hand, was facing down a chubby, smartly dressed man who seemed to have difficulty processing the bad language. After a moment of indecision the man frowned furiously and stormed off.

The redhead promptly noticed Luke looking up at him, shrugged, and sat down beside him.

"Said I gave him *The Look*. Fuck I did! Not my type even if there were *four* of them squeezed inside of there. Counted *seven* chins before I lost count. Not. Bloody. Likely."

Oh, Luke thought, but did not say anything, avoiding the boy's gaze. It really was unusual to see someone with that colour hair. It was probably dyed. If he had hair that colour he would dye it black. And was there the hint of *tight curls*?

To be fair, some humans *did* have naturally curly hair, and the funny redhead *might* have been one of them, if he was feeling charitable, which really he was not, not with the sheer *misery* of waiting.

“With photographic memory I’d be able to count them in slow motion in all their wobbling glory.”

“You have photographic memory?” Curiosity had gotten the better of Luke, but only just.

The redhead gave him a funny look, which was not flattering to either of them. “You are having me on! Did I say I *had* photographic memory? *No I did not*. You are so wrong. Do you know how wrong you are? I mean, if I did then I’d *never* forget that horrible flabby ass and it’s your fault. It’s clearly your fault! I mean, just the thought of seeing that monstrous behind for the rest of my life and *forever!* Oh, my cherries!”

The final exclamation did not seem to fit the gist of the rest of the crazy guy’s monologue, but Luke was far past caring. He should not have asked the question. Now he could only studiously try to ignore the fellow until he went away. *Please gods, let him go away.*

“Oww! Can you fucking believe it!” the annoying guy cried as a passer-by trod on his foot.

Serves the idiot right, he thought, for stretching his too-long legs out onto a busy sidewalk instead of keeping them tucked under his arms like his own were. Best to ignore the fellow. Ignore him long enough and he would be sure to get the message.

“What did you say your name was again?”

Luke was not going to fall for that one; he was a *college* student.

“Are you constipated?”

He turned on the redhead with a mixture of annoyance and surprise. “What?”

“Well, your face is all scrunched up like, you know...like you are *having trouble*.”

“No it’s not! And no I’m not!”

“Okayo, just showing some human concern, like, you being a human and me being a human...we being humans together. Showing concern. That’s what we do isn’t it? I mean what if I didn’t care that you are constipated?” At Luke’s glare the guy added: “Not that you are constipated, I mean I *believe* your denial, really, I do! I can see honesty written all over your face, your scrunched up, frowning, kind of annoyed—”

“Luke, sorry I’m late!”

His head shot up with instant relief to find Emily, her pretty heart-shaped face smiling, brimmed bonnet a halo against the sky, with delicious and *naturally wavy* honey curls escaping it everywhere. My, did she look good.

He stood quickly, eager to escape the crazy boy with the foul tongue and funny hair and to make progress in his barely two week long relationship with the gorgeous girl. He was pretty confident tonight would be home base.

“Who’s your friend?” Emily asked, confusing him for a moment until he remembered the idiot sitting on the plinth. “He’s not—”

“Jeb!” the redhead interrupted, springing to his feet, squashed toes forgotten. “I’m off limits!”

Emily evidently did not understand the remark or the guy’s sudden wariness any better than Luke did. “Yes, well, good...I think. Emily,” she told him, eyeing the boy curiously from head to toe, before turning a bright smile on Luke. “I want to see a movie.”

A couple of hours later, after one final obtuse and particularly obscene remark about cherries from the foulmouthed idiot and some fumbling in the back seats – the latter fortunately without any strange redheads nearby – Luke and Emily emerged to find the lamp-lit streets glistening with rainwater and a downpour in progress.

“Ah, damn,” he said, as the half dozen others from the sitting hurried off in ones and twos leaving them alone on the steps. “The weather folks must be drunk again.” If he had known that the rains would be several hours early he would have brought a rain deflector.

The young woman smiled coyly. “How far is your apartment?”

“Not far,” he answered, but they were in for a good soaking. “Here we go,” he warned, and pulled her with him into a wild sprint down the sidewalk. By the time they reached the porch to his apartment block they were both winded, cold, soaked through and laughing hysterically.

Luke put his palm on the sensor and they entered the building, passing through the darkened shopping mall and nearly empty eateries and taking an elevator to the thirty-second floor. Inside his small but comfortable bachelor pad they took off their coats, removed their shoes and stood close together as the shower’s air dryer excised the excess moisture from clothes, hair and skin.

“Coffee? Espresso?”

“Yes please,” the girl answered, settling on the sofa and waving to the sound system to play ancient classical music at a low volume. It was probably the first time such grand music had graced his apartment, and he was surprised to find it relaxing and adding to the oddly dreamlike mood that had somehow developed between them. He thought he actually *liked* her. Even more bizarrely she seemed to like *him* – not the macho mask he had adopted with her previously, but the real him beneath. On a couple of occasions during the night his mask had slipped, and she seemed to respond better in each

case, so much so that he ditched the mask entirely and was himself; naked soul and all that.

It was scary. And it was exhilarating.

“Here.” He handed her the espresso in his best mug and settled down beside her with his own. He lifted it to his lips...and even the coffee seemed to taste better. By the time Emily left his apartment early the next morning, he had enjoyed by far the best night of his life. He thought he might even be in love.

TWO

The hall was unruly as usual, and Luke had trouble separating his own thoughts from those around him. He would overhear a snippet of a conversation and immediately his mind drifted to the subject until it was captured by the next. Just as well he had nothing important – that is, complicated – to think about. When he did think about *her*, which was whenever his thoughts slipped free from whatever direction they had been unwittingly pulled by the conversations, he found himself breaking out into a great big grin.

“You all there?”

“Oh, Tarka,” he answered as the memory of Emily’s abundant breasts vanished and he recognised his sociology classmate and second best friend, who was most definitely human – as well as tall, lanky, often surly and unfairly good-looking. “Yeah, fine.”

“Have you heard?”

It had always seemed a rather banal question, and he could not resist his practised reply. “How do I know if ‘I’ve heard’ if you don’t qualify the question with what I may or may not have heard?”

The other young man took the rebuke in good spirits, as Luke knew he would, his face lighting up with pleasure. “The *Imperium* has suffered a big defeat, everyone’s talking about it!”

He glanced back the way he had come, and considered that from his own observation the crowd seemed to have been discussing absolutely everything except the Imperium, defeated or otherwise.

“The fascists had it coming!” Tarka added emphatically, the excitement of passion in his eyes.

“Sounds like people being killed,” he rebuked.

His friend regarded him suspiciously all of a sudden, as if he might have crawled out of some unseemly hole. “Social justice cannot exist until every fascist is dead.”

“I suppose,” he allowed, but he just could not find the energy to gloat in the deaths of human imperialists, however fascist. The Imperium had, after all, been absent from their sector for ten thousand years, and was likely to stay that way. There was absolutely no way the independent Gaian republics would welcome back an imperial overlord that stood for everything the Sisterhood of Gaia found most repugnant: human supremacy, meaning fascism of course.

He thought of Sur’Sin and his other Fader friends and shook his head. They were the same as he was, *better* even since they were

not tainted by the inherent evils – imperialism and racism – of the human race, never mind that their skin was black or red and the red ones worshipped an omnipotent and demanding god. Tarka's girlfriend Hasnia'Sin was a Red Fader, so he could understand the young man's gloating at imperial dead, those who would keep him apart from his lover (and Tarka had confessed in a drunken but sincere moment of bromance that her Fader's sharp teeth were *very* good for arousing his...*something or other*). Still, surely the fascists were people too. Was social equality more important than their lives?

The Imperium was so far away... How many deaths? Thousands? Millions? And someplace so far away that it might as well not have existed – if it even *did* after so long – for as much as it affected him and his fellow students, human or Fader alike. In fact it was much more likely that the defeated Imperium – if it *had* been defeated – was one of the uncountable small states that had arisen in the wake of the actual Galactic Empire's retreat and not the big bad evil empire itself.

A small cheer went up behind him and Luke guessed the news had managed to spread after all, whether the old Imperium Humanum still existed or not.

"You'll be at the FLC this evening, comrade?" Tarka asked, although Luke had not intended to go. There was an odd look in his friend's eyes that he could not interpret and it made him hesitate a moment.

He had planned on seeing Emily again that night, but he had not managed to get through to her to arrange it yet, and the meeting was especially tempting with the man touted as the next president due to speak. He put on his most confident smile in spite of any real passion – even a future president could not compare with Emily where it counted: he imagined the charismatic Tboko'Sin with large, shapely breasts and chuckled at the absurdity. "Yeah, count me in!" It was a good cause, *Fader Lives Count* fundraising for the International Brigade fighting imperialists (though ironically not the genuine *imperial* ones) on Altair II, and it would get Tarka off his back

and perhaps his mind off the disappointment of not being able to reach his girlfriend.

“I knew you’d come.” His friend’s face lit up again, the strange look passing as if it had never been. *There* was passion.

Six hours later they had built themselves up into a momentous chant, something greater than the sum of the parts, something that lived, breathed and demanded that the fascists on Altair give freedom to their oppressed Faders, or rather to stop trying to turn the clock back to human minority rule and the repulsive policies of humanist segregation. No cause was dearer to the hearts of the students. Shout loud enough and they would change the cosmos, they could achieve *anything*.

The chant was morphing into cheering and Luke knew that the speaker had arrived. A moment later the Secretary for Education’s familiar dark Fader face – a perfect study of dignity and gravitas – appeared in the sky a thousand times life size, his triumphant smile taking in all of them.

“Let my people go!” the politician demanded, and the resulting cheers and whoops of assent filled the square, topping by far even their previous lofty efforts.

THREE

“I didn’t understand a word of that,” Luke confessed to Sur as they left their morning lecture. It really was too early in the day for deep thinking, especially that day when his mind was elsewhere. He took the opportunity to check the PO on his wrist to see if Emily had responded to his message. She had not. An entire evening and morning in data seclusion seemed excessive, even if it was supposed to help unwind stress.

“I think that’s the point,” the Fader surmised. “Some people think we don’t *know* anything.”

“But it sounds simple the way you say it. Couldn’t *she* have just said that! It would have saved a lot of time.”

Sur grinned. “It’s not supposed to be easy, or this would be a kindergarten.”

Luke could not argue with that.

“She doesn’t want you bothering her no more. Stop. The. Messages.”

Luke had a sinking feeling as he recognised the voice, and his brain only actually processed the words and made sense of them as he found himself staring at the annoying red haired kid from a couple of days before.

“What?” he managed.

“Your girlfriend’s now your ex-girlfriend,” the boy told him with a wary look on his face. “You understand past tense? I can explain it if you really *are* that stupid, but like, I ain’t got the inclination.”

“Emily?” he asked, the significance of the apparent rejection suddenly striking him. His heart felt like it would sink beneath his feet.

“You got more than one? Not that it’s any business of mine. I’m not nosy.”

“Why – uh, why...? How do you know her?”

“Statue of the fucking blessed sisters, night before last? She’s got it in her head we’re friends.”

“I don’t know you,” Luke countered unnecessarily. Emily? Why? What had he done? One solitary night of intimacy – was that all he meant to her? He had felt...something, something he had never felt before. It was too precious to just *disappear*.

“Yeah, well, I never claimed she’s not crazy. Came all the way to the Towers to get me to come here and tell you face to face, like you’d want to listen to *me*.”

Memories of the evening burst into his mind. The sofa, the coffee, the hesitant conversation, the lovemaking...

“Knocked you pretty hard I see,” the boy observed. “You’re kind of cute, and if you’re single now, any chance...”

“No!” Luke spluttered as he took on the redhead’s meaning.

“Shit! Are you hitting on my best friend?” Sur demanded, backing the redhead against the wall and looking all menacing without actually hitting the guy yet. One of Sur’s looks was worth any other guy’s punch; the redhead seemed blissfully unaffected...

“What, you think you got first option? Well, that’s fucking *rude* that is! Let the guy make up his own mind why don’t you? I asked *first*.”

There was too much for Luke to take in all at once – *Why* was the stupid redhead immune to *The Look*? He clearly had no *clue* about

self-preservation. *Why* was the guy ignoring his quite unambiguous rejection? *Why* did Sur look flummoxed, as if on the one hand he wanted to flatten the guy for suggesting he had any sort of improper designs on his best friend but was frozen to the spot because he could not believe anybody could be so crazy and because *The Look* had not worked? And Emily...

“Why did she...?”

“Never did understand women,” the redhead confessed, *still* ignoring Sur’s *look*. “Didn’t see as I needed to bother. Better things to occupy my intellect. Like the world’s fucking problems.”

Luke was left open mouthed as the guy promptly turned around and left.

“Well, that was harsh,” Sur said, when he was finally able to speak and the fury in his eyes had abated to some sort of puzzled wonder.

Harsh. Unexpected. *Inexplicable*.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” Luke growled. “Coming in here and telling me not to see my girlfriend ever again!”

“Her new boyfriend?” his friend suggested.

Her new boyfriend. Luke had to admit he did not think *that* very likely.

“Okay, he tried to hit on you, but some men are like that.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Bisexual. It means—”

“I know what it means!” He was never short tempered with his friends but the redhead had that affect on him. *Emily*.

“It’s not as if it’s the first time a girl has dumped you,” Sur helpfully reminded him, but seemed to realise as soon as the words had left

his mouth that they were not likely to be of much comfort, and wisely shut up.

“Yeah, well, it’s the first time a *guy* has told me that a girl has dumped me.”

“Do you believe him? If some guy told me my girl had dumped me I’d think he was up to no good. I’d have to hear it from her.”

Did he believe the idiot redhead? And if he did not, why did he suddenly feel like ice inside?

“Go and ask her,” Sur pressed. “And if he was lying, next time you see that fucker, bash him good. I’ll help.”

“We have class...” If he asked her and she confirmed the break up... he did not think he would be able to handle it. Not this time. Not *her*.

“Man, there’s *after* class, you know. You’ve no idea how to keep your woman. Have you hit first base even?”

He gave Sur a semi-vicious knock, which his friend took in good humour, or at least accepted he deserved.

“She’s *perfect*,” Luke whispered.

“Shit man, no girl is perfect.” His friend laughed. “I’ve known enough of them to know that. But neither am I, so I reckon it works out even.”

“She *liked* me,” Luke explained.

“Here, give me her number, I’ll ask her.”

“Nah, I’ll ask her later.” He would have to. He could not go through life never knowing. He would forever know that he was a coward.

“Shit, you know what, I’ll catch up to the fucker and beat it out of him!” And the fury was back in his friend's eyes...

“Wh—?”

Sur took off down the corridor in the direction the redhead had gone a couple of minutes earlier.

“Holy shit!” Luke quickly took off after his friend. Sur was a good guy, but he had rather there were not any unfortunate misunderstandings between his best friend and the doom and gloom nemesis with stupid hair.

It did not take long for him to catch up to the tall Fader, standing at the picture window overlooking the main entrance to the campus three floors below.

“How did he get out so quick?” his friend asked as Luke joined him.

There, in the grounds below, the redhead was striding away, a smaller hooded figure beside him.

“Could it be Emily?” Luke asked aloud, heart suddenly pounding.

As if he had been heard, the hooded person turned and glanced back their way, face hidden in the shadows.

“Man, that gave me the creeps,” Sur admitted as the two figures vanished beyond the campus gates and into the city.

“It couldn’t have been her,” Luke reasoned with himself. “Emily is nearly as tall as that annoying bastard. It wasn’t her.” That, at least, was something.

*

“Is this a good idea?” Sur asked for the third time in ten minutes.

“You are the one who told me to ask her,” Luke reminded his fellow student, for the second time in ten minutes.

“I did say *after* classes, not miss them all!” the Fader countered.

“I know, Sur,” Luke deflated. “But if I don’t do this now I’ll probably lock myself in my apartment and never come out. *I got to know.*”

“Yeah, strike while the adrenalin is keeping you alive!”

“Ah, you might have worded that a bit differently,” he told his friend.

“While the adrenalin is keeping you...lively?”

“Why? Why would she dump me? Things were *great.*”

“The guy’s lying,” his friend assured him. “Trust me, I’m a good judge of character. Dodgy piece of work if ever I’ve seen one. Do you think that hair colour was natural?”

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was, everything else about the guy is odd, why not his hair too?”

“Fair point.”

“But, you know, he seems too *dumb* to come up with something this crazy?”

“Are you asking me? Well, the dumb ones are the best liars, they work on instinct. Clever people tend to over think things.”

“Well, I just hope he *is* lying, or got it wrong, or...”

“He is, um, he has? Probably both.”

“Damn!” Luke let his back slide down the wall until he was sitting on the floor of the corridor, a surreal situation if ever there was one, awaiting his fate.

“We’ll know everything in five minutes, straight from your woman’s mouth.”

“If she’s still mine. If she ever was...”

“Women *are* good at acting, I’ll say that much.”

“Not helping,” Luke pointed out.

“I’m here aren’t I?” The Fader sounded a bit pissed off.

“Sorry, Sur, I really do appreciate your support. I mean, what the hell, how am I supposed to act?”

“Pretty dumb situation, uh?”

“Pretty dumb,” Luke agreed with the wisp of a smile. “Downright loony! Has this ever happened to you?”

“Nah,” the Fader smiled. “I do the dumping. Never been dumped. I know how to treat my women.”

“Wish I did,” Luke confided. Although Sur dumping his girlfriends did not seem like treating them right to him. It was probably the whole acting thing, *pretending* to treat the girl right. With Emily he had been his true self. There was no act. Was that where he went wrong? Had he gone wrong? Was a relationship all an act, a dance, a game, and when one player was tired of the game they just left?

His previous relationships had been games. He had never felt truly attached to any of the girls, and he did not suppose they had felt any differently. In a sense they had used each other, and both parties had been okay with that. He was not okay with *this*, whatever *this* was.

The door at the end of the corridor slid open and students began to exit, so Luke got to his feet. An exam had been held in one of Emily’s core subjects and there were varied expressions of both dejection and relief amongst the emerging throng, most of them

strangers to him. Then a vaguely familiar face, Emily's classmate... Johanna, a tall girl seeped in sarcasm, approached in conversation with a shorter boy. She gave Luke a dismissive sneer as she passed and he gave her it straight back.

"She's a sour one," Sur observed.

Any minute now Emily will walk out that door. He was not ready for this. He felt the urge to turn around and run, to never find out whether she had dumped him and why. It would be so easy. Well, it would be easier than this.

He noticed his friend tense, and tensed in response.

"Is that it?" Sur asked, and Luke felt a sense of confusion as the doorway was suddenly empty. It could not be...

As the seconds ticked by and no further students emerged, Luke found himself heading for the classroom, sensing Sur follow. He halted in the doorway, watching a couple of robot assistants dismantling apparatus at the front of the auditorium, a Fader professor sporting a frown on her face as she supervised them. The tiers of seats arching around the back of the room were all empty.

"Emily?" his friend asked, puzzled.

Luke did not reply, instead making his way to the front, where the professor had stopped watching the robots and was waiting for him to approach. "Yes?" she asked, clearly suspicious at his presence.

"I'm looking for Emily den Chartalan, this is her class?"

"It is," the woman confirmed. "But she did not show." Her expression was unsympathetic.

"Do you know where she is?"

"If I knew where she was I'd be telling her how much trouble she's in!" the professor answered. "If you find her first, tell her to get her

arse into my office and explain herself. She's not only lost the merits for this exam, she's *deducted* for the non-show."

"Ah, okay," he replied, and turned to look at Sur. The Fader student shrugged, as baffled as he was. Missing an exam was a disciplinary matter for a human, and Emily had struck him as the conscientious type, a hard worker with a definite career plan.

*

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"Sure, Sur," Luke told his friend. "The last thing I want is for her to feel intimidated. If we both turn up at her apartment she's going to be outnumbered, best if I go alone. And she's not going to respect me if she thinks I need backup."

The Fader shrugged.

"And there's no reason for you to miss the classes too."

"I'm behind as it is," Sur admitted, although Faders were of course allowed special dispensation.

"Okay, well, see you later then." Luke smiled at his friend and was waved off.

It feels like I'm taking my first steps. It really did. Each one was difficult, inseparable from the task ahead of him, something he had never had to do before. Each step had a purpose that filled him with some hope but mostly dread, confusion and doubt.

As he sat in the monorail car at the campus station, overlooking the lower city, he could not help but let his gaze drift to the heights where Emily had her term time apartment. Even an intensely socialist city

like Saringrad required luxury residences for the political elite and their wealthy allies. Luke himself would have had his apartment there if he had listened to his father, but he had preferred something closer to campus, something more egalitarian, not the refined accommodation of a wealthy magnate's son where robot or flesh and blood servants performed every task except the breathing, the eating and the playing.

As the transport began to move, he turned away from the view of the city and found himself staring at a large poster on the station wall, a celebration of the unity between humans and Faders, the clasp of hands between two giant smiling figures, a Fader male and a young human female. "We are One!" the caption proclaimed. For some reason the smiles seemed too bright, painfully unreal, and jarred against his mood. He closed his eyes and tried to gain some sort of inner calm as the monorail hurtled towards Emily and whatever lay in store.

At the Heights' station he left the monorail and passed the plush seating and expensive boutiques without really noticing them. They belonged to the world that he belonged to when he was not pretending, the world that Emily belonged to. Had she dumped him?

The thought caused him to stumble, and then blush as he drew the attention of several passers-by.

He was here for answers, *the* answer, and dragging his feet was not going to get him anywhere. He picked up his pace towards the exit, not knowing how the journey would end but newly determined to meet it with fortitude.

"Emily den Chartalan," he enquired at the desk in an imposing lobby after confirming for the third time with his PO that this was the right hotel.

The young human desk clerk frowned, consulting his console. "Den Chartalan? Is she expecting you, Sir?"

“No,” he admitted as the hotel employee accepted personal data from Luke’s PO.

“Just a moment...Mr Porter.”

As a silence screen materialised to allow the clerk privacy to speak with Emily, the chirping of birds in the lobby’s forested grove and the brusque footfalls of the few other guests on the marble floors and their whispered conversations gained clarity.

“Please go on up Sir, suite 417,” the clerk told him, and a virtual guide appeared in the air as the man’s attention returned to his console. The guide moved at Luke’s invitation and he followed it through the lobby, past the fountain and its ring of ornamental trees and up to the fourth floor. His boots sank into plush carpets as they traversed the airy, high-ceilinged corridors that centred on the building’s wings. The guide came to a halt to the side of the door behind which Emily and his fate waited, and assumed standby, ready to guide him back to the lobby when he was done.

Luke was gathering the courage to introduce himself when the door slid open, either because the guide had alerted the occupant or because he was expected; it was not Emily who stood there, but a young woman with short dark hair, her brown eyes wary.

“Emily?” he asked.

“She left. You’re the boyfriend aren’t you?”

“Left?”

“Come on in,” the girl offered, and he followed her into the suite’s bright atrium, floor to ceiling windows overlooking the city below and the mountains beyond. In the lounge she stopped and turned. “I’m Emily’s roommate Irina.”

“Luke,” he told her, although the desk clerk would have passed her his ID from his PO. “You said she’s left?”

“I don’t have any other explanation,” the young woman elaborated. “I returned from my trip to Carcosa this morning and all her belongings have gone. Just *gone*. I was hoping you could tell me what’s going on.”

“She missed an exam today. She’s in serious trouble.”

Irina frowned.

“I mean, she’ll get demerits, maybe even a disciplinary.”

“I’m fine for rent, it was my mother’s idea I needed a roommate, and Emily’s mother was one of her college friends. They arranged the apartment between them... But where has she gone?”

Luke shook his head. Not only had the stupid redhead turned up supposedly with a message from Emily that she had dumped him, but she had abandoned her apartment and failed to turn up for an exam. “The desk clerk didn’t seem to be aware she’s left.” He had a sudden suspicion. “There wasn’t a burglary? None of *your* things were taken?”

The woman just stared at him, her worry all too evident. It was an outlandish suggestion – a burglary in such a prestigious establishment – but other more reasonable explanations evaded him.

“I last saw her yesterday morning,” he confided, and then felt his face go warm. “She spent the night at my apartment. I haven’t seen her since.” He might have added the redhead’s story but it was as inexplicable as it was demeaning, to be dumped by proxy, and he did not think it would help.

“That’s more recent than me. And she didn’t say anything about...?” She raised her hand toward the lounge.

“No. Can I have a look at her rooms?”

“Of course,” she agreed, a little surprised. “There’s not much to see.”

She led him towards one of the doorways and stood aside for him to enter the chamber. It was a second, more intimate lounge. There were no signs that the room was occupied, in fact there did not seem to be anything remotely personal. A further door took him to a spacious bedroom where the bed was unmade. Reluctantly he headed toward it, feeling like an intruder about to do something sordid, and on impulse lifted a pillow. There was nothing beneath it. He turned, discarding the pillow on the bed, and noted the opening to a wide, furnished balcony, stepping out to stand at the barrier overlooking the city, a fresh breeze caressing his face. If Emily was not here, then where was she?

Returning to the bedroom he opened a few cabinets, finding them all empty, and did the same in the bathroom and a guest room. That bed at least had not been slept in.

When he returned to Irina he felt more hopeless than ever. “You’ll tell me, when you find her?” the woman asked.

“I will,” he promised, and followed the virtual guide back to the lobby.

“Her roommate tells me Emily den Chartalan has left,” he told the desk clerk.

“Left? You mean *permanently*?” The young man seemed genuinely surprised at least.

“That’s what it looks like.” He felt better that the employee had not deliberately sent him on a wild goose chase.

The clerk consulted his terminal, becoming more confused as he checked and counter checked the contents on his screen. “Perhaps...” He did not elaborate, but whatever it was proved to be a false hope. Finally he looked back up at Luke, flushed. “This is completely irregular. If she left she should have notified the desk. There is a bill to settle, confirmations required, forwarding address.”

“There’s nothing?”

“No,” the clerk confirmed. “I’ll check with the shift manager when she returns.”

“Cameras?” Luke suggested tentatively.

The clerk’s expression darkened. “We respect the privacy of our clientele. Unless we receive a court order the recordings are locked.”

“Oh, okay. Please let me know if you find anything.”

The man nodded, still flustered at a guest’s mysterious departure as if it were a personal affront; Luke’s PO would have provided the clerk with his contact details.

As Luke was turning away from the desk he was surprised to recognise the Secretary of Education, Tboko’Sin, emerging with a sizeable entourage from the hotel’s gardens into the lobby. The politician’s familiar face sported a quiet smile and was gregarious, generous, until his eyes crossed Luke’s. Unmistakeable recognition registered before Luke broke the lingering contact, the man’s eyes filled with cold, hateful calculation; he felt shaken to the core, overcome by a cold sweat, caught up in something he could not even begin to understand. How could a politician he had never met not just recognise him but seemingly *despise* him? Somehow he managed to stay upright and retain his breakfast until he had escaped the building, only remembering to breathe again when he was outside on the street, his breaths coming in quick gasps. *Fear*. He had been terrified and it was a completely new experience for him.

FOUR

THE YEAR BEFORE...

Katerine watched as the skyship lifted from the city square in front of the factory where she worked, loaded with soldiers and munitions destined for the front. Her youngest and last surviving son was on board, only fourteen years old. She wondered as she had the previous nights and days why she had ever bothered to live. A husband and three children she had lost, in the violence before the war and in the war itself, and the last would not survive the same fate. Hope seemed like disease, unnatural, perverse. She had known hope in the past but she could not face it again. *Not again.*

She was bitter as she glanced towards the city dignitaries, party apparatchiks all, sombre atop their dais draped in flags of black and red. How many sons or daughters had *they* lost, those smartly dressed leaders who were enjoying the cool of the afternoon cloud cover after the heat of midday? Perhaps a few, when it was unavoidable, but they knew how to avoid the draft in ways that a simple factory worker did not, and were rumoured to have made their fortunes in bribes for helping others to avoid it. If things became too bad they no doubt had money enough to flee to other worlds where humans were still a majority and start again. Oh, how bitter she was! How consumed by fury! *Petr.* Her eyes watered as she thought of him and as her fingers clutched the keepsake he had left her, his likeness painted by one of the street artists only that morning.

She willed her hand to open, to reveal the picture: a remarkably pretty boy with ivory skin, dark eyes and short cropped hair stared up at her, serious and unsmiling, since this was the custom with portraiture in the doomed Human Republic of Suid Altair. He

appeared so fragile and for her *he was and had always been*. She held back further tears, determined not to lose sight of the portrait. It was all that remained of him.

At long last she gazed up to the skyship, which had reached the towering ancient shipyards to the east of the city, buildings that could have encompassed the *entire* city, in fact the reason for the city in the first place, long ago when Altair had been an entirely human world. The hull of a single great starship stood there as it had since time immemorial, since before the forsaken planet had been cut off from the Empire ten thousand years earlier. On its hull blazed 'Heavenly Star' in metallic sapphire and it was a monster, twenty miles and more in length, comparable to the mythical Arks of the Thirteen, and had such purpose as now no one could even guess. It was no *ordinary* starship: that much was certain. Of course Suid Altair had no use for such a vast ship, nor for the deserted shipyards that had once built their like for the Imperium.

"Back to work, ladies," the foreperson instructed, a grim, blonde woman, well suited to her role of taskmaster, her tight fitting grey skirt and blouse every bit as immaculate as those on the dais in contrast to Katerine's dusty and dishevelled garments. Katerine took one last look at the image of her son, no longer feeling any emotion as she did so. *Past is past*. With fingers grimy with dust and metal filings, with a heart devoid of anything, she slipped it into a pocket and followed the other workers back inside the factory, the great banks of towering pistons deafening as the dark interior swallowed her.

*

Petr sat on the floor of the skyship with a hundred other young men and women, arms wrapped about his knees, the collar of his unfamiliar greatcoat tucked up around his ears and enveloping his

chin as if he could hide himself in it – it was a size or three too large which helped.

“Bran.”

Petr turned to the boy sitting next to him, a year or two older than himself, who sported an incongruous smile and possessed a plain though friendly face.

“Petr.”

“You from Cardo City too?”

He nodded. Where else?

“We’re going north, hence the big coats.” The boy tugged at his thick sleeve as if he needed to prove the point. “My brother’s just come back from there.”

“Your brother *came back*?” Petr knew that the flare of jealousy he felt was wrong but he could not help himself. The boy seemed pleasant enough and he did not really want him to lose his brother, as Petr had three times over.

“On sick leave. He lost an arm and it’ll take a while to grow back. Cybers would’ve been cool but they cost too much.”

“Everybody whispers we’re losing,” Petr said quietly, not able to share the talkative young man’s apparent enthusiasm for everything, even artificial limbs.

The steady eyes regarded him quietly but only for a moment. “My girlfriend’s father says one more push and we’ll drive the fadis from the southern continent altogether and they’ll sue for peace, give us our independence. He’s in the political corps.”

“I hope he’s right.” Petr doubted it himself. Four years since the rising and the only things that had changed were many fewer people in the streets, a severe shortage of food and lots of air raids. A year

back the politicians had promised the same thing. That was when Petr had lost two of his own brothers.

It was not *entirely* true though – there had been *one* improvement. There were not human farmers being murdered in their hundreds any more, unable to protect themselves against marauding fadis looking for revenge, money and guns. That was how he had lost his father and eldest brother, both tortured in the most brutal fashion before the war, their bodies abused and mutilated in the most despicable ways to cause terror to the survivors. That was how they had lost the farm and his mother ended up working in a factory, the family sharing a single room in a Cardo City tower block. Most the fadis had been decent enough, but that did not make up for the bad ones. One murder was too many, three thousand, every one of them murdered by fadi gangs, was a cause for uprising.

But instead of human farmers murdered in their beds, their families and fadi workers abused, beaten or murdered too, thousands more now died fighting in the war. Death seemed the only promise for humans on Altair.

“Of course he’s right – they’ve got *us* now haven’t they?”

The smile was so engaging, so infectious, that Petr had to smile himself in spite of his thoughts.

“That’s better. I thought you were going to scowl at me the whole ways there.”

“Sorry.” He was. It was early days, but he already liked the fellow and the mood amongst the other recruits was dire enough without Petr adding to it.

“So what were you before you joined?”

Joined? Had the boy actually volunteered? It seemed too incredible to be true. “I was in school.”

“Ah.” Bran nodded to himself. “I helped my folks on the farm. With Bethalem – that’s my brother – away, and the fadi labourers all moved north, they needed me out of school. Bethalem can help out now, for a while anyways.”

“What about his arm?”

Bran shrugged. “It’s not so bad. You can do a lot with only one. See.” The boy made an obscene back-and-forth gesture with his left hand and Petr wondered how anyone could possibly be so cheerful headed for the northern front.

“I still wish I wasn’t going,” he admitted. It was best to be honest – or as honest as he dared be. It dawned that he had probably said way too much already...

The boy’s face became serious. “We’re going to win, I *promise*. The fadis will be back on the northern continent where they belong by the end of the year, and come the Spring Festival we’ll be heroes. Saviours of the human race! The girls will be all over us!”

Petr shrugged politely at his excitable new friend but at that moment girls were the last things on his mind.

*

The skyship had reached Enderlan on the northern front, which was not as far north as it had been, and the occasional spluttering of an engine had not brought them crashing out of the sky as Petr had feared; skyships were *supposed* to be infallible, and he wondered how their exception had managed to come into being – no doubt manufactured – using the word loosely – by the struggling rebellion from any salvaged material to hand. He found himself badgered by his new friend toward the nearest window, where young recruits

were wiping the frost clear, and regarded the sprawling military base below. Everything seemed to be grey or black: the buildings, the vehicles, the people huddled against the cold; even the snow was filthy.

To the south of the base, beneath the alpine escarpment on which the town and fortress sat, lay the burnt out wrecks of a couple of skyships, and Petr said a silent prayer for the people less fortunate than themselves as they passed over them. He wrapped his coat more closely about himself and tried to ignore the steaming of his breath, slinking back to his own place to wait for the landing. Bran joined him shortly after, and there was no denying the excitement in the other boy's face.

"I hope I get assigned to the Fifth! That's Bethalem's unit."

Ah yes, Bethalem, the brother who lost his arm. Presumably while he was with the Fifth.

Petr closed his eyes and groaned inwardly. His own brothers had been here – the situation, not Enderlan – before him, and he had made his mind up that he would follow them stoically. Not that there was any other option. Desertion would bring shame on his mother, and it was a war of survival, the last gasp of the human minority trying to regain control over their own destinies, to end the terror of fadi thugs and the creeping discrimination of their fadi rulers. Of course the humans had discriminated against the fadis when the humans were in power in Suid Altair, there had been no other way to maintain human supremacy, human independence. Petr was unapologetic for that. He was human. His blood was human. His loyalty was human.

"Incoming!"

The cry came from the cabin up front and the skyship banked abruptly to the right. Petr just managed to grab the handgrip on the floor beside him as several recruits found themselves thrown off balance and crashing into the side of the craft.

Bran actually clambered up to the windows on the opposite side and was scanning the sky, ignoring the moans from the injured. “Three frigates, from the north. Can’t tell whose they are from this distance.”

The north. The fadis held the north. The crew would hardly be concerned at the presence of friendly craft. But frigates?

“Where did the fadis get frigates?” someone asked.

“Traitors, that’s where. The humans of the Sisterhood are arming fadis to kill us humans. Even got a bunch of Sisterhood volunteers fighting for them, call themselves the International Brigade. Bastards, that’s what I call them, mother-f—”

The skyship shuddered, stopping Bran in his tracks, and the booming sounds of ordnance broke out.

“Nearly got one!” the boy called excitedly from his place beside the window.

Then a larger explosion on the other side, down on the ground, followed by several more, as loud engines screamed directly above. Flame bloomed up beside them, removing the frost from all the windows instantaneously. The skyship levelled off and then the sudden G force did its best to pull Petr off the floor as his knuckles whitened on the grip and the craft dropped vertically. He felt his bones jar as they and his head hit the deck when the ship slowed abruptly moments before it touched down.

“Out now!” roared from the comm above, and recruits everywhere were grabbing their gear and converging on the exits. Wondering if he was concussed – his head felt like it had exploded – Petr grabbed his own bag and managed to stand. Bran came up beside him, seeming unhurt, and searched momentarily for his larger bag, finding it where a couple of boys and girls had been tossed against the starboard side of the ship.

Petr went over and checked a small blond-haired boy who was out cold, a nasty gash to the kid's head, and was relieved to find the pulse at his neck. "Help me lift him," he told Bran, tossing his bag down on the floor.

Bran did as he was asked, discarding his own bag, and they managed to get the boy to the exit, each of them under one of the wounded boy's arms.

"You heard, rat-food, out now!" an irate bearded man in flight uniform snarled, giving Petr a painful shove in the ribs before jumping out the craft. Grimacing at the jab, Petr struggled down the walkway with Bran and their burden, following the other recruits in their dash toward a nearby tunnel, explosions continuing amongst the buildings around them, the screams of fadi engines bombarding the eardrums every bit as effectively as the cannon were ripping up vehicles, metal and human flesh.

As they gained the tunnel entrance, the noise suddenly relented enough to allow Petr's ears a breather. Petr turned around to witness a bright red beam strike the skyship, the craft turning red with the intense heat and then exploding upward and outward as its fuel ignited. The few remaining recruits between the ship and the tunnel were all knocked off their feet, and Petr wondered with a cold knot of horror in his stomach if any of the injured had not made it out.

For once, when Petr caught Bran's expression, it showed just a hint of doubt.

"Welcome to Enderlan," he muttered, hoping his friend did not hear. He immediately felt guilty for the self-indulgence of sarcasm when lives were being lost.

As Bran made to take the injured boy further into the tunnel, Petr turned to glance back at the landing field: a couple of recruits were moving but a second pair was ominously motionless.

“Put him down here,” he said, gently removing himself from under the blond kid’s arm. Bran hesitated but then did the same, setting the unresponsive boy down against the wall as Petr hurried back out into the fiery apocalypse.

He went to the first casualty, an older girl with a scorched ponytail, ashen face tinged blue. She gave a slight, involuntary moan, and with that welcome sign of life Petr lifted her up under one arm while Bran took the other without being asked.

Eyes streaming from the smoke from the burning skyship, Petr found it more difficult to carry their second comrade, his arms locked painfully in place, and did his best to ignore the complaining muscles. More dragging than carrying the girl they reached the shelter of the tunnel and set her down beside the boy, who was still out cold. Petr checked the pulse at the boy’s neck again and thought that it did not seem as strong as it had before. *Don’t die on me.*

Three other recruits remained on the ground outside. The nearest was crawling toward them, and Petr decided that he had to help whether he was strong enough or not. He found the boy grimacing with every move forward, skin blistered and eyes streaming even worse than his own – the fellow was blindly dragging himself away from the burning hulk.

“Here,” Petr offered gently, and with Bran’s assistance helped the boy to his feet with the fellow making several muttered curses under his breath. Taller and heavier than their two earlier rescues, Petr was thankful that the boy was able to stand in some fashion, limping between them. In the tunnel entrance beyond a medical team had arrived to take charge of the casualties...

“Bran Comavich Elantron.”

Bran jumped to his feet, beaming at his newfound friends, foremost of them Petr, before forcing his countenance to one suitably serious as he marched forward through the aisles of seated human soldiers to the front of the hall where the senior officers waited.

Petr watched as a general nodded to his friend and pinned a medal to his uniform. Although Petr had done as much as Bran in rescuing the injured, he felt no jealousy that his friend had received all the acclaim. Bran’s family were members of the party, and his girlfriend’s father a colonel in the political corp. It was natural that the party would celebrate its own.

They had heard that an important fadi from the Republics, from the Sisterhood, someone called Tboko’Sin – which meant nothing to Petr – had arrived to counsel the northern fadis and to bring weapons and volunteers, and that he had personally murdered several human prisoners for entertainment; they had heard too that a new fadi offensive was being prepared, one the rebel human south was ill prepared to meet. The garrison in Enderlan needed all the ceremony it could manage if morale was to stay strong in the face of all the bad news.

A couple of minutes later and Bran was beaming again, being congratulated by his friends. Petr grabbed his hand enthusiastically, the applause in the hall tailing off as every voice joined in a stirring rendition of the old, banned Altairan human anthem.

*

Concussed by a near miss from a fadi shell, Petr tried to gather his thoughts into some coherence. The deafness lent a surreal air to the situation, as if he was floating in a dream and not crouched behind a

collapsed wall clutching a rifle set to kill somewhere on the outskirts of the one time human village of Huxaven. There were no humans there now, well except for the idiots in his squad, but there were definitely fadis and lots of them.

Bran crawled over to him and started talking as if he could hear a word of it, which he could not. He gave his friend a blank look and then remembered to point to his ear and attempt a lost puppy impression.

He did not need to be able to hear to understand that the next disgusted words to come of Bran's mouth were 'fucking sippy'.

The other boy pulled his face directly toward him with a tight grip to either cheek and proceeded to mouth words very slowly and with great exaggeration: "It...will...pass."

Petr nodded to show that he had understood, difficult as it was with his friend's muddied gloves holding his face like a vice. Bran at last seemed to realise the situation and let go. The other boy's eyes suddenly went behind him and Bran turned to see Vasily emerge from the shadows, laser rifle pointed at his compatriots.

The older, square set soldier lowered the weapon, rather later than Petr thought appropriate, and crouched beside them. Petr peeped over the wall and the next thing he knew he was being jabbed painfully in the side. He pivoted to Vasily to see anger in the soldier's eyes, only for Bran to intervene between them and hurriedly start speaking with the bigger man. Petr could guess that his friend was explaining that he was deaf and that prodding him under the ribs was not a good idea.

Thankfully he was beginning to hear sounds again, although they were muffled and it was impossible to make anything out; it did mean, however, that he was no longer alone in his head.

"I'm starting to get my hearing back," he told his companions, or at least that is what he intended to say. By their reactions he was not

too sure he had spoken clearly.

Bran smiled encouragement and slapped him on the back, while Vasily simply huffed, unimpressed. Petr did not know what he had done to antagonise the man but he was not going to spend his time worrying about it either. Over the course of the next couple of minutes his hearing had improved enough to understand what the others were saying to each other.

“When your fucking boyfriend wakes up we’ll make for the wall of the inn. The shells came from the direction of that courtyard between the inn and the block of flats beyond.”

Once Petr worked out that he was the ‘fucking boyfriend’ he glared at Vasily and both the soldier and Bran were surprised that he had made sense of their conversation, so much for his telling them. The older man snorted at him, and he was about to take him up on it when Bran put a hand to his shoulder and indicated Vasily intently with his eyes.

Not sure what exactly he was supposed to see, Petr’s gaze eventually fell on the under-officer insignia that did not belong on Vasily’s collar.

“Alex didn’t make it,” Bran told him quietly when he saw the confusion on Petr’s face. Petr had liked the under-officer, their immediate superior, a man who always had a smile on his face even when it was not really the time for it; it was the way the soldier had approached life, as if it was all some great amusing joke, and never did his humour turn to cruelty or mockery, at least not of his comrades. And Alex was now...gone...which meant that *Vasily* was their superior. He gave the sour man a quick glance and noticed the satisfaction on the square face when it was clear that Petr finally understood the situation.

“Right,” Vasily decided, with a smile that was a mockery of the easy ones that had graced Alex’s familiar face. “There are no fadis between here and the inn, so after three...”

And they were running. Petr kept as low as he could, bent almost double, while still able to kind of see where he was going. There was a sudden burst of laser fire, cutting across his path in a bright red flare, and then he was through the place the beam had been moments earlier, the air still crackling and warm. A few seconds later he had his back to the wall of the inn and sank down to the ground to get his breath back. That had been *close*; if he had been just milliseconds faster, if he had stumbled forward as he ran, he would be dead. The thought suddenly brought his breakfast back up and he vomited onto the sidewalk, the acidic tang burning his throat and filling his mouth and nose.

Bran dropped down beside him, and Vasily was a little further on, still on his haunches, glaring toward the courtyard where the fadi gun emplacement was located.

“You okay?” his friend asked, a gloved hand on his shoulder. Petr swallowed the repulsive acid and nodded. He *had* to be okay or he was dead. The other boy smiled and nodded too, then quickly checked his rifle and joined Vasily. Petr tightened his grip on his own weapon and dashed over to his compatriots.

“There'll be four of them on the gun, if they're not short-manned,” the under-officer told them. “Plus at least one with a rifle.” He was glaring at the corner of the building from where the deadly red beam had originated as if he could see through it or around it. They all knew that to *actually* poke a head around the corner was a sure way to lose it.

Glancing back at the wall they had left to get there, lost in shadows now, and at the corner of the inn on the other side to the fadis, Petr wished they had the tech or the robots real soldiers were supposed to have – according to the movies at least. Here they were farmers playing soldiers, fighting an army that was a ragtag bunch of drunken rapists and thugs who got kicks bullying and molesting *any* civilians, their own included; the fadis on Altair sometimes still seemed more animal than civilised, but Petr knew as well that deep down humans could be animals too, if they let themselves be.

He noticed the window ledge just above his shoulder and pulled himself up on to tiptoes to peer through the filthy pane; for a wonder it was still intact. *What if—?*

“Yes,” Vasily said to himself, grinning as he took in the window. There were no doors on this side of the building so the under-officer tugged and then quietly lifted the window frame, pulling himself up and over the ledge before smirking down at his two comrades. “Bran, make sure the fadis don’t come around that corner and cut off our retreat. As for your boyfriend...” Vasily reached his hand down and grabbed Petr’s collar, tugging him upward. Realising that the man wanted him inside, Petr reached up to the sill and half pulled himself and was half dragged through the opening and into the dark inn.

Vasily unceremoniously released his collar and then slowly, quietly, made his way further into the room, treading warily behind the sights of his rifle. There was a stairwell toward the back and the under-officer headed toward it, glancing back to make sure Petr was still with him when he reached the foot. Satisfied, the older man stealthily disappeared up to the floor above. Wasting no time, not keen on being left alone in a deserted room, Petr followed the man up and along a narrow corridor to an open door into one of the guests rooms – the bed looked like it had been demolished by a banshee searching for loot, which was probably not too far off the mark. The only chair was in pieces and the remains of torn sheets and blankets were scattered about the floor.

Vasily ignored these and quietly made his way to the nearest of the narrow windows. Using a finger to tease an opening between the wall and the curtain, the man smiled at whatever he saw below. He nodded at Petr and signalled for him to take the second window. Not waiting to be labelled a coward, Petr hunched down and half crawled half scurried to the indicated place. He teased open his own curtain and had an excellent view of the fadi gun emplacement below, the voices of its crew reaching them in indistinct bursts of alien tongue. In addition to the gun crew there was a small land car parked at one side of the courtyard, and a couple of officers and their aides were

studying a holographic map of the village and surrounding area. A little further nearer the street were three fadis brandishing rifles, one of whom was watching the way Petr and his comrades had come, while the others were glaring and shoving at each other in the midst of some argument.

The under-officer carefully parted the curtain with the barrel of his weapon and then motioned to Petr, indicating the officers and their adjutants. These last were closer to Petr's window, and he understood what was being asked of him: he was supposed to shoot four men dead. He swallowed and nodded. War was no place for too much thinking: the regret must wait until later. He was terrified, his mouth tasted of sewage, there was still a ringing in his ears and it felt as if he might pass out at any moment. He gently prised aside the curtain with his rifle and carefully took aim at the fadis studying the landmarks on the hologram, holding the weapon as steady as he was able to as his eyes sought his superior and he awaited the command.

One slight nod was the only signal he was given and they discharged death in unison, his weapon coming alive to spit long incandescent forks of lightning through flesh and bone, sending the fadi officers and their attendants into some sort of macabre death dance, outlandish pirouettes, until the great puppeteer cut the strings and they fell to the ground in veils of dark blood, the holographic map disintegrating as the PO that had generated it was fried.

It was over in five seconds, no more. Feeling sick, Petr glanced over to the other side of the courtyard where the three gunmen were sprawled like litter on the cobblestones, all arguments ended forever, and the gun crew were hanging limp around their weapon with one curled up in a foetal position beneath it, that man looking as if he might be asleep except for that his head was missing and brain matter coated the ammunition crates.

Petr's eyes involuntarily, with some perverse compulsion, returned to the officers, to the men *he* had killed. To kill was the most disgusting of all crimes. They were his enemies. They were fadis. But he had

extinguished life, sacred life, which was *all* life. He willed them to get up, to start laughing and joking, as if it had all been a performance, an act, but they would not move, they *refused* to move no matter how desperately he begged them to. He felt disgusted with himself that he was the cause that these men no longer lived, and terrified that he could just as easily be lying there, a corpse whose life had been ripped from the cosmos as if it had never existed. He told himself that they might have been murderers, rapists, as so many fadi soldiers were, but he could not know that *these* men had been, and even if they had been... Petr might have thought that he had nothing left inside of him but he fell to his knees and vomited until only bile passed his lips and then he was racked with dry heaves as if his stomach itself wanted to be out of him, to flee his unforgivable act. Tears followed, but he had wiped them away before Bran appeared at the door, a beatific smile on the other boy's face, as if he had seen an angel, as if he could not believe that they were still alive.

Bran helped him to his feet, and Petr did his best to ignore Vasily's ugly sneer as his friend led him from the place where he felt his soul had been raped and nothing could ever be the same.