

Chapter 1. The Empire of Govhlor.

The planet known on Earth as Gliese832c, orbiting the red dwarf Gliese832, that is visible in the constellation Crane, was inhabited by a highly evolved civilization that had discovered how to travel in space hundreds of years ago. The beings who lived there and called Govhlor their planet, had a humanoid body structure, with a stature that exceeded eight feet in height. The robust build was equipped with powerful musculature proportionate to the planet's gravity.

The body differed from the human one for a very prominent spine, protruding from the back with a cartilaginous ridge that continued along the neck and reached the top of the skull. The head showed very protruding cheekbones that made the small eyes sunken with a rhomboidal pupil placed vertically. The mouth, without lips, showed a set of teeth similar to the human one but with the canines much more evident and sharp. The auricles, small and very close to the skull, were pointed. Completely glabrous, they had thick and leathery skin of a greenish gray color. An Earthling would have considered them reptiles, even if in reality they were not.

In spite of the technologies they had, the social organization was primitive and similar to that spread on Earth in the Middle Ages. A great Emperor exercised absolute power over the planet and the worlds he had subjugated. Under him, the Dukes managed the power in his name but in practice they were independent and divided the domains among themselves. The most deserving, according to the unquestionable judgment of the Emperor, received the title of Governor of the conquered planet, where they could rule as they pleased.

The Empire had its own army and space fleet, but each Duke could have his own troops and ships. In the past, there had been rivalries between the Dukes, which had resulted in bloody wars, but with the conquest of other worlds and their division, they were all interested in the new conquests and the rivalry between them practically disappeared.

Duke Lundthor entered the throne room, already crowded with low level nobles. With a slow and martial step he went towards a bench placed on the right of the throne and sat down after having addressed a greeting, with a deep bow, to Emperor Hulhus who, half lying on his huge throne, looked at the room with a bored air. Behind him were deployed ten Guardians, in black uniforms, who held the kwerr, a weapon supplied almost exclusively to them. It was formed by a long steel rod that carried on the top a sharp serrated blade, slightly curved and contained a ray generator.

Two Guardians entered the room, holding by the arms a completely naked being who could hardly move and was bleeding from the different wounds he had in various parts of his body. When they arrived in front of the throne, they made him kneel in a hollow in the floor, three yards square and about ten inches deep, remaining motionless at the sides of that kind of basin.

The guttural voice of the Emperor resounded in the silent hall:

“What is the charge?”

Duke Lundthor rose from his seat and, turned to the Emperor, said:

“Great Hulhus, this vile Patrician has disobeyed my orders and stole several...”

He could not finish the sentence that the Emperor silenced him with a sharp hand gesture and, turned to the two Guardians, ordered:

“Proceed!”

Simultaneously, the sharp blades of their kwerr fell, one on the throat and one on the nape of the neck of the prisoner who collapsed to the ground, his head half detached from the trunk, in a lake of blood. After a few seconds, the bottom of the basin opened in two halves, causing the body to sink while, from the sides, a steaming liquid, with an acrid smell, washed away all the blood. The room remained silent when the Emperor got up from his throne and went out followed, shortly after, by the Duke.

The star Gamma Pavonis, visible from Earth in the constellation of the Peacock, is a yellow dwarf not very different from the Sun, around which the planet Uluth orbits. The complacency of Emperor Hulhus had entrusted it to Duke Wohlok, one of his most loyal feudal lords who, by imperial appointment, performed the duties of Governor. In practice, however, was the absolute master, since the Emperor, to ensure the loyalty of his dukes, left them a free hand, provided that they paid, or rather, did pay the imperial taxes to the inhabitants of the planet. Uluth was particularly rich in raw materials essential to the Empire, especially in the military field. The hulls of spaceships were manufactured with metals from the rich deposits of the planet. Weapons technology depended largely on the extraction of rare metals that were abundantly available only on Uluth. In addition, the intensive farming on Qwok provided huge quantities of highly prized meat, much sought after by the Empire's wealthy nobility.

The indigenous inhabitants of the planet, a meek people of gatherers and hunters, had been forcibly enslaved to the Empire and forced to work according to the directives imposed by the Governor. The only two activities allowed were mineral extraction and Qwok breeding.

The Qwok was a huge herbivorous animal weighing up to 5 tons. It was similar to a large rhinoceros, but had four fearsome long horns on its head pointing forward. Of a tame nature, it could be easily domesticated and used for work or as a mount, but it was raised primarily for its meat, considered a delicacy throughout the Empire.

The inhabitants of the planet were practically slaves under the absolute power of the Duke. Only a small group of individuals had rebelled against the tyranny and lived in hiding on the inaccessible heights full of tall trees and deep caves. The Duke's Guardians were tasked with searching for them and, when found, killing them on the spot. The Duke had established a prize for each rebel killed, just to encourage the search, but the finds were very rare and this made both the Duke and the Guardians angry and anxious to collect the prize. A further reason that fueled the desire for revenge of the Duke, was given by the fact that the rebels, on several occasions had managed to overwhelm some isolated Guardians, killing them and taking away their kwerr. Thus armed, they proved to be very dangerous for the Guardians who, although much more numerous, could not avoid the sudden sporadic guerrilla attacks that often caused significant losses. The rebels were a real nightmare for the Duke who was determined to solve the problem alone, without informing the Emperor, for fear of being deprived of power in case of prolonged failure. The fact that the Rebel ranks were growing larger and larger made the situation absolutely intolerable for the ruthless tyrant.

Yquus had discovered a system of caves that plunged from the side of the mountain into the bowels of the planet, forming a labyrinth of chambers and tunnels. In one of these, enormous and with a very high ceiling, which was accessible through a narrow tunnel, there was a rather deep lake surrounded by flat, sandy shores. On the opposite side of the lake, there was another tunnel that went up to the surface and came out on the opposite side of the mountain. Most likely there were other exits through the many underground chambers that should have been explored thoroughly. It was the ideal hiding place for the rebels and also easily defensible thanks to the narrow accesses that would not allow the passage of more than two Guardians side by side. The entrances were almost invisible from the outside and the depth of the cave would have hindered or even prevented the Guardians' detection systems from detecting their presence. He gathered all his followers and they settled on the shores of the underground lake. While some were organizing the settlement with a view to a long stay, Yquus sent some of his people, armed with kwerr, to explore the various chambers and to draw a complete map of the cave system with all possible exits to the surface. With the rocky materials present along the shores of the lake, the builders began to erect housing, also using the kwerr, which thanks to the powerful ray at very high temperature allowed to obtain regular blocks of rock to form walls and fences. The provisions were not sufficient for a long stay, so Yquus ordered another group to go out to hunt a Qwok, whose meat would ensure a supply of food for a long time.

Four hunters armed with kwerr cautiously emerged from the cave into the mountainside looking up at the sky. The main danger came from the Dwagoo, huge, voracious flying reptiles that

would swoop down on anything moving on the surface and devour it on the spot if it was too heavy to carry to their nest. An Uluth inhabitant weighing around two hundreds lbs, on the other hand, could be easily transported in the air and placed in their larder on the mountain tops where they were usually stationed. The Qwok, slow and tame, did not resist those terrible predators and were only partially eaten because of their enormous size. An adult Qwok, with its 5 tons of weight, was impossible to carry even for the powerful Dwagoo.

The hunters spotted three Qwoks grazing lichen at a distance of a few hundred yards and ran down to the plain to catch up with them. It would have been very useful to convince one of those behemoths to climb up the mountainside to facilitate transportation to the rebel shelter. Once grabbed by one of its four front horns, the animal would let itself be guided meekly without resistance. The opening of the cave was not wide enough to allow the passage inside, but at least they would have shortened as much as possible the journey to transport the large pieces of meat.

Along the stretch that separated them from the small herd, they stopped to collect lichen and filled a large sack. When they were next to one of the Qwok, a hunter grabbed one of the two lower horns of the animal and invited it to turn its head towards the sack full of lichens. While the animal grazed contentedly, the whole group, keeping the sack within reach of its mouth, moved in the direction of the mountain. They were going up the slope when, high in the sky, a Dwagoo appeared and, having reached the vertical point of the other two Qwoks who were still grazing, swooped down on one of them and bit him in the back of the head. The animal collapsed to the ground under the terrible grip of the predator's jaws, while the other one trotted away at the maximum speed allowed by its size. The Dwagoo began his meal, which would keep him busy for a long time, giving the hunters time to reach a small plateau not far from the cave entrance. One hunter aimed at the animal's forehead, right in the middle of the four horns, and a death ray came out of the kwerr, knocking it to the ground. While another hunter ran into the shelter to call other rebels to carry the meat inside, the others began to tear the huge carcass to pieces. That supply of meat, along with the harvested lichen would allow the rebels a long stay in the safety of the new shelter.

Gordon had been informed by the incorporeal beings of Upsilon B Andromedae, that the species hostile to their universal mission had forcibly subjugated the inhabitants of Uluth, a planet orbiting Gamma Pavonis, and it was from there that he decided to begin his research. They had informed him that on Uluth existed, unbeknownst to all, a small colony of their minds placed inside a hundred bodies similar to the one found on Earth, in the underground electrical cabin in Nevada. The beings of Upsilon B had suggested to Gordon that he locate the colony and make contact with them, as they could be extremely useful to him.