

And He said unto me:

Son of Man, can these bones live?

And I answered:

Oh, Lord God, Thou knowest.

—Ezekiel 37:3

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

At first the battle was almost invisible, with small portions of the ships disappearing or breaking off to float away into space. It was like a pantomime, a silent movie, difficult for my mind to accept as real. I asked the Ghoul what kind of weapons the Alliance used, and he replied that the weapons were particle beams. As time passed and the armadas approached closer to each other, different weapons came into play, weapons which, if they did not make noise in the vacuum of space, at least produced the explosions and fire of weapons I was familiar with. Occasionally I thought I caught glimpses of small objects darting from one ship to another, but if so, they moved too fast to see clearly. What was clear was that most of the damage was being inflicted on the Alliance.

During the battle the Ghoul was willing to talk, and Sam, Summer, and I probed for answers. Benrobi was silent but watched the battle closely, his face hidden behind an expressionless mask I could not penetrate.

“We call them simply the Enemy,” the Ghoul explained. “They came in a vast fleet across the intergalactic void from somewhere. They swept down your spiral arm of our galaxy, destroying or enslaving every inhabitable planet. Primarily they destroy, wiping out complete solar systems, including the primary star. If you were an astronomer on Earth today, you would

see a new supernova in your sky every one to two months. An astronomer's paradise, a nightmare for the civilizations of the galaxy. My civilization, called the Shenii, encountered them five thousand Earth years ago because we had a small scientific colony at the very end of your spiral arm of the galaxy. When the Enemy swept in from the void, our colony was immediately destroyed, but not before one fast scout ship was able to escape.

"In spite of whatever feelings you may have about us for wiping out your race, we are a peaceful civilization. Oh yes, we had warships, but only a few, and only for minor policing action. The Alliance is a group of civilizations in our region of the galaxy, a coalition over twenty thousand of your years old. Several different members of the Alliance sent warships to stop the tide of invasion, but were completely unprepared for the magnitude of the force they found. The small armada provided less resistance than an asteroid belt. A few fast scout ships again escaped with a warning."

The Ghoul turned to watch the battle, and frowned. A cluster of Enemy ships was approaching the blue-green giant, protecting a huge ship—huge even by the standards of this battle. The personnel on the bridge noted it as well, and an outbreak of clicking and chattering erupted. The stars swung above us, and we appeared to be heading straight for the planet. It was clear that we were about to engage the enemy.

The Ghoul turned back to us. "Luckily, the Enemy is nothing if not supremely arrogant in its confidence that it can destroy all opposition. Instead of pursuing us, the Enemy chose to continue its organized, relentless, merciless sweep down the spiral arm. This gave us time to regroup and arm ourselves. Three thousand and one thousand Earth years ago we met them in two other major battles, both of which we lost. We are meeting them again here, probably for the last time. We have thrown every resource we have into this battle. If we lose, I doubt there will

be enough left to even consider further resistance. I suspect remnants of our civilizations will flee and hide, but for how long? Perhaps we would have time to build ships to cross the void to another galaxy and leave this one to the Enemy ... or perhaps not.”

The Chief of Security suddenly clicked and clattered at the Ghoul, and he turned to us. “We are being ordered off the bridge.”

We followed him back into one of the worm-like tunnels. Again, as we walked, I had the feeling that I was passing near and even through other beings, not only in other corridors but perhaps in other rooms as well.

We came out in the docking bay, near the great yawning mouth that opened into empty space. Benrobi, unfazed, just stared out through the opening into the battle beyond. As before, I could see nothing separating us from the void. I stood about fifty feet from the opening and wanted to move closer, but I didn’t have the courage. Outside, the battle silently raged, and I could only watch in awe.

“Tell us again about mankind,” I said to the Ghoul. “It’s difficult to believe that we could not have been of some help to you in this war.”

He stifled a laugh. “How could you have helped? You never even conquered your own solar system.”

“Why not?”

“War, I think. We actually did interact with humans in this time on your moon, where your race had recently built a base, for the third or fourth time over the years. The history of the human race shows great belligerence. Apparently, you blew yourselves back to the Stone Age at least three times over the last fifteen thousand Earth years, forced to slowly rebuild civilization

each time. Perhaps if you had evolved without the wars, you would now be advanced enough to be of some help, but at the level of knowledge in your time, all we needed was your planet.”

“I don’t understand who you are,” Summer suddenly remarked. “You look human.”

“Genetically, I’m as human as you are,” he replied.

“How can that be?”

“Human DNA was used to create me, just as human DNA made you who you are. The only difference is that my creation was entirely in the laboratory instead of in a bed.”

Summer frowned.

The Ghoul continued. “Every being on this ship was genetically created for a specific purpose. The warriors are obvious; the small creatures on the bridge are the command personnel. They are intelligent and quick. There is obviously no need for them to be large, so they are not.”

“Then none of you are Shenii?”

“All of us are, in spirit if not in physical body. There are a few true Shenii—and a few individuals from other worlds of the Alliance—on some of the command ships, but there is little need for many of them. The crew and warriors of this ship are ideally suited for warfare; it is why they were created, and it is their entire purpose for existing. We consider ourselves the military arm of the Shenii and it is our duty to defend our race and the Alliance.”

“Even to the point of trying to kill a defenseless college student?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean that you engineered several monsters in an attempt to kill me!”

“I did nothing of the sort. Your imagination must be overactive. The human race has seen monsters under the bed since the dawn of its civilization.”

“These weren’t under the bed, though some were on it. These were very real—just ask the cops who walked into the trees in the park and were torn apart by them.”

The Ghoul studied me, as if searching for the truth. “I had nothing to do with that. My mission was simply to genetically engineer the extinction of your race; I wasn’t prepared to use violence in any way to hasten the demise of any individual.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“What you believe hardly matters.”

“But you do admit that you caused the extinction of the human race!” Summer said.

“I have admitted that several times.” The Ghoul stared at us with those ancient eyes. “Remember our alternative. We are talking about the extinction of sentient life in this galaxy. We felt there was no choice. Your race has spent most of its history slaughtering each other. At least this was much more humane.”

“Then you created the time gate?”

“Some of the Shenii scientists did.”

“How?”

“He won’t know that,” Benrobi said as he continued to watch the battle. “He wasn’t created to know that.”

“He’s right,” said the Ghoul without any embarrassment.

“But you do?” I asked Benrobi.

“I do, a little,” he replied. “As they say, it’s better to be lucky than good. The Alliance was lucky, and mankind was unlucky. The gate is actually a wormhole between several points in space-time. The Shenii don’t really have the ability to create one on their own, but there are natural ones in the universe. They aren’t true wormholes, but rather weak points in the fabric of

space-time that can be exploited. They found one when they arrived on Earth and exploited it to set up a link between your century and now.”

“What about the ones to the twenty-third and twenty-fourth centuries?”

“They are unintentional branches of the wormhole.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

Benrobi didn't answer; he was watching the battle intently. By now, the Enemy had virtually encircled the gas giant. Alliance ships in the way had been destroyed or incapacitated. I could also see that the large ship I had noticed before was indeed gargantuan, appearing as big as a couple of the smaller moons around the blue-green planet. There was something wrong with the ship, or at least my perception of the ship. It wavered, out of focus, flashing in and out of reality. At times it almost disappeared.

“The problem with particle beams in space is the relative scarcity of particles,” muttered the Ghoul.

“I think your Enemy has found a source,” replied Benrobi. There was a distinct edge to his voice that I found disturbing. I couldn't tell if it was excitement or anticipation.

“You are right,” replied the Ghoul. “We must prevent their weapon from being activated at all costs.”

As if the pilot of our vessel could hear him, the ship appeared to accelerate. I can't say how I was able to tell, because the stars were constant and our only sense of motion was in relation to the other ships and the planet itself. But the planet appeared to suddenly rush at us, doubling in size every ten seconds. I wondered when the Enemy would see us. I should have been afraid, but I was not. The excitement pulsing through me overwhelmed the few sparks of fear I felt.

A bud was forming on the equator of the blue-green giant. As I watched, it grew larger and larger, distorting the planet until it looked more like an egg than a sphere. Then it was a tongue of blue, licking out as if to swallow the Enemy ship. Somehow, through forces not remotely visible, the Enemy ship corralled the tongue from the gas giant, narrowed it, focused it, and turned it into a tongue of fiery death. With the quickness of a rattlesnake, it lashed out at a cluster of Alliance ships and obliterated all but one of them in an instant. The sole survivor lasted merely a moment longer, then it twisted and writhed in agony, falling slowly toward the surface of the planet, ultimately disappearing into the stormy blue clouds.

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“I'm not hanging around here to be fried alive,” Summer suddenly burst out. I turned to her and noticed that Benrobi was already halfway to the little ship we had stolen on Earth. Summer started after him, pulling Sam with her, and both the Ghoul and I began to chase them. All three were faster than I expected, and they slowly widened the distance. The Ghoul was

running stride for stride with me. As we ran, he reached into his front pocket, found a small cube about a centimeter in all dimensions, and raised it to his lips. He quickly snapped out a few clicks, but I slapped the cube out of his hand and when it bounced on the floor in front of me, I stamped it flat. The Ghoul made no attempt to pick it up. I guessed that if it was a communicator, it wasn't now, and he didn't waste time picking up the remnants.

I'm not sure that any of the four of us chasing Benrobi had the slightest idea exactly what we were doing; we were simply obeying our instincts, like lemmings jumping into the sea. Blind reflexes in action.

When the ship shuddered and belched, we were within a hundred yards of the shuttle. The Ghoul and I tumbled onto the floor of the docking bay. The difference was that he landed with grace and I flopped, hands and feet completely out of control, sliding across the floor after I landed, a sudden, agonizing pain in my left shoulder. I tried to rise, couldn't, tried to move my arm, and couldn't. I looked at the shoulder. It was displaced to the front, obviously separated. The Ghoul by now was on his feet, and I staggered after him, making no attempt to quiet the moans coming out of my mouth.

I managed to fling myself through the door of the shuttle just after the Ghoul, perhaps ten seconds behind Summer and Sam. I half-crawled, half-stumbled to the bridge. The three spheres were orbiting around Benrobi's head, and he was staring out towards the entrance to the docking bay.

Where would we go?

The Ghoul had the same thought, because he made a dash for Benrobi. But Benrobi was too quick, twisting out of the way, on the defensive yet instantly prepared to attack. The Ghoul paused, thinking over the situation.

“What happened to your arm?” Summer asked me.

“I dislocated it, I think.”

The Ghoul stepped toward Benrobi with a puzzled look in his eyes. I was in too much pain to understand what was going on, but not so much that I didn't know that something was wrong.

Summer grabbed my arm and jerked it before I realized what was happening. I let out a scream, but neither Benrobi nor the Ghoul acknowledged the noise. She continued to pull hard as I continued to scream. The room began to spin as she pulled even harder. I thought my arm was going to pop off, but instead it just popped. Suddenly the pain eased, and I realized that she had pulled it back into place. A wave of nausea and sweat washed over me as I fell against the nearest wall, unable to stand by myself.

“Thanks, I think,” I told Summer through gritted teeth.

“You'll be fine. You're tough,” she replied, turning away from me.

Easy for her to say—it wasn't her arm and shoulder that two tigers had fought over. I leaned against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

“Where are we going?” the Ghoul finally asked.

“Where *I* want to go,” Benrobi said with a snort.

The Ghoul looked as though he wanted to reply, but then Benrobi ordered our ship to lift off the deck just as the giant craft shuddered again, launching the floor of the docking bay up to bat our ship like a fly swatter hitting a fly. Our aircraft jolted upwards and all of us flew across the room, even Benrobi.

He was the first to his feet, but already some autopilot had intercepted the flutter and corrected it. Benrobi grabbed the cube in front of him with both hands, closed his eyes, and we

darted out of the docking bay, glancing against the roof of the bay as we left. The ship was far from level when we bounced upwards, so I didn't have any idea which side of the ship had careened off the ceiling of the bay.

We sped toward the nearest Enemy ship. Everything was beginning to become clearer to me. I looked at the Ghoul—why did I still call him that? I guess I still had a problem with thinking of him as Thaddeus Rumpkin. I asked him what his real name was, but he failed to answer my question or even return my gaze, though he did not look surprised at what was happening. How human was he? Could I expect his reaction to be the same as a human's? Genetically, he was the same. But he was created by aliens, not by human parents. How could I know what his reaction would be?

I decided that I couldn't tell, but probably it didn't matter.

The shuttle jerked twice, and I was flung to the floor again. Summer and the Ghoul grabbed a nearby chair and managed to stay erect. Benrobi didn't budge, merely absorbing the bounce with his knees as if expecting the jolt.

"The antimatter ***** is damaged," the Ghoul remarked. "We must have hit it when we bounced off the docking bay ceiling." I couldn't understand the word he used after antimatter, so I asked him about it.

"There's no equivalent word in English," he explained. "I will just call it the antimatter guide, though that is far too simplistic."

Benrobi glared over at him, but said nothing.

"You won't be able to control the ship much longer," the Ghoul continued in a calm voice, as if announcing that dinner was ready.

"It will work long enough, even with your archaic technology," Benrobi snapped.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” the Ghoul replied.

“You can fix it,” Benrobi ordered the Ghoul.

“No, I can’t. I know very little about engineering.”

“What is there to know?” Benrobi sneered. “Your technology is simple, compared to ours.”

“My specialty is human genetics. There was no need for me to learn much engineering. Even our so-called ‘simple’ technology is beyond my knowledge.”

“What’s going on?” Summer asked softly.

“Tao Benrobi is no more human than our other friend here,” I told her.

She stared at me in disbelief.

“I would guess that he is a creation of the Enemy, just as Thaddeus Rumpkin is a creation of the Alliance. Lord knows why Earth deserved such attention from the Enemy.”

“If you don’t fix it, none of us will live,” Benrobi told the Ghoul.

“Do you care?” the Ghoul whispered softly. “We are both warriors for a cause. Are you not willing to die for that cause?”

“I am willing,” Benrobi spat out. “But not before I fulfill my mission.”

“What is left?”

“To convey my information to my superiors.”

“What information?”

Benrobi paused just as the shuttle lurched again. This time I was subconsciously prepared and didn’t fall. Neither did the others.

“Your course of action helped our cause,” Benrobi answered. “I will say no more.”

The shuttle was beginning to vibrate now, the shudder waxing and waning in intensity.

Each cycle worsened, and it was obvious to all of us that the ship had only a short time left.

“Well, dammit!” Summer exploded. “I’m not a warrior for some cosmic cause. I don’t want to die, and neither does my brother! Or Richard,” she added.

“You are insignificant,” Benrobi told her, face tight and teeth clenched from the strain of guiding the doomed ship. “No one cares if you live or die.”

Summer blanched and charged. Benrobi wasn’t prepared at all. She intersected him about belt-high with her right fist and he bounced across the room toward the outer wall of the bridge. She was all over him with her hands and feet, screaming and yelling as she struck. I tried to join the battle, but the shuttle suddenly went completely out of control, tumbling and bucking and bouncing me off the wall. I stayed upright—the floor of the bridge was “down” because of the artificial gravity—but changes in momentum were making it difficult to reach the two combatants. The Ghoul beat me to the skirmish; he wasn’t concerned with the outcome of the battle but rather with pulling the controls from around Benrobi’s head. They appeared to be reluctant to leave, darting around in their orbits and evading the Ghoul’s hand. Obviously, a new approach was needed.

I jumped for the fray when the shuttle autopilot somehow corrected the turbulence for a few seconds. My left fist knew exactly what to do, and suddenly Benrobi was unconscious, and my fist was screaming at me in agony, along with my injured shoulder. I rolled on the floor and rubbed my fist while the Ghoul realized that the control balls were now available for the plucking. He grabbed the balls and slipped them to his head, where they orbited, apparently as content as when they had orbited Benrobi’s.

The Ghoul frowned and the shuttle made a flip. I was still lying on the floor and was thrown against Summer.

“Good punch, kid,” she told me.

END OF EXCERPT