



From Darkness, They Came
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Chapter 1

HE WAS known simply as Darkness, a giant bear of a man with unevenly cropped black hair and eyes that showed nothing. It was most likely these eyes he was named for. His mouth hung perpetually slack and you might be forgiven for thinking he was simple, but he was anything but. Muscles, grown lazy from years of near weightlessness, stretched his AG suit to bursting, and the support system connections around the suit's collar dug into his bull neck. It was only when he smiled that you truly knew Darkness, for in that smile was all the wit and fierce intelligence you would expect from a Prophet.

The huge blue curve of Earth's flank drew into view through the viewing window. Darkness had removed the filters from the toughened glass. A touch of a button on the control panel to the side of the window would bring the filters back, one after the other, like nictitating eyelids, filtering ultraviolet, infrared and any number of electromagnetic wavelengths that certain inhabitants were unable to tolerate. Darkness was not one of these however, being fully human.

He drummed his fingers reflectively on the curved surface of the window. The nacelle-window was eight feet across, and of glass more than four inches thick. It bulged like a frog's eye from the side of the ship and had its twin on the opposite hull, reached by walking around the twenty-foot wide gallery that lined the entire front hull of the *Darkness Falls*. Plummeting down from the inner ring of the gallery was a stomach-churning view to the lower habitation floor, fully half a mile down. Galleries ran round each floor, all narrower than on the viewing floor to allow for hull-side habitation, offices, shops and bars, and the impression was like looking down the length of a giant whale's ribcage. An invisible safety shield hummed and crackled from the tops of the gallery railings to prevent accidents and would-be suicides.

Darkness felt rather than heard the footsteps come up behind him, and he ceased his drumming.

'Prophet?' a nervous voice asked.

He remained impassive, content to look at his home world. The voice coughed and said, this time a little more confident,

‘Darkness?’

He turned.

The man was roughly half the size of Darkness. He wore the same dark grey AG suit, a replacement support pack slung across his back. Its trailing connection hoses hung like the legs of a dead squid. His face was red and blotched, as if he had run the entire half-mile or so of staircase. The gravity-lift worked, but most chose not to use it. He fiddled nervously with the hoses. The connection collar of his suit bore the ring of red gold that marked him as a Second Officer. He cleared his throat.

‘Second Officer Spane, Prophet.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Spane,’ Darkness replied, omitting the man’s rank deliberately. Spane’s face reddened further and the thin white line of his lips tightened, but to his credit, he said nothing. Perhaps the look in Darkness’s eyes stilled him, or perhaps he had been warned of the Prophet’s strength and propensity for brawling with officers of his rank.

‘Councillor Farson requests your attendance, Prophet. He has need of your... ah... talent.’

‘I assumed,’ Darkness replied, barely a muscle moving, save for those on his face. ‘Shall we go?’

‘Follow me.’ Spane turned on his heels, literally; a movement specific, Darkness thought, to those men who assumed they were so much better than those around them that they were only one step away from moving without touching the floor at all. Darkness, in a particularly uncharitable moment, wondered how long it would take the man to fall to the lower floors if pitched over the safety shield. A smile cracked the stillness, and had Spane seen it, he would not have turned his back on the Prophet so easily.

They made their way slowly to the head of the staircase, and Spane, perhaps unconsciously, moved so that they walked down them side by side, rather than have the Prophet at his back. The hum and spitting ozone reek of the gravity lift-shaft surrounded them as they passed one of its numerous ovoid entrance doors. The shaft was empty, and probably wouldn’t see traffic until the bars opened, alcohol numbing the less desirable effects of travelling by gravity. Darkness had never suffered through their use, and he saw from the nervous way that Spane eyed the openings, that he did. Darkness grinned.

‘We will take the gravity-lift, Spane. We don’t want to keep the Councillor waiting.’

Spane began to protest but experienced Darkness' strength when a meaty hand clamped around his upper arm, circling it completely. His protests ceased, and with eyes squeezed shut, he was dragged into the lift-shaft opening. He punched their destination into the keypad just inside the door opening and they stepped off into the shaft. There was a moment of pure weightlessness as the gravity-lift counteracted the false-gravity from their AG suits, and then the gravity plates that lined the shaft like the plates of a giant armadillo hummed into life and they were hurled down the shaft. The quarter-mile journey to the floor that housed the Councillor's quarters flashed by at close to three hundred miles per hour. The negative atmosphere generators at either end of the shaft ensured that they felt nothing, the atmosphere in the shaft effectively moving at the same speed as they did. Darkness folded his arms and relaxed. Spane did the opposite.

Seconds later, the gravity plates exerted a stronger force on the two men, and they slowed, and stopped. Darkness stepped lightly onto the exit platform and waited while his suit adjusted his false-gravity. Spane crumpled to the floor and turned the colour of cheese. Darkness waited patiently and presently the Second Officer stood. His legs appeared to be able to hold him upright and he looked at Darkness with a look that may have weakened lesser men. Not so Darkness.

'Shall we go?' he asked, noting with no little satisfaction that this time when he turned, Second Officer Spane kept his feet firmly on the ground.

SPANE PICKED up his pace as they walked. The thicker crowds down on this level seemed to provide him with protection from the threat he sensed in Darkness. Had Spane but known it, Darkness' fighting days were over, in fact had been long before his secondment to the *Darkness Falls*. Darkness allowed the rumours to grow, and with them, his legendary status. People seemed far more inclined to believe and act upon prophecies when they came from a man they feared.

Five minutes walking, during which time not a single word was exchanged, brought them to the quarters of Councillor Farson. Farson had been human, to begin with, but numerous enhancements and alterations had left his body irrevocably changed. He had uncommon strength and had no need for an AG suit, as he had specially implanted AG motors behind each eye that regulated his personal gravity. The bones of his arms and legs had been spliced with metal-calcium alloy structures that were, weight for weight, twelve times stronger than bone. The

Councillor was virtually indestructible, and for this reason, Darkness was, if not afraid of him, at least wary. Spane pressed the communications console with his thumb. It scanned his thumbprint for recognition and opened a channel of communication to the Councillor's main office. A female voice said,

'Yes?'

'Second Officer Spane, and I have the Prophet Darkness.'

'Of course,' the voice said and the door slid open silently on opposing magnetic runners. Darkness and Spane stepped through into quarters only slightly less profligate than the best hotels on board, and the owner of the voice stepped up to greet them. She was a First Officer, her ranking clearly marked by a neck band of alternating bright red and black gold. Darkness, although having the reputation and, when the occasion called for it, the disposition, of a monk, knew neither the denial nor inhibition, and shamelessly eyed the way the AG suit clung tightly to her. She eyed him back, even placing a hand on his immense forearm as she introduced herself.

'First Officer Williams,' she said, looking up at Darkness. 'So pleased to finally meet you, Prophet.'

'Darkness,' he corrected. 'We are certainly well met, First Officer.'

'Jane,' she said.

'Please?' said Spane. 'May we see the Councillor?' He did not try to hide the scorn in his voice.

Darkness nodded, and First Officer Williams removed her hand from his arm. She pointed across the vast room, and returned to her position at a computer monitor. The two men followed the direction of her gesture and saw a huge door set into the rear of the room. It swung open at their approach. Darkness felt a quiver of anticipation flutter in his stomach. They entered Councillor Farson's private office. The room was lined with a cellulose-composite that was grained and polished to resemble wood. The effect was flawless. Only when you put a flame to the walls would you know the difference, for the composite could not burn. What windows there were on the hull side of the room were slightly frog-eyed like the viewing windows above, but were thicker still, six inches or more. Permanent electromagnetic filters turned the Earth into a dark purple ball hanging in an even darker textured purple velvet sky. False-light came from the numerous suspended photocells that could be turned to any colour and any intensity, with the touch of a button. Farson had this ability built in alongside the gravity regulators in his head, so that he remotely had control of the lighting system, and

presumably the atmospheric system. His two flanking guards, both droids, both bigger by far than even Darkness himself, standing impassive with an arsenal of ready weapons at their disposal, did nothing to help the atmosphere. Their expressionless faces stared, unblinking and sombre. The doors shut behind Darkness, silent and massive, and internal dense-steel locks slammed home within the huge frames. All this turned Farson's office into one giant capsule, safe from intrusion. And escape, Darkness noted, with discomfort. Farson brightened the false-light; a piercing blue that turned their AG suits silver.

Chapter 2

THE COUNCILLOR wore robes that covered him entirely, but Darkness knew enough to see the damaged and scarred torso beneath. He was old, too, Farson. Some put his age at over two hundred, but Darkness thought one hundred and twenty was more accurate. Most major organs had been replaced by synthetic counterparts, and encasing his head, plugged all around into the support system collar that even he had to wear, was his face shield, and lower helmet. Made of the darkest steel-rubber alloy, it was immensely strong and as light as leather, and covered his mouth and neck. Providing he didn't lose his head, literally, there was no reason why Farson could not live another hundred years or more.

He spoke through a system of filters and grilles that lifelessly mechanised his voice. The dome of his head was littered with connector plugs, some filled, some empty. Trailing wires fed down through the back of his robe to unseen support units and remote devices that he controlled by thought. Once the upper helmet had been secured, again of deep grey steel-rubber alloy, this set with a transparent upper face plate, the whole formed an almost impenetrable shield.

He spoke now. Darkness felt disconcerted, watching the man speak and seeing nothing but scant movements of his eyes as he talked.

'Darkness,' he said. 'Thank you for coming in to see me.'

'I was summoned. I came.'

Farson nodded. 'So you did.' He abruptly shifted his gaze to Spane, so quickly that the smaller man gasped and shifted back a couple of feet.

'Leave us, Spane.'

The Second Officer began to voice his protest. One of Farson's droid guards, its face impassive, began to move, innumerable tiny organic motors controlling every movement, down to the very synthetic skin that cased the metal chassis. It spoke, its voice more natural and humanoid than Farson's. The final insult, thought Darkness, to have a droid guard appear more human than yourself. No wonder the man seemed shrivelled with bitterness.

'I will show you the door,' the droid said, gesturing silently behind Spane. Spane's protest dried in his throat and he backed away. The vast doors clunked open and he left.

'Ah, better,' said Farson. The guard settled back into place.

'I have to say I was a little bit disturbed by your last report, Darkness,' Farson said, gesturing to a computer screen. 'It lacked the... clarity of your others. Would you care to explain it further?'

'I would not, Councillor, but I suppose I must.' Darkness said, taking a step closer to Farson. Darkness heard tiny motors whirring; saw almost imperceptible movements from the droids. 'I, too, am disturbed. I have been on this ship for how long now? Eight years?' Farson nodded.

'The prophecy you have in front of you has disturbed me like no other in all that time. It lacks clarity, yes, but it is as I saw. I can see no more.'

'But it has no end, Darkness. The report has no end!' The robotic voice gained some human inflection as it rose in pitch.

'It has no end that you wish to see, Councillor. That is not the same as having no end. If it is so, then it is how it must be. I can see no more,' he repeated.

Farson took a deep breath.

'You may think, Prophet, that your secondment to this vessel is an easy ride, predicting meteor showers and hostile craft. So far you have done well, I'll admit it, and we have missed those meteor showers, and our battle division has kept us safe from hostility. But this is *not* an easy ride. I brought you here for one reason only, and not because this ship appears to be named for you. I brought you here because I thought you were the best there is, and yet you present me with this report that is nothing more than deranged nonsense!'

Darkness said nothing.

'Hostility, you predict, for the *Darkness Falls*. Great hostility, and yet you cannot see a proper end to it, nor even any means of defence! How do I prepare for something that even our greatest prophet cannot predict? These creatures you see? They have no name, as you see it? You do not see when they will arrive?'

'I called them nothing, Farson, because that is how I saw it. And for all I know, they are here already. I have no way of knowing.'

'But you present me with this...this...massacre and expect me to deal with it? WHAT NEXT, DARKNESS?'

'That, Councillor, is not why I am here. I do not present solutions. I only tell the predictions as I see them. It has always been your duty to interpret and solve. I am the messenger only.'

Farson screamed into his voice grilles and the sound made even Darkness flinch. The Councillor swept an arm across the desk, hurled the contents to the floor.

'You must predict again, Darkness. I am ordering you to predict again!' The voice had calmed but the venom in it was unmistakable. Farson knew very well that lowering oneself into a prophet state so soon after ending another had killed lesser prophets.

'Councillor, if I was to lower myself into the state again so soon, the results you get would be meaningless.'

'*THIS... IS MEANINGLESS!*' Farson screamed, pointing to the report that glowed on his monitor. 'You will predict again, and this time you will find an answer for me!'

Darkness inclined his head slowly.

'Whatever you wish, Councillor. I will predict again, and I will report back to you. However, if the results are not as you would hope them to be, I can do no more. You will have the only answer I can give.'

'You WILL NOT fail me, Prophet! Guards!'

The two droids began their slow, lumbering move forward. Darkness had no wish for confrontation.

'Give me two days,' he said as he left.

As the dense-steel bolts thumped into place, Farson activated the sound module in his skull that rendered his office soundproof. He screamed and then, using another device located just behind his left ear, raised the volume of his screams until the glass shattered on his drinks cabinet on the other side of his office. The screams stopped and he turned his attention to the report playing out on his monitor.

'I suppose now we will see whether you are worth the price, Darkness, eh?' he whispered to no one. He deactivated his guards with the flexing of another mind-controlled implant and watched.

Grainy images flickered on the screen, and it was as if a camera played out Darkness' very thoughts. It showed the interior of the ship. By the look of it, it appeared to be the storage hold on the lower floors. Farson had watched numerous times, and still the shock of seeing the creatures wrenched the breath from him.

They swarmed in through hold doors that appeared destroyed. They came like a swarm of night, black glistening things, vaguely humanoid, but with grossly elongated arms and legs ending in razor claws that clattered and tails that rent the air like whip cracks. Their heads were sleek black domes, ringed with translucent teeth that dripped fluid. Farson feared it was blood. He saw men, *his* men, form a counter-attack

line, and saw that line destroyed almost casually, bodies torn apart by claws and teeth and tails. The destruction went on, in different rooms, on all floors. Always relentless, all laid to utter waste. The final scene of the report, before it flickered back to the start, seemed to be from outside the *Darkness Falls* as it rolled and pitched in the darkness and finally plummeted to Earth. And again. And again.

No mention of when, how and why.

He had seen destruction before. Darkness had predicted it many times, never this wholesale and total, but always there was a when and a how and a why. And they had been prepared. But now? For all Farson knew, the creatures might be outside the hull this very minute, or in the hold. How long before they came for him?

He turned again to the report, replayed on the monitor. The creatures were swarming and killing as ever, but his attention was not on them this time. Rather he was looking to a darkened corner of the hold where he had earlier noticed a cowed figure in the shadows. It was too dark to see the figure's identity, but Farson felt sure that if he could discover that, he could avert disaster. Something about the figure disturbed him. The mere fact that it stood unharmed where others were sliced and cut and destroyed, spoke of its immunity to the creatures' wrath. And perhaps of its control over them?

He reactivated his guards and sent them from the office with clear instructions. Harsh breaths filtered out through his face grilles and he balled his fists against his thighs. He resisted the urge to scream his frustration, and was content with digging the flesh of his palms with his fingernails.

DARKNESS SETTLED into his quarters, cursing Councillor Farson. He dimmed the lights so that they were almost off and plugged a long thin tube into a connection port on his AG suit. The drugs that flowed through the tube turned it a faint iridescent blue for a brief moment, and then it cleared. Darkness' AG suit chilled the liquid as it pumped through and the chill passed to his veins as the cooled drug entered him through a capillary-thin needle inserted into his wrist. He shut his eyes and immediately felt the swaying dizziness that signalled the start of the prophecy state. He sat down on the edge of his bed and screwed up great handfuls of bed clothes as it fell upon him.

It had been a day and a half since his last descent into prophecy. The drug was designed not to induce the state itself, but rather to counteract the drugs that all prophets took daily to inhibit their visions. Prophets

were born that way and no one had yet solved the whys and hows of the matter. Without the inhibitor, they lived with continuous tortuous visions, monumental predictions that they could neither interpret nor control. Without the inhibitors, prophets died. They simply could not deal with the sheer influx of future possibilities.

Darkness lowered his breathing rate. His heart slowed to less than forty beats per minute. His mouth hung slack and his eyelids opened slowly, revealing the whites. They were shot through with red. The drugs were fully flushed through him now. He waited. The truth was, he could do no more now until the visions were over, until the drugs wore off and the inhibitor drugs began to take hold once more.

Darkness' final prophecy began in earnest, twenty minutes later, and didn't end for close to three days, by which time it was already too late.

Chapter 3

COUNCILLOR FARSON shut off his monitor, closing the report and filing it with the hundreds of others. Reports not only from Darkness, although they were by far the most numerous, but from the dozens of other Prophets he had hired aboard the *Darkness Falls*. He rose from his chair, organic motor-joints at his knees and hips helping him rise.

The image of the shadowed figure plagued him. He felt he should know who it was, *had* to know. Darkness must have seen it. He must know more than he's letting on. Farson moved quickly across his office, shutting down the lighting system and closing the window completely with a flex of his mind. The doors opened for him, and he startled First Officer Williams into a half-salute.

'Williams,' he crackled through his voice filters. 'Call a meeting of the Council. We must talk.'

First Officer Williams, who had not seen Farson out of his office in three months, was momentarily lost for words. She swallowed her disbelief as she saw the raging fury in his red eyes.

'Of course, Councillor. Right away?'

'Well, I was thinking a week on.....OF COURSE RIGHT AWAY!' he yelled, and Williams flinched. She backed to her desk and pushed a number of buttons on a console. Each was a personal communications line direct to each of Farson's four Second Councillors. There was no need for words. Once the Second Councillors saw that the line had been activated, they would come. Farson turned. The joint-motors whirred. Williams cringed. She hated the sight and thought of Farson more than anything aboard ship. The sounds he made, the looks he gave. She smiled sweetly.

‘Done, Sir.’ She turned away without suffering further fury and heard nothing more from him except the quiet thump of the doors closing behind him.

COUNCILLORS WENDALL and Crask were first to arrive, both red faced and breathing heavily, although whether that was from the stairs or the summons, it was hard to tell. They took their seats that had risen silently from the floor panels of Farson’s office. They fiddled nervously with the hems of their robes, waiting. Farson’s eye irrigators, that he needed more and more these days, sprayed saline onto his drying eyeballs at intervals with a soft hiss. The slow thrum of the ship’s engines became a hypnotising drone. Crask coughed.

‘Are you well, Sir?’ he asked. Farson didn’t reply, but indicated his body with a wave of an arm. Hearing the mechanics of this movement clearly, Crask wished he hadn’t asked. He fell silent.

Two more Councillors arrived, Haron and Harin. They were the only non-human Councillors aboard the *Darkness Falls*. They had fought hard for their right to serve. In appearance they looked vaguely simian, huge pads of hardened skin on their cheeks like those of male orang-utan. Their heads were completely bald, their skin a deep violet black. They were tall and thin, long arms ending in four fingered hands. They had appeared aboard ship over four years ago from apparently nowhere. They would not speak of their history, of their home. Limited medical studies had been carried out, as with any new inhabitant aboard. The medical Officers had been astounded by what they had found. Not one heart but four, multi chambered things that beat one after the other, the effect being a wave of contraction throughout the multiple organs. One single lung nearly two feet long. A multitude of other marvels, intricacies of anatomy that baffled then, and baffled still. The most astounding feature of the two was their symbiosis. It was assumed that Haron was the male, Harin the female. Haron was the taller, so that Harin’s head rested into the space between neck and shoulder. A thin tube of flesh, the same deep violet, passed between the two at chest height, and could be retracted into either one of them. Their arms wrapped protectively around one another and they seemed to melt into one another. They were independent beings, no doubt about it, but they shared their needs, their nourishment and a hundred other things through the tube. They were, in essence, conjoined twins. And when they spoke, it was in unison.

'Councillors,' they acknowledged with a perfectly timed dip of their inky heads. Their voices were milliseconds out of phase, and the sound was like hearing dozens of them at once. There were echoes and wide space in that sound.

'Haron. Harin,' said Farson, greedily eying the pair. It was common knowledge that he had tried to bed Harin some years ago, spectacularly unsuccessfully. It never stopped his lust for her. She blinked impassively at him, her eyes large ovals of jade green, flecked with gold.

'Is there a problem, Councillors Farson?' they asked.

'A prophecy has been made, Councillors. It is not favourable.' Farson believed that it was always best to get to the point. 'It shows our destruction. Our *utter* destruction.'

'But we will plan for it as we have had to before. Defend ourselves?' said Crask. 'Why this meeting, Councillor Farson? Can Captain Andiss not ready our defences?'

The other Councillors murmured in agreement.

'We cannot plan because we have no idea when or how it will happen.'

Haron and Harin spoke. 'Who was the Prophet?' They seemed not to care for the prophecy itself, merely the reputation of the Prophet.

'It was Darkness, which makes this whole matter more confusing. Always his prophecies have been...' he paused for a moment, weary. 'You all know, he has never made an inaccurate prophecy yet. It will be easier to watch, Councillors.'

He played the filed report. The Councillors watched in silence.

Haron and Harin were the first to speak. Their ethereal phasing voices lent a particular eeriness to the closing scenes.

'We know these creatures,' they said, their deep, normally smooth brows wrinkled as if in deep thought. 'They have no name where they come from. The Black Death some have called them. Others, Eaters of the Night. Our people call them Harii's demons. Whatever, we know of no army that could withstand that onslaught. Especially as we know nothing of their intentions, their plans, their meaning.'

'Their plans?' spat Crask. 'Does that report not answer your question? Their plan is our destruction.' His eyes flicked from one twin to the next, unsure as to which was formulating the thought.

'Do not be fooled by their apparent mindless slaughter,' said the twins. 'They most definitely have a plan. Watch again, and this time, concentrate on the dark corners of the room.'

Ah, thought Farson, they have spotted the figure.

But, no. The report was replayed and as the Councillors watched intently, they saw something that even Farson had missed. Into each corner, in every dark recess of the hold, prisoners were being rounded, herded into tight corrals formed by the black sleekness of the Harii's demons. Those that offered resistance were being slaughtered, it was true, but *only* those. The sheer ferocity of the attack gave the impression of total destruction, but it was far from it. Rather they were taking away the fighting force of the *Darkness Falls* and leaving the workers.

The scenario was becoming more chilling still.

'It is as if,' said Wendall, his breathing becoming laboured, 'they are harvesting us for slaves.'

The statement was so simply put that suddenly the truth of it was clear. Crask stifled a cry, and even Farson paled as he thumped his hand down onto the table.

'We had heard of this behaviour, but never witnessed it,' said the twins.

'Well, now you have,' said Farson bitterly.

'This cannot be,' said Wendall. Crask sat with his head in his hands. 'Darkness must have made a mistake.'

'I thought the same, but this is Darkness. If we cannot trust his prophecies... ?' said Farson.

'Then we are doomed. Our forces cannot withstand that, even if we knew when they were coming. We just cannot match them.' Crask raised his head as Wendall spoke, and his red ringed eyes looked mournfully at the Council.

'We must try,' he said. 'We must make our forces ready and we must head to Earth where we can raise further aid. We still have that hope.'

'It is futile!' spat Farson. 'They could attack now! For all we know, they are mustering themselves as we speak. We simply do not have choices. In the light of that, I may have some answer for you. I was hoping one of you would have spotted something I saw in the report. I will play it again. It may be a glimmer of hope, it may not. But a glimmer of hope is always preferable to no hope at all.'

Crask, Wendall and even Haron and Harin brightened visibly at this, although the look was soon dulled as they watched the report again. As each scene played out, they saw some new facet to the Harii's demons' plan, some new atrocity. Farson pointed out the dark figure standing like a statue in the corner.

'It could be nothing more than a man frozen in fear,' said Crask, feeling emboldened with the doom hanging over them.

'Look again, Councillor Crask. See how the man's lips are moving? See his hands? He is summoning these creatures, by God! I am sure of it!' Farson slammed the table again, the motor-joints adding extra weight to his fury.

'But who the hell is it?' asked Wendall.

'Are you able to look deeper, Councillor Farson? To move in closer?' said the twins.

'Yes,' he said cautiously. He operated a number of keys to the side of the monitor and the view zoomed in onto the man's face. It showed nothing more. Dark and hopelessly blurred now, he turned away from the screen in disgust. 'Nothing,' he whispered.

'Look at his chin, Councillors. There is a fresh wound there. It may be that that is all we have to go on.'

The Councillors thought but could not put any names to that semi-face. As abhorrent as the viewing had become, each of the five Councillors present watched the scenes again and again. They were unable to glean anything further, and twenty minutes later, Farson killed the monitor.

The twins were the first to break the silence.

'Do you trust your Prophet, Farson?'

'No. However, I have no choice but to trust him enough to have to rely on his next prophecy. I asked him to read this situation again.'

Wendall spoke. 'When did he make this report?'

'A day and a half ago, more or less.' He knew what was coming and silenced Wendall and Crask as they jointly began the same argument, sounding horribly like Haron and Harin.

'But, that is too...' they started.

'It is too soon, yes, undoubtedly, but what other choice do we have? I just cannot help feeling that I am missing something.' He said this last almost to himself.

'Should we guard Darkness?' asked the twins. 'He must be protected.'

'My guards are with him as we speak,' said Farson, a little abruptly. 'Although whether we need to protect him, or protect us from his damnable visions, I have no idea!'

'You don't think Darkness is behind this?' said Crask, his eyes widening. 'He has ever been our friend, Farson. You cannot shoot him for being the messenger. He is only doing what you have asked of him. That is all he has *ever* done.' Crask seemed to realise he had gone too far, and shrank into his chair.

'GET OUT!' Farson bellowed. 'All of you. We will reconvene for the next report. And think, damn you all. Think!'

The room reverberated with his yells long after the Councillors left. He opened his window filters and stared at his home, floating like a purple glass marble in the velvety depths of space. He had time enough at least to do that.

Chapter 4

DARKNESS ROSE from his vision like a drowning man to the surface of a lake. He gasped air, tore at the tubes connecting him to the drugs, and slumped forward onto his knees. He pulled the numerous connection hoses from the ring of ports around his neck. The last to come free was the cable that connected him to the computer drives in the lining of his AG suit. From the information downloaded onto these, he would make a copy of his prophecy onto the double encrypted report discs. He hoped, prayed even, that what he copied to those discs was a result of the insufficient rest time between visions. He prayed that what he had seen was not the whole truth of the matter. His hands still shook from the shock of it. The terror and destruction. The blood and the death. The betrayal. And lastly, that face. Had he truly seen it? It was as if he had grasped its identity at the last minute and then lost it again.

First, although he had been in a state of coma for the last sixty hours, the thing he needed now most of all was rest. The vision, however disturbing it had been, would have to wait.

He removed his AG suit entirely, lay down to sleep. The atmosphere generators in his apartment took over from his AG suit, taking their cues from the half dozen personal sensors set into the bed's frame. Small monitors flickered into life on a far wall, and they showed his apartment from the outside, security cameras sweeping the doorway and corridor at intervals, the software running them tuned to bray an alarm if intruders were sensed.

The software didn't consider the two droid guards as a threat, and certainly they were not exhibiting any threatening behaviour. The cameras scanned them again, and this time picked up the signal emitting from the black collars they both wore. The software recognised Councillor Farson's guards and turned the cameras to scan elsewhere.

Coffee began to brew noisily in Darkness' kitchen area. He rose and stretched, pulling on his AG suit in one fluid, if slightly stiff, movement. The atmosphere generators recognised this and switched off.

He drank deeply of the scalding brew, allowing the pain to wash his mind clear of all thought. He was lucky enough to have an apartment hull-side of the *Darkness Falls*, and using the control panel set into the wall near an aperture, he opened the opaque glass iris. He studied the swell of Earth, as if it were completely alien to him. He felt a sudden urge to protect the fragile planet however he could, and raised a hand to the window to cup the globe in his palm.

A small compartment situated at the small of his back contained a microscopic processor and direct remote feed connector to a report disc generator in the rear of his apartment. He fed a fresh disc into the generator and operated the processor, previously downloaded with his latest prophecy via the connection collar, with a touch pad on the disc generator's control panel. Soon the entire report was fed through the ether into the reception ports of the generator. The report would be finalised and ready for viewing in less than ten minutes. Darkness would not view it here. All he had were vague memories, flashes of content, not always accurate to the finalised report. It was as if he might see one version of events, and the report finalised another. The outcome was always the same, but the road to the end could vary wildly. He may see something in the vision that had no bearing on the outcome, and sometimes miss the most vital part. He never interpreted, but this time hoped he was wrong.

Darkness drew himself out of this meaningless thought. What was done, was done. What was finalised in his report, could not be changed. He would leave the analysis of it to Farson. Still the face kept haunting him, as if he should know it, but couldn't grasp its identity.

OUTSIDE THE door, the security cameras picked up the dull gleam of light on synthetic skin, as the two droid guards sent by Farson to stand guard at Darkness' door returned to their master. They moved silently. If asked, Farson would not have had an answer as to why he had set them there. Perhaps he was looking after his most valuable property in this time of flux. Perhaps he no longer trusted Darkness, or himself. Whatever the answer was, the droids had no information to pass back to Farson other than that which he expected. Darkness had locked himself away in his quarters and had not risen for three days. The guards entered Farson's office and immediately went to stand behind him at his desk. He had not left the office since the Council meeting. His skin was drawn and grey, etched with worry and malnourishment. It seemed he

had not eaten for two days at least, and the guards' olfactory sensors picked up minute traces of disease in the air around him.

He pressed the intercom and spoke to First Officer Williams.

'Send for the Prophet,' he croaked, his voice grilles and filters straining to make his words heard.

He came an hour later. Farson noted how the Prophet's eyes seemed sunken and black, how his skin had lost its glow.

'You don't look at all well, Darkness,' he said, all too aware of the irony of that comment in the light of his own condition.

'The report, Farson. I have it here. It will be my last for you. My last for anyone.'

He slung the report disc onto Farson's table, and at the soft chime it made hitting the leather surface, the two droid guards opened their eyes and straightened. Farson stood.

He appeared to exert great control and left the disc where it had fallen.

'Tell me about it, Darkness. Did you learn anything new?

'It is the same, Farson. The creatures come swarming in, and lay waste to the ship. I see no way of stopping them, and again I see no definite clue as to the time of their arrival. As I said to you three days ago, they may be outside the ship as we speak.'

'So you did,' said the Councillor, his voice strengthening. 'And yet you were wrong that time, were you not? Is it not possible that you are wrong this time?'

'Perfectly,' the Prophet replied. 'And yet you and I know it shows the truth. Or some form of it. The only way I can see this thing ending is to evacuate and send the crew and passengers to Earth in the life-ships. And do it now. Before...'

'And leave the *Darkness Falls* in the hands of these demons? You know I cannot do that. There must be another way.'

'I see no other way.'

Farson appeared to consider this for a moment, and then he reached for the disc. He inserted it into the slot to the side of the monitor and began playing Darkness' final prophecy.

THERE WAS blackness and a piercing white light began in the centre of the screen, growing in size and brightness until Farson was sure it would burn right through the monitor. He darkened his face shield. The light changed colour, slowly, almost imperceptibly, until it was a faint throbbing red. A split appeared. It seemed that black water rushed in, and it took Farson a few seconds to recognise the split as a tear in the

ship's hull. The black water was not water at all but a rush of Harii's demons, innumerable and senseless.

He cried out and leaned back away from the monitor.

The creatures continued to pour in, and as terrible as the sight was, Farson started scanning the edges of the vision for sight of the cowed figure in the previous report. The vision moved throughout the ship, room upon room filling with the creatures as if with liquid night. Farson began to see indiscriminate killing, thousands of corpses piling in the corners of the largest room. He also saw men and women, their faces obscured by the darkness, herded into the hold, into any available space, and held there by terror.

And suddenly, there amid the bloodshed and the gore, he saw the shadowy figure, scarred chin bleeding fresh blood. The identity again was maddeningly out of reach and yet he felt he knew.

'I KNOW, I KNOW!' he screamed at the monitor.

In the background, the cloud veiled orb of Earth began to change. A shadow drew across it, darkening it until the globe was a black ball hanging in space. Farson knew what that meant. The demons had reached Earth.

He bowed his head.

'So they have reached Earth,' he said.

'It would appear that is their destination, yes.'

'Have you no idea who the figure is? Is he leading them, controlling them?'

Darkness turned away. 'I have no ideas. He may be leading them, but as I have always said, my prophecies are not always literal. It may be that he has a pivotal responsibility in all this, but perhaps knows nothing of it. His is shown there because of his importance, not directly because he causes all this, or because of his literal geography. He may not even be aboard. Perhaps the presence of the demons on board is nothing more than a mirror for the attack on Earth. I cannot say. The visions are over, Farson. This was my last. I have no control over them anymore. I do not even trust them. I say we contact Earth and warn them, and then make ourselves ready to face whatever we have to face.'

'You are not in control here, Darkness. I am.'

Darkness spread his arms and allowed Farson the decision. The First Councillor summoned his Council.

They arrived as one, and Darkness presumed they had been waiting for this summons. Wendall and Crask sat in their customary chairs, while the symbiotic organism of Haron and Harin stood, their heads

inclined, hands clasped in a rare show of intimacy perhaps not suited to a meeting of the Council.

'We have the report?' the symbiot inquired.

'That we do, Councillors,' replied Farson. Darkness did not like the new calmness in his voice.

They watched in silence.

Wendall was the first to speak.

'But this shows us nothing new! Nothing of our escape, of our salvation. It shows no hope for our home planet and no hope for us!'

'Then perhaps there is none,' said Haron and Harin in unison.

'I cannot accept that!' spluttered Wendall. Crask, fingers knotted tightly in the hem of his Council robes, said nothing. He had gone the pale grey of old cheese.

'Accept it we must, Councillors. I propose to contact my counterpart on Earth and convey this report to him. They must take whatever action they feel necessary. I feel the only way through this is to discover the identity of the figure and prevent him from calling his minions.'

'As I said,' Darkness began, 'there is nothing to say he is instrumental in all this.' He turned to the Councillors. 'I have been trying to tell Farson that I cannot vouch for the validity of this latest prophecy. It was too soon after the previous one, and my mind has not recovered fully.' He implored the Council, hating the sound of his voice but saying it anyway.

Before the others could speak, Farson asked, his voice amplified slightly and sounding stronger by the minute, 'Is it the case, Darkness, that you cannot prophesise a lie?'

'That is true, Farson, yes. It is also the case that when a Prophet is *ordered* to perform a prophecy, and one so soon after another, that the results might not be trusted as they should. I admit that the report is accurate inasmuch as it shows an event that *will* happen. But exactly this way?' He gestured to the monitor, still playing out the report. 'I cannot say.'

'So although this person may not be the cause, he is somehow connected? I feel that if we know his identity, we can prevent this!' Crask blurted. 'We must prevent this.'

'Are you all so proud as to refuse a total evacuation? There are other ships. There are other worlds than yours. And perhaps an abandoned ship will not send the Harii's demons scurrying so readily for its place of origin.' Haron and Harin spoke softly.

'Yes,' said Wendall. 'Evacuate. That will save us, and we can warn Earth.' He began to rise.

'SIT!' screamed Farson, his bulk towering over the Second Councillor, his voice distorted by the grille and the volume to which he had raised it. Wendall sat immediately.

Farson returned to his seat and spoke again.

'We must go from here and think hard, Councillors. If there is a plan to survive then I am confident we will find it. If there is no plan, then it matters little how much we discuss around this table. Go now, and pray we have the time.'

The Council looked at one another aghast at Farson's apparent lack of concern. Little did they know he was exerting all his considerable strength not to reduce every one of them to a bloody pulp. He glowered at Darkness, remembering his comment that he was merely a messenger. Farson truly wondered. He darkened his face shield further to hide the blood seeping into the corners of his eyes. The irrigators there sprayed constantly to keep the blood away. Farson was sure that the pressure in his head had finally burst a vein there. He sat motionless as the Councillors stood. He shut off the sound into his ears and the Councillors' protests and whines began to quieten. He closed his eyes finally and the last thing he saw was Darkness imploring him silently. And then he saw darkness.

Chapter 5

THE FIRST explosion, an hour later, rocked the ship and tore a huge gaping hole in the side facing Earth. Two hundred crew and passengers died in this first attack. There was no fire, but a blinding white light and then black rolling plasma that scorched everything it touched. Those who saw the initial attack were not alive long enough to think about it. Those that saw the destruction on monitors abandoned their posts and fled. Some died in the rush, others of pure panic. The huge ship's engines thrummed and whined in protest as they struggled to keep it stable.

Darkness was in his quarters when he heard the explosion. A few seconds later the shock wave threw him from his bed and across the room. He hit the wall hard, and lay for a moment, stunned. He switched on his communication port and saw nothing but white snow. The sound had gone too. He tried another, less secure channel, and saw snatches of terrified faces, heard screams and shouting. Then that too was gone. He slammed a fist into the glass display and it shattered. Cursing as blood ran from his knuckles, he managed to stand and make his way to the door. As he suspected, the opening mechanism was damaged, and the door opened perhaps two feet. It was enough for him to squeeze through and he snatched at a heavy woollen robe as he left. If the communication had gone, then surely the heating had too. Their control rooms were on the same floor. Darkness shuddered as he imagined his death not from the attack itself, but from the destruction of the atmosphere generators. He had to find his way to the main communications floor, or as close to it as he could manage.

People rushed by him, screaming, bloody. He pulled the robe around him and made his way to the stairs. He was met at the head of the stairs by Spane and First Officer Williams, who seemed to gravitate toward him like he was their salvation.

'Is this it, then?' Spane said, barely loud enough to be heard over the panic.

'It would appear so, Councillor,' Darkness replied, looking at neither of his companions. He relished Williams' closeness however, comfortable in her warmth. They reached the communications floor after some fifteen minutes. The stairs were crowded, the main flow with them rather than against, but the sheer mass of bodies made the journey slow. Darkness barged into the control rooms and stood aghast at the destruction there.

Control panels were scorched and smoking. The demons seemed to have penetrated here, laid their destruction and left, for other than a black oily smell that pervaded, there was nothing. There was a sound like a great dying beast that Darkness took to be the engines failing. Indeed as he watched, the final control screen showed the last dying moments of a huge engine as it sparked and burst into flames.

Darkness went cold. The end seemed perilously close now, and yet he felt there was something he could do. Perhaps if he made it to the escape life-ships, he could at least aid those left alive. He turned suddenly, Spane and Williams following, the blank shock showing vividly on their pale faces.

The escape deck was in a state of pure panic. The Harii's demons had yet to breach this area, and everywhere were groups of people fighting for access to the life-ships. Darkness strode swiftly across the deck, pushing people left and right. He searched for the red gold Officers collar among the crowds and saw desperately few. He thrust himself through a crowd of people struggling to board a life-ship. As he reached the door to the ship, a second explosion rocked the escape deck. People screamed as one, and Williams, who had reached Darkness's side, fell against him, clutching at his robe. Fire and shards of white hot hull casing swept through the deck, reducing the number of living bodies by a third.

Darkness saw his first real glimpse of the Harii's demons. More horrible and blacker than any of his prophecies, they swarmed like black treacle through the gaping wound in the ships hull. In doing so, effectively blocking it, they dramatically reduced the venting of atmosphere through the hole, and temporarily saved hundreds of crew and passengers from being swept out into the void. Blood and bodies flew as the demons coursed through the remaining survivors. There was too much confusion and not enough light now to see clearly, but Darkness was sure a number of survivors were being herded, just as he predicted. Fear had yet to take hold of him, and he gathered Williams to him tightly.

'Follow me,' he said, the depth of his voice rather than the volume of it sufficient so that she understood. He forced himself against the flow of bodies, actually towards the glowing rent in the hull, towards the nightmare influx.

The demons were flowing harder than ever, and the first cold pinches of fear gripped him as he watched them rise up the curved walls to continue their progress unhindered across the ceiling. Darkness ran to one wall, on the opposite side to their original attack and made for a life-ship that had remained unassaulted by the panicked throng. He threw the hood of his robe over his head, and held Williams out in front of him. His breath began to come in ragged gasps now, and the life-ship began to draw close.

Suddenly a violent blow to his right side sent him tumbling alarmingly towards the wall. He had time to turn his cowled face upwards before a dully chromed foot came crashing into it.

FARSON WATCHED as his guards cleared the way. He was dimly aware of his Prophet struggling to rise, as the guards kicked into him again. He felt a measure of regret, but that was soon overshadowed by a desire to escape his death. He reached the Prophet and mentally ordered his guards to leave him. The least he could do was give the man a fighting chance.

And then he saw.

Darkness rose, aided by First Officer Williams, leaning heavily on her. All sounds of screaming and the sizzling crackle of the chitinous invaders running over one another ceased. Darkness lifted a hand to his face and wiped blood from a fresh cut on his chin. Suddenly the memory of the cowled figure in the Prophet's reports came to him, and he recognised him at last. It was Darkness then, in those reports. Darkness standing in the shadows, chanting, controlling or leading these creatures. Confusion clouded his mind, for was not Darkness fleeing as he was? Perhaps he had lost control of the mindless black horror. His face shield, already at its most protective, darkened further as his rage doubled, trebled. He screamed again, and at this last his ears became deaf to it, blood poured into his throat from ruptured vessels there, and he sank to his knees, the joint motors smoking, overworked. In his anger and confusion he failed to send kill orders to his guards, and as Darkness saw at last what Farson himself saw, as he wiped the blood on his robes, the realisation of his role in all this hit him. He ceased to think, rushed to the prone Councillor, and from his robe, hidden, he drew a weapon. It

was a twin handled razor, except the blade between was fashioned from light and darkness, so that to be cut with it at once created a wound and its exact opposite. The disparity between the two effectively caused the affected area to cease to exist. Darkness threw it almost carelessly at the Councillor. He turned at the last moment, and so did not see the weapon cut through him as if through air, did not see it increase in size until the void was fully four feet across. The Councillor became unravelled at it touch, and in the spilling of organs and synthetic blood, flashes of light and darkness played like the rippling fire across the edges of a burning piece of paper in a soft breeze. Farson fell in two, dead as he thought he would never be. All this took no more than ten seconds. Darkness retrieved the weapon quickly and felt comforted by the warm thrum in his hand.

With the cessation of stimuli from his thought controls, the two droid guards fell still. Darkness edged past them, and grabbing Williams, made for the life-ship. He glanced once at the influx of Harii's demons, and seeing the sheer scale of numbers, ran faster. He had perhaps fifteen seconds before they reached him, he thought.

When they were twenty feet from the life-ship, sensors set into the floor instructed the doors to swing open.

'RUN!' Darkness roared and pushed Williams harder. She reached the life-ship and rushed on board. By activation of those same sensors, it engines were warming up, a low throb that pulsed through the tiny craft. Darkness withdrew his razor once more and as he turned, falling into the life-ship, a single demon, slightly ahead of its fellows, reached him. The stench from its glistening mouth overwhelmed him and he barely had time to throw his weapon before the translucent teeth sliced through the air, inches from his face. The demon fell in two, as did several of its companions directly behind it. Darkness' fall came to his aid, for his momentum carried him briefly out of their reach and the door hissed shut firmly. Darkness dared not open his eyes until he felt and heard the powerful roar of the escape thrusters jetting him from the stricken ship. As the life-ship tumbled from the *Darkness Falls*, Darkness watched in horror as the swarm of Harii's demons coated it like tar, shadowing the brief explosions from within.

'You killed Farson,' Williams said, shocked, as if this were the only piece of cognitive information she could hold on to.

'He knew,' said Darkness holding his head in his hands. 'I brought this.' Even as he said it, he could not grasp its meaning. He had had no part in bringing the creatures, in fact had been fleeing them. Confusion

wracked him, and he felt a portion of his mind collapse under the pressure.

'You killed him,' she said again. Darkness approached her, meaning to comfort her, when she fell suddenly silent. Blood bubbled from her mouth. She coughed and her eyes grew wide. Darkness looked on, paralysed, and watched as a spot of blackness appeared between her breasts. The spot grew, until it appeared to push through the fabric of her AG suit. She slumped forward, as if held up by the black rod that was now forcing its way out of her, and in an instant Darkness knew.

The Harii's demon on board the life-ship pushed it whip tail all the way through First Officer Williams' lifeless body. It whipped from side to side, and the body fell, lacerated and torn. Darkness stood facing his own death, all insectile mandibles and black glassy carapace, razor edged, as the prophecy cleared. His part of the Prophecy seemed not to bring the creatures to the ship, nor yet to control them. He longed for death, approached the creature, willed it to destroy him as it had his companion. He prophesied one last time.

He saw his life-ship tumbling through space, its destination pre-programmed and unchangeable. He saw the first soft glows, like a red dust storm around its pointed hull as it breached Earth's atmosphere. He saw it crash land into desert, its cargo of two dead and one living spill out on to the hard packed sand. The final view, before the razor tipped spear of a tail pierced the life from him, was of a shadow swarming over the surface of the Earth like a spill of oil over the surface of a ball. His part of the Prophecy was not to bring the creatures to the *Darkness Falls* then, nor to master them.

It was merely to bring them to Earth.

He screamed as his blood spilled within the life-ship. He grew cold and still as his guilt and sorrow bled out with it. The Harii's demon feasted on the corpses, and had it known such things, would have recognised the red dust storm around the pointed hull. It would also have recognised the feelings of birth it experienced as it shed razor sharp scales in the form of black glassy larvae that quickly burrowed into the hull casing to feed on the organics there. And when it landed, it found that its claws and jointed limbs worked equally well in gravity and on hard packed sand as they had in the void of space.

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