

C. E. TAYLOR

# ANGOLIN

A futuristic cityscape at night, viewed through a window. The sky is a mix of deep blue and vibrant red/orange, suggesting a sunset or a dramatic event. Several tall, slender skyscrapers are visible, some with glowing windows. The foreground shows the dark interior of the room, with a window frame and some blurred lights. The overall atmosphere is one of a high-tech, possibly dystopian, environment.

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*To my husband, whose love and support helped make  
this work possible, who believed in me always, and who read  
my drafts even though he doesn't like science fiction.*

# PROLOGUE

The war room uprights were filled with maps and data blocks. General Gennet knew the suns were setting behind them; daylong cloistering and covered windows hadn't dulled his senses. But the battlespace awareness points and strategic possibilities held his attention so deeply that he didn't bother to turn to his Fifth Order counterpart entering the room.

"This is our objective, I take it?" said General Estes. Even after decades of friendship, he never was one for hellos.

"It is," Gennet answered, darting his eyes back and forth over the information updates and absorbing every refresh. "This is Negara, our enemy's new target for a stronghold. It's three hours south-southeast by standard M-7 gunship, much less if we get the new troop transports I requested. And good evening!"

"The *new* transports? The ones equipped with TimeSpace drives? I wouldn't count on it," said Estes. "TS might have been commonplace technology to our ancestors, but we're still relearning it. High Command won't release it for combat before it's ready."

"I beg to differ, Eldric, and so should you. I think you know they will." Gennet peeled himself from the uprights. "We need to get down there undetected, past the enemy's primitive satellites and surveillance craft. HC knows this and so does Parliament—the Kraal will grant what I ask."

"Mmm," Estes said with a bit of a sniff. "I've read your reports on the matter, Vieron. I also hear every councilor and legate in Angolin has visited you on this—the Seventh Order will become the *new* Kraal if you're not careful. But help me understand why we're doing this.

Negara is down in the Mare Vresel, six thousand clicks away. It's halfway around the hemisphere; if the enemy wants a foothold down there, why not let them have it? By the gods, this makes no sense."

Gennet eyed him, mystified. "Did you read all of my reports or just those involving you and Fifth directly? You know what's at stake as much as I do. You have to."

The uprights' shifting hues danced across Gennet's deep-brown skin and Estes's pallor. In lieu of a response, he received a blank stare at his hand resting on his sword pommel; Gennet was one of few in the Angolin Guard to wield the time-honored weapon.

"Last month"—he unhanding his sword and continued—"the Kraal received a diplomatic message. In short, it warned that the enemy is planning permanent troop installations on this end of the Abyss. We both know why: after all this time, the Carmogen finally know about Angolin. They're searching for us, and harder than ever."

"After nearly a millennium? I doubt it," Estes said. "We're called the Hidden Realm for a reason. The ancients were more than thorough in our concealment, and we've excelled at it since. We can't jeopardize that by rushing outside the Cloak for this kind of operation, we'd do better to stay put and remain unseen. Why waste lives and resources on the Kraal's useless whims?"

"The enemy is headed in this direction, Eldric. Isn't that enough? If even a portion of our technology gets into their hands, they'll over-run this entire planet, starting with us. Angolin will be neither safely hidden nor *safe* any longer."

"This diplomatic message," Estes said, narrowing his eyes, "who sent it?"

"The foreign secretariat of Lena. Who else?"

"Lenans! We're listening to them now? They may have unparalleled intelligence services, but they've never been reliable allies in or out of combat."

“They’ve always done what we asked, if only just,” Gennet rebutted. “They’ve also never betrayed our hiding. It’s us who keep to ourselves; we can’t blame anyone but ourselves for that.”

“. . . I recall reports of Lenan aid being tepid in past operations.”

“And *I* recall them providing it anyway,” Gennet threw back. “We would have lost the Campaign of 1370 without them. Their help allowed us to remain hidden. I was there. You weren’t.”

Estes sighed hard, eyes flitting across the uprights-illuminated floor. He removed his cloak, tossed it across a chairback, and loosened his collar as though it was strangling him . . . His jaw quivered. He eyed Gennet before blinking a single, recognizably tight blink indicating he was receiving an incoming call.

“Do you want to take that in private, Eldric?” Gennet asked.

“No! It’s not important.” Estes straightened. “So you trust the Lenans then?”

“Not ‘trust,’ exactly, I wouldn’t go that far. I understand their position; that’s the distinction.”

“From one containment op back in ’70? And now, they’ve conveniently stoked our fears to get us down into the Vresel to do what they could achieve themselves. What else could they intend with this beyond securing our protection?”

Gennet marveled at the hastily cobbled calm’s collapse. “Look past that intent to see their role in this. Carmogen inroads over here won’t stop with Angolin. Lena is equally vulnerable: huge army but no energy weapons or timespatial shrouds to protect it. We have these advantages; they’ll provide whatever assistance we require, regardless of who’s protecting who. Simple. Try to add sight of that to your pleasant mood this evening—”

“You know this won’t be a garden stroll,” Estes interrupted. “Negara will be our biggest operation in decades and instigated by a people we know little about.”



“Or have little faith in, Eldric. That’s your real meaning,” said Gennet. “But this isn’t about Lena; it’s about our survival on this world. We depend completely on stealthtech now that the enemy is developed enough to cross the Abyss and reach this side of Tentim. TS-shrouded ships, Angolin’s Cloak—if they get hold of the technologies we’ve revisited . . .” He leaned in, eyebrows lifted. “They discovered the Kay Allendë three years ago, look what happened there. A proud warrior culture more advanced than the Carmogen is now a race of battle conscripts and slave labor. We’ll suffer worse if we *don’t* go to Negara.”

“And you and HC believe a handful of TimeSpace drives barely out of workups will spare us from that fate somehow?”

Gennet sighed annoyance. *Is nothing at all being heard?* “Right now, the enemy thinks the Angolinian Rise is down in the Vresel. We can keep it that way if we take this opportunity and don’t squander it.”

“Whether we do this or not, Vieron, what about the collaborators?” Estes asked, shifting tack after apparently having run out of arguments. “You told me a while ago—insisted, actually—that you suspect plotting right here to aid the Carmogen. If that’s true and if it finds its way to Negara, how do we stop it? How do we fight the enemy and our own people at the same time?”

“You expect me to have all the answers. I don’t, of course,” Gennet said. “But I don’t intend to let Angolin fall to invasion”—he peered into cold eyes icing over the strangely inscrutable wiles the other brought with him—“or treason.” He turned to the surrounding uprights. “Close all files and end.”

Real windows replaced informational ones. Gennet looked beyond Nieuw Holland Valley toward the Great Lake. Far away on its opposite shore, he could just make out the Parliament Pavilion and High Command buildings atop the Kraal. Beyond the government citadel, fading sunlight rendered the Angolin Centrum’s skyscrapers as pastel

needles against the East Ranges. Civilian traffic plying the sky lanes glinted like snowflakes on winter winds . . .

Movement below caught his eye. A crowd filled the base entrance court around two officers, unequal in rank, but in a heated exchange. Their shouts couldn't penetrate the windows' translucent metal, but mouths definitely moved in argument. And bystanders intervened when words led to shoves.

"I understood you ran this base with a nemurite fist, Vieron," said Estes. "Is this what passes for discipline here at Seventh?"

Gennet ignored the sarcastic quip of a question as he watched the men spar. He had grown accustomed to their altercations. And now, he *counted* on them.

The subordinate officer turned and walked away. A sword much like Gennet's hung from his belt, an immediate identifier. "That must be Dharmen Tate. I've heard about him," Estes said.

"No doubt," Gennet replied. "Excellent officer. Highly capable. A bit rough-edged, though. And that whole package makes him the perfect choice for my plans. You asked how we'll handle traitors and the enemy at once? He's it."

"Him? You can't be serious," Estes said. "How do you expect to root out collaborators with that hothead leading your efforts? I smell another gamble here, Vieron. You have a few of them tonight. His dossier is impressive and he gets a lot of praise, but I don't care if he is Nüren Tate's son, he's a standard-issue boot if I ever saw one. I've seen more professionalism in cadets."

"That's a snap assessment on your part, of which *you* have a few tonight. But it won't matter at all if he succeeds. I'm not worried." Gennet raised his chin, comfortably settled in his convictions as he continued to look down below. "And believe you me, if treachery really has seeped into my ranks, the lieutenant is just the man I need to flush it out."

## CHAPTER 1

# NEGARA

**H**ave you heard the rumor, Rem-E?

If you are referring to the upcoming campaign, sir, I have. Campaign. Interesting term. Why not call it a containment operation like last time? What's High Command up to?

"Containment" may not adequately describe the operation's scope, Lieutenant. The information I have compiled indicates that this will be—

*A big one. The enemy's getting closer and closer to us. I'd like to be surprised, but I'm not.*

Do you require anything further before I enter rest mode for the night, sir?

*Just one thing, Rem-E: What combat survival files do you have for tropical warfare?*

*How in the blazing suns did we get into this?*

Dharmen wiped sweat from his eyes and tried to focus. He and his comrade fought heat, flies, and fear with every fleeing step. *Gods, you brought us to this crazy jungle rise. Do you have to prey on us like this too?* He dismissed the paranoid blasphemy and snatched a glance behind him. They had managed (he hoped) to lose the enemy, but who could be sure? And especially with all this seemingly aimless meandering.

“Theus, is this really the way?”

“Course it is, Lieutenant. Trust me. Don’t you recognize that tree over there, the big one with the two trunks?”

“How can you possibly tell one tree from another *here*?” Dharmen replied.

“Just believe me for once, Tate. You can’t always be in control of everything,” Theus said, nearly breathless as he hacked a useable path through the bush. “I’m sure this is the way back to the river. It has to be!”

“If I wasn’t reassured before, I am now. Thanks for that.” *Hear that, you bloody Carmis, Theus is sure!* Dharmen would have shouted it, but they had already been discovered once and barely escaped. If the Netherlords wanted them, he wasn’t about to make it that easy.

He looked to his side, then forward. Theus instantaneously appeared far ahead but faded from sight. His personal TimeSpace generator’s temporal interruptions were randomizing again. He vanished entirely, then reappeared alongside and bumped into Dharmen. Both PTS fields flashed.

“Lower your setting,” Dharmen said in a low voice. “If I can’t see you, neither can the enemy. You don’t even show up through these damn synth lenses. What idiot engineer thought these could penetrate an artificial gravity well anyway?” He ended that with a thought command to his internal: *Rem-E, deactivate.*

Theus’s barely visible hand went to his controller. “PTS output decreased by fifteen percent. Let it be enough. We can’t get caught here; I don’t want to see a POW camp just yet.”

“You will if we get separated,” Dharmen said. “For now, I need to know where you are. This is the last place I want to end up alone.”

Theus moved on without reply—exhausted or afraid, Dharmen couldn’t tell. “When we reach the river,” Theus finally said, “we can follow it north to the ford and head back to camp from there. Stick with me and we’ll be there by dinnertime.”

“Sticking with you got us separated from our team,” Dharmen said. “The general trusted us to relay enemy strengths and positions. Now what do we do? The others better make it back on their own, ’cause we’ll never find them like this.”

Dharmen hid his fright in the overgrowth, but he couldn’t calm his rushing thoughts. *Why did Gennet send us here? The Guard has superior tracking abilities; an advanced post is about as necessary as these stupid new interstellar naval ranks. We still have ground wars to fight, we’re not going back into space right this minute! And why us? Theus and I don’t have this kind of experience, why put us out here alone with two shipman recruits barely out of basic?*

An hour ago, the four of them were manning their post when they spotted Carmogen troops approaching. Dharmen and Theus ordered their fresh-out enlisteds to remain as silent and still as base micromice. Hopefully with PTS running, the enemy would move on past them. One SR obeyed. The other panicked and fired before anyone could stop him. A hail of return volleys—*particle energy volleys*—had followed from weapons the enemy shouldn’t have had. The team had to scramble before their makeshift hideout was blown to pieces.

Now they were separated and on the run. Wonderful! And Theus’s ranging skills weren’t helping. Neither was the dense Negaran forest. Its wildly variegated foliage created an explosion of blinding colors eased only by sun shading in the otherwise useless synth visors. Dharmen assumed it was a beautiful place, if only he could stop to appreciate it without being visually overwhelmed, and shot dead in the process. And like the flora of Angolin, most of the plant life here was motile—pulling, tugging, and wrapping wiry prehensile tendrils around unwary limbs. Body armor synth cutters and membrane herbicides couldn’t keep up. Dharmen was glad he had left his sword behind for a field machete.

The suns had just left the sky, and the landscape grew easier on the eyes. Small comfort for being lost behind enemy lines. He pushed on, thought of the recruit who had nearly gotten them all killed. *Yes, he disobeyed orders, but he's just a kid. Angolin's isolation hasn't prepared any of us for this, what more could I have expected? If only his twin sister had been assigned to us instead of to Intel Company Bravo off-rise. Now she's a real soldier!* He pictured himself back in his enlisted days, taking orders, making mistakes, and making more mistakes, all while downplaying his position as the son of the famous General Nüren Tate, and just doing his duty. The memories put a razor-thin smile on his lips.

Then he froze in his tracks.

Voices. They traveled up the path behind him and then ceased. He crouched and listened. Nothing. He looked around. "Theus?" he called as softly as he could. "Thee, where are you? Lieutenant Tarkala!"

No answer, and no return on internal AI trace. Theus's PTS had put him too far ahead again in the twilight, increasingly moving forest growth. Dharmen's mind raced. It felt cowardly, but he wished he were back at Seventh. Its peacetime comforts and daily routines were downright heavenly compared to this. Even his superiors' accolades would have been welcome for once. A "pillar of honor" and a "rock of courage, much like his father . . . when his temper's not in the way"; the lauds that filtered back to him were embarrassing though not undeserved. Dharmen fit every one of them beyond his own self-awareness.

But that was before Negara. Before the sweltering heat and bizarre landscape that compounded every discomfort, and an enemy that was always too close despite all the latest (and unreliable) stealthtech.

He felt his heart pound up through his temples. *What are my options? Shoot? Run? At what? To where? . . .How 'bout calm, first and foremost?* He took a deep breath and quietly readied his pulse

rifle, settling the butt into the pocket of his shoulder. He focused his hearing on unnatural sounds—*people sounds*—in the bush.

A harsh cackle reverberated about thirty meters away. Talking followed. He knew it wasn't the rest of his team. Even fresh-outs wouldn't make this much noise in a war zone for anyone to hear. This group sounded hostile and too large, whoever they were.

Dharmen quietly backed off the path, dodging thick, undulating stalks to move behind a reasonably wide tree. He increased PTS output and peered around the tree's shivering, creaking bole as the voices approached. Heads moved through the bush single file. He could hear their speech clearly now: a mixture of Lenan and Angolinian Standard. There was a woman with them. She couldn't have been Lenan; their brigades had no female soldiers. But there were no other Guard postings behind enemy lines. Who was she?

He heard a male voice, too annoyingly familiar to be anyone else's.

*Lieutenant Commander Armetrian! What in the Netherworld?*

They were nearing. Dharmen checked himself. He was too visible, even for dusk conditions. He set PTS output to full, instantly adding cloaking and temporal interruption to his camos' natural light-bending fibers: the hair of the East Ranges *taroc* provided outstanding natural camouflage. The wooly animals were champion steeds and expert climbers, but they were fearful of everything. Physiological reactions rendered them invisible when threatened, and with good reason, considering their high-mountain predators. Dharmen's own fear response activated the camo fibers a fraction. He hoped PTS would compensate.

Silently, he watched. Several were in the group, including two very short figures moving to the sounds of chains.

"Keep walking!" an Angolinian voice ordered.

They were in front of him now. His heart resumed its race. He stood still, trying not to give himself away with accidental noises or

movements that PTS couldn't cover. The last figure passed. He crept from hiding and checked for stragglers.

No one. Just the sickle forms of Kiern and Dasha, Tentim's innermost moons casting a dim glow on the path from the darkening sky. He thought of getting back to the Allied line. But what about this Lenan-Angolinian mix? *And Armetrian*—what were they all doing out here? Hesitating for a few heartbeats and double-checking PTS status, he edged along the path, following their tracks.

He came to a break in the forest and saw all of them, about ten people standing in the clearing. All but four were Guardsmen, partially PTS-blended into the night. Two deathly pale men—one young, the other much older—were obviously Lenan. The remaining two were fettered and naked.

Dharmen took position behind a cluster of static tree ferns, treading cautiously as he recalled the general's comments about his questionable woodcraft.

The woman in the group swung around and activated a wrist-mount field torch, Guard issue. It alarmed the prisoners, who muttered something unintelligible and rattled their primitive Lenan-made shackles. Dharmen held still, narrowing his eyes to slits as the passing beam enveloped his entire body in spite of the foliage. But it revealed nothing; PTS and light-bending taroc fiber hid him excellently.

"Shut that off, Vara!" Armetrian ordered. "They're due any minute, and *they* don't need light."

She lowered her torch but left it lit. "I'm from the Fifth Order, Lieutenant Commander, not the lowly Seventh. You're not my CO. Don't give me orders."

"Forgotten your place, soldier? I still outrank you," Armetrian shot back. "We don't know who else might be out here, so cut it!"

"Forgotten yours?" she said. "We're not exactly on Guard-sanctioned duty at the moment."

He stepped toward her.



Wordless, she deactivated the torch right when they were nose to nose.

Dharmen sensed the friction between them—no need for light to reveal that, and no surprise at all. Armetrian got along with almost no one. *But what on Tentim is this about?*

“We don’t have time for this, Armetrian, can’t you do something about her?” said the elder Lenan. “You know what our associates think about women, especially *your* women. You should have left her back at your encampment or at least not brought her here in uniform.”

Vara turned on the man. “No one *brought* me here, and that’ll be enough from you! I’ve put as much on the line for this as any man present, so don’t—”

All attention went to figures emerging from the bush. Three were in the forefront.

“You have no control over her at all.” One stepped forward and scoffed at Armetrian. “In Gagna, we know what to do with them.”

His speech was coarse, but he spoke Standard surprisingly well. Dharmen sighed, glad for this little benefit. Despite years of use, Guard earplant lingua mappers still struggled to translate anything more foreign than Lenan speech. Regardless, the rough, smoky hiss in that voice was unmistakable: Carmogen—enemy combatants—and out here meeting clandestinely with Guard soldiers, and Lenans who were supposed to be Angolin’s allies.

“My gods, *what* is going on here?” Dharmen lightly mouthed.

The lead looked the group over. The dim moonlight revealing his scaly gray skin over a flat, noseless face and ridged skull reaffirmed his east-of-Abyss heritage. “Which of you is Armetrian?”

“I am Lieutenant Commander Armetrian. And you are . . . ?”

The gray man sneered. “I might have known. I hoped you would be someone else. What man takes back talk from a female? And she wears a uniform. Do not tell me she is a soldier.”

“That’s not important,” Armetrian said across Vara’s protest. “What we’re here to discuss is.”

The Carmogen studied the others. “Interesting to finally *see* all of you. It makes a change from fighting foes that step in and out of shadows like cowards.”

No one responded.

The gray man grunted. “Right, then, if *pleasantry* is what this side of the world requires . . .” Luminous yellow eyes peered down nostril slits at Armetrian. “I am Lord Naul, First Lescaïn of the Ninth Army of Carmogen. These are my inferiors.” He nodded a near-acknowledgment to two aides standing behind him.

“Glad to meet you in person,” said Armetrian. “Uprights—or *televisors*, as you call them—do us no service. Now that we’re all here in the flesh, we can talk business.”

“‘All’ is the operative word, Armetrian, and finally,” the elder Lenan said. “You’ve kept my aide and me in the dark from the beginning as you’ve smiled and sung your own praises from the other side of a screen. What is *our* role in this enterprise, and how will *we* benefit from it, exactly?”

“All will be clear soon enough, and you’ll benefit through coalition,” Armetrian answered. “Angolin is old, tired, and complacent. My people sit sheltered and unseen behind artificial disguises, with our leaders insisting on total seclusion. They keep us captive out of fear that we’ll rise up and go out into the world to discover what it really holds for us. But my associates and I will change that. We intend to bring Angolin out of isolation to join the rest of the world. There’s great opportunity all across Tentim and more yet to be had if we all work together.”

Dharmen kept still, ears open and eyes round with surprise.

“Work together toward what?” the Lenan pressed. “A better life for all involved, or just for you?”

“Toward a partnership,” replied Armetrian. “Angolin is the most advanced society on this planet. Lena and Carmogen are great empires. They would become even greater with the technology we’ll share with our esteemed colleague here and with you. Operation Dawn Fire will see to that.”

The Lenan cocked his head. “Dawn Fire? Labeled this little scheme, have you? And still without our input?”

Lord Naul stepped forward, bare gray arms folded across his chest. “Names mean nothing to me as long as they set the stakes no higher, Lieutenant Commander. My people have conquered most of this planet, but we are at constant war to keep it. I want assurance, not empty words.”

“What you would gain goes beyond Carmogen’s wildest dreams,” Armetrian said, and began strutting among the group. “And we’ve already armed you well for this fight as a sign of our good faith. What further assurance could you need from me?”

*Armed? That’s how our weapons are getting into their hands?* Dharmen was frozen to his spot at hearing this. He was certain he made noises as he shifted uncomfortably in place, but no one appeared to notice.

“Keep your part of this deal, that will be satisfaction enough,” answered Naul. “And I know you have the ability, I have seen your knowledge. You have controlled energy weapons instead of shells. You also have the ability to hide your bodies, your equipment, and even your whole rise from our eyes. Some kind of devices our scientists are still trying to comprehend; our best intelligence forces cannot locate you. At least not yet. And I hear you are beginning an impressive space program, though you likely come from elsewhere to begin with. You Angolinerers conceal every part of your existence.”

Naul surveyed the group. “Money is no issue. We can pay billions, and no doubt we will, but I demand to know if we will receive what

we pay for. Can you deliver Angolin's technologies to us as promised? You and your superior, wherever he is? His absence from this meeting has not escaped me."

"You'll get what you want. Don't worry about that," Vara said in Armetrian's place.

The heavy, stifling air went quiet. Even the night sounds of the surrounding wood seemed to hush as Naul wheeled on her. "You dare address a high commander of the Carmogen Army, woman! In my homeland, you would be ripped to pieces and thrown into the Great Nothing for that!"

"She meant no disrespect, Lord Naul." Armetrian eyed Vara. "Did you, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. None at all."

"A female warrior. Pitiful!" Naul muttered. "Well, Lieutenant Commander, what do you say? Do I have your assurance?"

"Of course," Armetrian replied, "and don't concern yourself further. I swear to you that my people will give the information willingly."

"And if they do not, Angoliner, then what?"

A sick smile formed on Armetrian's face that even the night couldn't hide from Dharmen. "Then my associates and I will break Angolin. We'll deliver its secrets to you if it means delivering the Hidden Realm itself. You have my word."

Naul perused him. "Excellent! I look forward to our growing relationship. And I am curious to see how you will react if your people do *not* cooperate."

Armetrian raised a hand and motioned.

The chained captives were yanked forward. Dharmen could make them out clearly now: two short, broad-statured men with green-brown skin and bone-straight hair hanging from their heads like shadowy bowls. Negaran natives. The moonlight was just enough to reveal intricate tattoos and gold nose rings on panic-stricken faces.

“To satisfy that curiosity in the meantime, take these gifts as a small token,” Armetrian said. “I’ve heard of the high price exotic races bring in Gragna’s slave markets. You should do well with these two.”

“Add this fiery beauty, and I will accept,” said Naul, looking at Vara. “It is a long journey to the empire, and I could . . . use her.”

Vara’s lid blew before Armetrian could clamp it down. “I’m a free woman, not some foreign army whore! You’re a long way from home, Carmi. Don’t forget it.”

Naul moved just one step before her rifle raised. His men readied weapons.

The Guard contingent countered.

Dharmen watched, unblinking.

Only Armetrian kept his rifle stowed. He ordered his people to lower theirs.

“My whore you would be,” Naul said, smiling at Vara through razor-sharp teeth. “As God wills . . .”

Dharmen’s chest grew hot as the collaborators wrangled on. The misogyny, slave trading, and collusion were bad enough, but Armetrian was handing his own people to the enemy. Under any other circumstances, Dharmen would have screamed and shouted at these people for what they were doing. He wished he could do that here. He couldn’t, but the notion to end this right now gripped him. They were huddled, it would be quick and easy. But there had to be more of them. And the captives—risking gunning down innocent people, especially over something like this, sickened him. He wrestled with the decision . . . and decided he had to try. Other traitors would have to be found later. These were going down now.

He increased his rifle’s beam width setting and aimed. Targets locked, he fingered the trigger and left his fern cover. A thick vine wrapped around his ankle and yanked him off his feet. His back smacked the hard ground, damaging his PTS generator. A thin ripple of PTS light dishearteningly indicated he was no longer concealed.

Vara's torch-arm found him first. Weapons clicked and pointed at the lone officer on the ground. Dharmen couldn't take all of them on in a gun battle. He quickly untangled himself and jumped up to flee into the darkness. The blast to his side hit right between his armor's protection zones. He yelled and recoiled at the burning sensation from the particle beam, impulsively wrapping his arms around his middle as he fell. He rolled over to find himself facing mud-splattered boots and staring up rifle barrels.

"Looks like we've got an eavesdropper," Armetrian said, stepping on and securing Dharmen's pulse rifle. "This is no lounge, Tate, get up!" He grabbed Dharmen by the collar, pulling him to his knees.

Dharmen struggled to hold on to his pierced abdomen.

"It was a mild shot, soldier. Your internal's already on it, don't be so weak. Though I guess your kind isn't accustomed to pain."

"My kind? What is that exactly?"

"Shut up! You're in deep as it is." Armetrian rounded him and snatched the PTS generator from his belt. "Be more careful now that you have no protection, though discretion's not your strong suit either, is it? How much did you hear just now?" He put his face in Dharmen's. "And what are you doing out here, alone?"

"I could ask you the same, *traitor*," Dharmen came back. "We've been fighting them for weeks with you right beside us, and all this time you've been supplying them. That has to be the worst thing imaginable. Though why am I not surprised to find you of all people destroying your honor and selling us out? Is it because you have none to begin with?"

Armetrian backhanded him. "You're speaking to a superior, Lieutenant, show some respect! How many times have I had to tell you that?"

"As often as I've needed to make you. *Sir!* Show your officers some; maybe we'd return it—oh, and do you think you'll gain any from this? You've betrayed your own; respect is forfeit for good! And don't think powder face here'll give you any either." Dharmen took the

hatred-turning-to-fear on Armetrian's face and ran with it. "The collaborators get taken too, Lieutenant Commander, even if they're last to go. Think about that when you end up in the same slave markets as your 'gifts' here."

Naul bent down and leveled his face with Dharmen's. "This is a waste of my time!" They drilled stares into each other: the Carmogen's trying to intimidate and Dharmen's having none of it. Naul rose, glared at Armetrian. "Want to show me your true worth, Angoliner? Here is your chance! In my ranks, he would already be dead."

Dharmen watched a vein pulsate across Armetrian's sweat-drenched forehead. He braced as the rifle lifted to aim between his eyes. Considering who was holding the weapon, he had no delusion at all over what would come next.

"Well enough for me," Armetrian said in a deadpan tone. "Bout time I carried out my instructions anyway."

Dharmen peered curiously at that.

"Tate," Armetrian continued, "you don't know how long I've waited for this . . ."

Blinding light pierced the darkness. A thundering rumble knocked everyone to the ground. A second airborne beam hit a tree, cleaving it in two. Another hit much closer. Flying debris struck the elder Lenan and felled him on the spot.

"High-yield energy weapons—Angoliner attack. Move out!" Naul ordered his men.

Dharmen seized the only opportunity he knew he would get. He snatched up his pulse rifle and bolted, making it to the edge of the bush. A shot fired past his head. *Not good at distance targets, are you, mate?* he thought of Armetrian. Beams hit the treetops, incendiary ones in rapid succession. The surrounding forest ignited. It was all Dharmen could do to hold his wounded side and escape, as flaming branches dropped around him.



*Keep going. No time to— Keep going!* Dharmen's mind raced faster than he could run through the moving forest. Fear, pain, and living branches reaching and darting at him didn't stop him. He had to reach camp. That meant crossing the river, wounded or not.

The ground began to slope downward. Dense, undulating brush gave way to peacefully immobile reeds. He heard the sound of moving water. Before him, the forest opened up to the wide, silvery band of the Nabreac River, the dividing line between opposing forces. Running all the way to the ford was no option. He had to cross here and now.

Dharmen dove into the fast-moving river. The water was surprisingly cold for such a hot, humid place. Pain gripped him. Each stroke was a biting chore as he struggled with the current and with his wound, but he forced himself to push on and get to safety. He was determined he was not going down, no matter what. Explosions filled the forest behind him. Agitated voices followed.

A pulse beam shot above his head. Another hit the water. He ignored them and kept stroke, despite strong currents that threatened to sweep him downstream. Smoky eruptions snaked across the water's surface. The river was wide and fast, but not quite turbulent enough to make him such a difficult target, even in darkness. He couldn't believe he was still alive. Armetrian's marksman skills were laughable.

He reached the opposite shore and plowed up the muddy bank. Shaded by undergrowth, he collapsed to the ground. He heaved and coughed up water, trying to regain strength. He heard movement in the brush, far too close. Scrambling to get his pulse rifle into position, Dharmen hoped its nemurite housings remained sealed against the water.

"Tarkala, don't shoot!"



“Theus?” he sputtered.

“Affirmative, Lieutenant. Are you all right?”

“No, absolutely not!” Dharmen rose to his feet. The riverside growth rustled. Camos approached, hacking at dangling vines, and joined by another face he was glad to see.

“Thee, what’s going on?” Dori Secár demanded, and then sheathed her machete. “Dharm, is that you? Where on Tentim have you been? I was about to order a search team.”

“With the enemy, Commander,” Dharmen reported, “and not just the one from the East. We need to get back to camp, ASAP. You won’t believe what I’ve just discovered about our good comrade, Armetrian.”

The swell of uniforms amazed Dharmen. The frontline outlier staffed by a single platoon two days ago swarmed now. Seventh Camp had relocated—all of it—and a hopeful sign that the campaign might end soon, despite the undermining of a few.

Dharmen was taken to the infirmary tent, where his wound was hastily treated. It was examined, particle-depurated, and stitched by a medi-synth assistant that proved more effective than the human medic and his detached cot-side manner. Dharmen couldn’t stand external AI—synth or robotic—but he had to admit his wound looked and felt better. He sat up slowly on the narrow examining cot, cursing at the nerve suppressor’s wearing off as Theus and Dori entered.

“What were you saying earlier, Dharm?” Dori indifferently asked as though perusing the NewsMesh after morning muster. “Something about Lieutenant Commander Armetrian? Honestly, you two at it again. What’s he done now?”

Dharmen got to his feet despite the medi-synth’s protests. He relayed everything from beyond the river, including his escape.

“Man, did the gods watch over you tonight!” said Theus. “If you hadn’t gotten away when you did, all this would’ve gone to the box with you, and Angolin would be invaded before it knew what . . . Commander, what do you make of this? Commander?”

Dori stood motionless, arms crossed and chin resting on one hand. A pursed-lipped frown preceded her reply. “Dharm, are you sure about all of this? Are you certain you heard them correctly? I know Armetrian’s a taroc’s ass and all, but this is over the top. Meeting with the enemy, lifting weapons and tech? And captives? It’s all . . . well, it’s a stretch to say the least. It really is an incredible story.”

Dharmen couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Incredible story? Try an incredibly painful truth, Commander, one I just took a hit over. But you don’t believe a word of it, do you?”

“I’m not sure what to believe,” Dori said.

“All the years we’ve known each other, longer than you’ve been my ISIC,” Dharmen said, “and you think I’d make up something like this?”

Dori watched him silently. So did Theus. So did infirmiry staff that probably hadn’t heard the full conversation but saw the fire in Dharmen’s jet-black eyes and felt the heat in his words. His signature plainspoken directness had followed him even to Negara.

“I just uncovered the worst thing ever and barely escaped to repeat it,” Dharmen continued. “We’re in serious trouble if Armetrian and these people succeed. If you don’t believe me, at least see that!” He stared at her. *If you’re listening to me but not hearing me, what more can I say?*

Dori was an excellent commanding officer: fair and usually dependable. But she could be self-absorbed and in her own head at times—traits too common among Angolinians. And this was the wrong time for it.

“I don’t know what else to tell you, Lieutenant, these are serious accusations,” she replied. “By the sun goddess herself, if this is real . . .” She turned and paced the tent without another word.

“Then we’re SOL if we don’t get on this fast, Commander. Wouldn’t you agree?” said Theus. “There’s no time for debate by the sound of it. If it is real, then we have to one-up these traitors.”

Dori spun on him. “Not so fast, Thee. We need to know what we’re dealing with first before we dive into anything. We were sent here to repel the Carmogen, not to accuse our own people of conspiracy without real proof.”

Dharmen’s anger charged the tent’s dehumidified air. “I’m the proof, Commander. I heard everything said, I saw the ‘gift’ Armetrian gave to the enemy, and I got particle-sliced for it. I already know what we’re dealing with, I don’t need doubt spread all over it!”

Dori’s mouth opened then closed at that.

“Ma’am!” he added.

“We’ll discuss it later, Lieutenant. Much later,” Dori said sharply. “It’s nearly nineteen hundred, and—”

A dutiful, excited shipman burst through the tent’s opening, saluted, and relayed a message: all personnel were to convene outside in ten minutes, general’s orders.

“Hear that, soldier?” Dori said to Dharmen. “We’re about to make the plunge; for better or worse, you’ve got ten to continue this.”

His gaze smoldered and darkened. “Permission to spend each one of them alone, Commander.”

“Your wish, Lieutenant.” Dori turned and left.

Theus sighed, gave Dharmen a quick slap on the shoulder, and followed her out.

Dharmen sat back down on his cot. *Guess I know my next move, Commander*, he thought. *Because you’ve just handed it to me.*

“I congratulate you all on a job well done, but it’s not over yet,” boomed General Gennet. The particle fire lighting the night and the blasts

shaking the ground seemed to affect him much less than it did the assembled companies. “The enemy has strengthened their line on the Nabreac’s south bank. We will engage them across the river and break their defenses. Then we will continue into the mountains. You’ll all have your orders shortly; I want the entire ridge top taken tonight. By dawn, we’ll have Carmi ass dangling over the edge of the Abyss. Now, if there are no questions . . .”

A hand rose high from the very last row. Dharmen had taken a rearmost position to get a command view of the assembly. “General, have you noticed that we’re taking on fire from our own weapons? How can we fight effectively if we’re not sure who we’re shooting at?” Dharmen knew whom to shoot at more than ever now, but he couldn’t mention the meeting beyond the river in this setting.

“Lieutenant, I don’t care who they are or what they’re using, if someone shoots at you, shoot back!” Gennet bellowed.

Chuckling rippled through the crowd, but murmurs mixed in. Dharmen wasn’t the only one concerned, even if he was the only one willing to voice it.

“But if this goes as planned, the enemy will spend the night running, not firing,” Gennet continued. “Now lastly, several people from both orders are suddenly missing tonight, with internal AI comm and trace functions off-line.” He recited a list of names, and it wasn’t short. “And has anyone seen Lieutenant Commander Armetrian?”

No one answered to this or to the roster from the Fifth Order. Of no surprise to Dharmen, it included Lieutenant Vara.

Voice thundering and both hands raised, the general disbanded the assembly. Camos dispersed like an insect army losing its chemical trail. Once orders were received from COs, they scattered in animated pre-combat preparation, deactivating synth DRASH, gathering provisions, reworking supply lines, loading weapons—chaos, but efficiently organized chaos typical of Seventh. Dharmen found comfort in it. His side was

about to advance; the enemy would counter. It was normalcy he could understand and handle. He wanted badly to sound the warning on what he *couldn't* understand, but there was too much to do at the moment.

And most importantly, who could be trusted?

He looked around. It took him a few seconds to notice, but the hordes of camos swirling around him had thinned, and not from assuming stations. Dozens had vanished, undoubtedly with TimeSpace. He ordered Rem-E to raise synth lenses, and scanned the forest behind him. There was no one to be seen, even with heat sensing at full. Not that he expected to find anyone. *Hmmph, I don't have to wonder whose side you've all slipped off to.*

The gunship's roll and pitch sickened Dharmen's stomach. The small craft hadn't been airborne for a minute before taking on enemy fire that, judging from the blows, was energy-based. Its shields would have easily repelled shells, but the particle fire rocked the vessel like a child's tub toy. TS curiously provided no cover, and the pilot compensated by slowing their approach to both soften the blows and prevent the blasts from breaching the shields, potentially tearing the ship apart. But it allowed more enemy fire to find its mark.

*My Lord Krone, have mercy on us,* Dharmen prayed to his patron deity. *I'll be the best soldier I can be, just get this hunk of nemurite on the ground!* He looked out a viewport. Beams fired from the formation's support sloops. Within seconds, all enemy fire ceased. Dharmen wasn't very religious, but he thanked the god of war immensely for the assist. He just wished he knew what all of the uplords had in store for them tonight.

Most of his company—including the SR who had exposed the advanced post—spun a cursing web deadly enough to match the Negaran summer heat clashing with the Abyssal gases below. Dharmen joined their rant. Silently. He felt himself rise in his seat. The ship

was descending; it lurched and shuddered before landing. All hands unstrapped and stood, pulse rifles at the ready.

Dori shot up from her cabinside jump seat as the deployment hatch desynthed: “Go! Go! Goooo!” she ordered with a push to exiting backs.

The company stormed out into the night through the bush covering the low foothills. Gunfire answered, bullets mixed with particle fire. But the Allies were in force, pushing forward against the opposition.

Something curious caught Dharmen’s attention. Distance to hostiles and darkness lit only by fleeting beams couldn’t hide subtle differences in troop movements and tactics on the enemy line. Troops and volleys were positioned in staggered bundles instead of their usual continuous single-line formations. That matched the Guard’s combat style too closely. Dharmen saw movement. He tracked the targets and magnified synth lensing. It defied night vision training, but he had to know the truth. He fired: not at the enemy, but *past* them.

“Don’t I know it,” he muttered to himself. “And right where I expected you to be.”

His shot illuminated what he had dreaded: several figures, all in Guard camos, positioned among the enemy forces. They hadn’t even bothered to use PTS. He groaned at the realization. *So there is more to this than Armetrian and a few stray rogues. A lot more . . .* Focusing squarely on his duty, he reset lensing, took a deep breath, and channeled his disgust into his trigger finger.

Night passed with enemy fire retreating ahead of the Allies, but not without casualties. Scores had been hit by Carmogen and by their own comrades. It was quickly understood not to be friendly fire; the number cut down by particle fire was too high and the targeting too precise. A handful of the renegades were apprehended. Those who couldn’t be captured safely were shot.

The Guard had a new internal situation more threatening than Carmogen bands nosing too close to Angolin, that much was clear. Dharmen wondered how centuries of peace in his homeland could suddenly have degenerated into this, but small comfort came in the form of victory. General Gennet's strategies had prevailed, the Carmogen line broke, and their forces were routed. If treason threatened to destroy Angolin, it wouldn't happen tonight.

Black sky morphed into the brilliant red of Tentim dawn. Companies from Fifth and Seventh stood with Lenan brigades in silhouette along the high ridge that split Negara in two. Smoke rose from fires all across the slopes. The nightlong pummeling had thrown the enemy back to the far side of the rise as Gennet predicted. Spirits were cautiously high, but Dharmen was too exhausted to be relieved. The shelling was over, yet his teeth chattered uncontrollably, and he couldn't stop trembling. His ears rang with phantom gunfire and explosions, and his eyes remained open by adrenaline alone.

There would be no rest yet. The Allies were preparing to advance down the mountains and finish the enemy for good. Dharmen was ready despite his combat fatigue, but one thing had to be done first, and it wouldn't be stopped by . . .

"You s-saw what just happened out there, Commander. S-still need proof?" he stammered through his condition as Dori and Theus approached.

"I'd order you at ease, Lieutenant, if you weren't there already," Dori said.

Dharmen was unmoved. "Look, if we c-can talk for a moment, not as superior and subordinate but as f-friends, then . . . Well, I just want to say that—"

“Please forget it, Commander!” Dharmen knew she would have called him on his insubordinate tone had he not been right about the traitors, and had so many Guard lives not just been lost at their hands. “Now if you’ll both excuse me . . .”

He left them, forgetting his shakes and still throbbing abdominal wound, and wishing he could forget the entire night. He found his target and moved with confidence he had rarely felt before top silver. Distrust would have to wait.

General Gennet turned as he approached. “Problem, Lieutenant?”

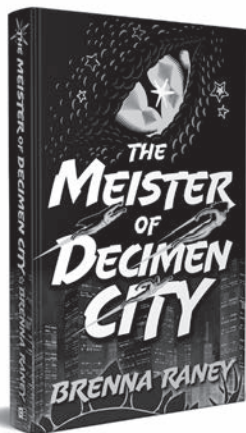
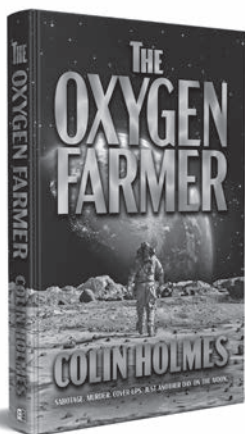
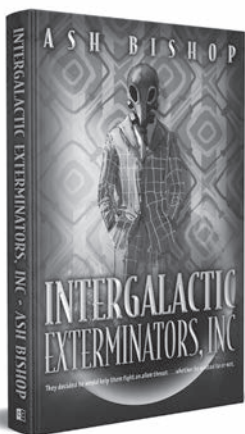
“Sir! Permission to speak.” *Candidly.*

“Granted.”

“General,” Dharmen addressed respectfully but firmly, “I have something urgent to report.”



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