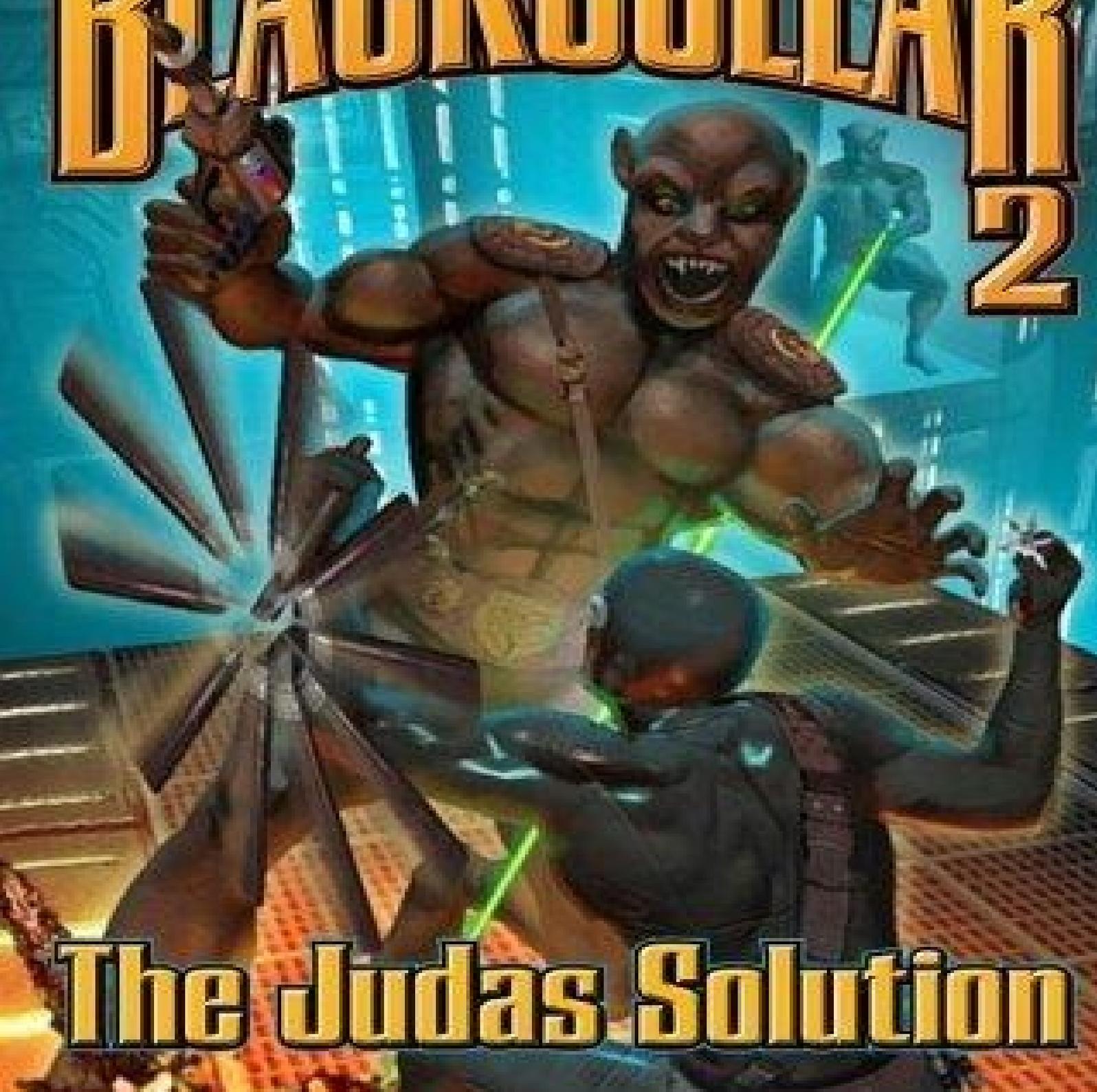


**TIMOTHY ZAHN**

**BLACKCOLLAR**  
**2**



**The Judas Solution**

# **Blackcollar-The Judas**

**Solution**

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## BLACKCOLLAR:

## THE JUDAS SOLUTION

## TIMOTHY ZAHN

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***Blackcollar Warriors:***

***The Only Hope for a Conquered Earth***

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*The Cobra Trilogy*

*Blackcollar*

*Blackcollar: The Judas Solution*

**PROLOGUE**

A sprinkling of new snow had fallen overnight on the western slopes of the Bernese Oberland in central Switzerland, and Security Prefect Jamus Galway found himself squinting against the reflected early-morning sunlight as he walked down the transport's entry ramp. It had taken five months of slow and painstaking investigation, but at last the search was about to come to an end. Maybe.

A young man was waiting for him at the bottom of the ramp, and even through slitted eyelids Galway could see the other's face go suddenly rigid as the prefect's escort appeared in the shuttle hatchway behind him. It was the same reaction he'd encountered nearly everywhere he'd gone in the past five months, from the back streets of central Europe to the elite governmental centers of New Geneva. Even here on Earth, after thirty years of Ryqril rule over what had once been the proud independent Terran Democratic Empire, the vast majority of TDE citizens had never seen a Ryqril so close and personal. Even fewer of those citizens had seen a *khassq* -class warrior like the one now striding down the ramp a pace behind him. Certainly fewer *living* citizens. Most people who found themselves facing a *khassq* didn't survive the encounter.

The young man had his expression under control again by the time Galway reached the bottom of the ramp. "Prefect Galway," he said formally. "I'm Security Lieutenant Albert Weissmann. Welcome to Interlaken."

"Thank you," Galway said, gesturing to his escort. "This is Taakh, *khassq* -class warrior of the Ryqril."

"Honored, Your Eminence," Weissmann said, bowing low. His voice, Galway noted with approval and mild surprise, was calm and steady.

Approval, because that was how one was supposed to face humanity's conquerors. Surprise, because if there was anyone on Earth right now who could inspire fear and trembling in those around him, it was Taakh. His well-muscled bulk topped Galway's own height by a good thirty centimeters, and even in the cold of central Europe he wore nothing above the waist except the elaborately tooled belt and baldric combination that indicated his rank and authority. Fastened to the belt at his right hip was a large laser pistol, while a wide-bladed short sword with carved hilt rode its sheath on his left. "I trust the region's been locked down?" Galway asked, looking around at the rows of neat homes and businesses stretched out beneath the towering mountains in the distance.

"Yes, sir, since two o'clock this morning," Weissmann confirmed.

Less than half an hour after Galway had sent out the order. "Excellent," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Weissmann said. "We take orders from New Geneva very seriously."

"Of course," Galway said, trying not to sound cynical. Neither Weissmann nor any of his people had any real choice in the matter, of course, any more than Galway himself did. All TDE Security officers, government employees, scientists, and top business people were routinely loyalty-conditioned by the Ryqril to be incapable of revolt, sedition, or even serious misbehavior. There was nothing

Weissmann's people *could* do except take their orders seriously.

Still, there was a certain degree of slack in the conditioning. Galway knew a few of his own officers back on his homeworld of Plinry who never put in more than the bare minimum of effort required. Weissmann's contingent was as dedicated and efficient as he claimed, perhaps the young officer had a reason for pride after all.

"That's his house over there," Weissmann went on, pointing toward a light brown structure at the end of a row of modest homes a block away. His eyes flicked furtively to Taakh, shifted quickly away. "Will you want our assistance in taking him?"

"*Yae* rill take he," the Ryq rumbled before Galway could answer. "*Yae* hunans."

"As you command," Galway said, bowing his head in acknowledgment. Either the Ryq didn't want to get his own hands dirty with this one, or he wanted to see how Interlaken's human contingent handled themselves. Either was fine with Galway. "Your people are in position, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Weissmann said. "My thought was to send four men in through the back. We can cut through the garden fence and move in under cover of some small bushes—"

"Whoa, whoa," Galway interrupted. "Any reason we can't just try the front door?" Weissmann seemed a little taken aback. "Uh ... no, sir, I guess not." Lifting his hand over his head, he gave a series of hand signals. "Whenever you're ready, sir."

Galway gestured, and together he and Weissmann headed down the street, their boots making occasional squeaking noises in the fresh snow. "New Geneva didn't say anything about the *khassq* being involved in this," Weissmann murmured, glancing furtively over his shoulder at the big, rubbery-skinned alien.

"Should I have brought more men? I mean, so we would look more professional?"

"If we can take Herr Judas quietly, then by definition you brought enough men," Galway assured him. Ahead, armed figures were emerging from concealment, converging silently on the target house. Apart from the standard paral-dart pistols each wore at his hip, Galway saw, their weaponry was a mixture of various types of flechette and pellet scatterguns. Yet another reason for Weissmann to feel nervous about Taakh's presence, though the hodgepodge equipment was hardly the lieutenant's fault. "Unusual name this man has, don't you think?" he commented.

"Yes, it is," Weissmann agreed distantly, his mind clearly concerned with his command's preparedness.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone with such a surname."

"And for good reason," Galway agreed. "Note the pattern here. First they gave us Allen Cain, obviously named for history's first murderer, and now here we have Karl Judas. The Resistance leaders aren't without a sense of ironic humor."

Weissmann snorted. "If you can call plotting to betray and destroy their own people humorous," he said darkly.

That was the loyalty-conditioning speaking, of course. Galway felt the same way, though a small part of his mind wondered if under other circumstances he might see things differently. "Every era has its share of malcontents," he reminded Weissmann. "This one's no different."

"Except that the Resistance has gone far beyond simple malcontentment," Weissmann countered. "I heard a rumor the other day that some of them actually tried to get into the old Aegis Mountain stronghold in Western North America this past summer."

"There was a team working in the Denver region, yes," Galway confirmed, wincing at the memory. "But they never got into the base, and I doubt they ever will."

"I hope not," Weissmann said, turning his head slightly to look back at Taakh. "There could be all sorts of weapons still in there. We certainly don't want them in Resistance hands."

"Agreed," Galway said. "And as to the concern you *haven't* yet voiced, Taakh's presence isn't a sign that the Ryqril are planning to set up shop here in Interlaken. He's with me, and he'll leave when I do."

"I see," Weissmann said, his carefully neutral voice not quite able to hide his relief. "Thank you, sir. ~~I have to admit that ... well, when they took most of our lasers away two months ago, I wondered if there was some sort of reorganization in the works.~~"

"Not as far as I know," Galway said. "And it wasn't just you. I gather that most of the Security forces around the TDE have gone back to flechettes and slug weapons."

"I didn't know that," Weissmann said again, a frown in his voice. "Any idea why?" Galway shrugged, trying to make the gesture look casual. The dark fact of the matter was that the Ryqril had lost three of their colony worlds to the advancing Chryselli forces over the past six months, and suddenly their long-standing space war had taken on a serious land component as well. With close combat weapons in short supply, the Ryqril high command had ordered that the lasers be collected from their conquered worlds' security forces and rushed to the ground troops now fighting to push back the Chryselli beachheads.

But that was hardly something to be discussed with a junior officer in a remote sector. "Not really," he said.

A pair of Weissmann's men were in position at the front of the house by the time they arrived, crouching in flanking positions by the walkway as they trained their paral-dart pistols watchfully on the door. Others, Galway knew, would be guarding all the windows. "Shall I call for a ram?" Weissmann murmured.

Galway didn't bother to answer, but simply stepped up onto the small porch and rang the bell. One of the flanking guards muttered something under his breath. Apparently, the polite approach had not occurred to any of them.

Or maybe they simply thought breaking down the door would look more professional in front of Taakh. He rang the bell again. This time there was the click of a lock, and the door opened a crack. "Yes?" a disheveled young man asked, blinking sleep-heavy eyes as he finished tying a sash around his robe. Galway smiled tightly. After five months, the search was indeed over. "Good morning, He Judas," he said, holding up his ID. "I'm Security Prefect Galway. May I come in?" Judas looked pointedly at the guns aimed at him, then silently pulled the door fully open and stepped back out of the way. "You and your men wait here," Galway ordered Weissmann, and followed Judas inside.

The door opened into a plain but neat conversation room. "Am I in some sort of trouble?" Judas asked as he backed up to the middle of the room beside what appeared to be a handcrafted center table.

"That depends on your point of view," Galway said. Even the man's voice was the same. "I've come here to offer you an opportunity. Please; sit down."

Judas hesitated, then crossed to an upholstered comfort chair and sat down. The chair frame, too, appeared to be handmade. "Nice furniture," Galway commented as he took a double seat a quarter of the way around the center table from him. "Your work?"

"Yes, it's my hobby," Judas said. "What sort of opportunity?"

"The sort that can guarantee safety and security for you and your family for the rest of your lives," Galway said.

Judas snorted gently. "Sounds way too good to be true," he said. "Why don't we start by hearing what exactly this wonderful deal will cost me."

Galway leaned back in his chair, studying the man closely. The face and voice were perfect, but what he could see of the man's physique through his robe would definitely require some work. At least four months of it, he estimated, plus the other training the man would need.

Still, they had at least five more months before the rest of the operation would be ready. Plenty of time.

"It'll cost six to eight months of your life," he said. "Under the circumstances, hardly worth mentioning."

"Oh, hardly," Judas agreed with the cynical smile of a man who's been offered a card from a magician's deck. "And what exactly would I be doing during those six to eight months?"

"A job only you can do," Galway said. "We want you to impersonate someone for us."

"What, I've got a twin brother walking around?"

"Actually, you have *two* twin brothers," Galway corrected, watching him closely. "Maybe more. You see, Herr Judas ... you're a clone."

The other's smile vanished. "That's a lie," he said, his voice suddenly stiff. It was, Galway knew, the correct reaction. But it was a little too quick, a little too practiced, a little too perfect. Judas had already known who and what he was. And there was only one place where he could have learned the truth. "I'm afraid it's your friends who've been lying to you," he said. "Not me."

"What friends?"

"Your contacts in the Resistance," Galway said gently. "The ones who've been grooming you since childhood for some special mission, then suddenly and inexplicably abandoned both you and the project a little over two years ago."

Judas was good, all right. His face barely registered the emotional shock he must surely be feeling at hearing supposedly secret parts of his life being calmly listed by a Security prefect. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," Galway agreed. "That's the other thing I'm offering: the chance to get a little of your own back in return for their shoddy treatment. Interested?"

"Why bother to ask?" Judas countered. "Fifteen days of loyalty-conditioning and I'll do whatever you want anyway."

Galway shrugged. He was certainly right on that score. "Personal ethics, I suppose," he said. "An effort to allow you a certain dignity in this."

"*False* dignity."

"Perhaps," Galway conceded. "And, for the record, the loyalty-conditioning will take a little longer than that. If we quit after the standard fifteen days, the psychor barriers your Resistance friends gave you might still leave some cracks in the wall. Nice try, though."

Judas grimaced. "Touché," he conceded. "Do I have time to dress and say good-bye to my wife and daughter?"

"Certainly," Galway said, gesturing toward the curved stairway leading to the second floor. "That was my other reason for not simply hauling you out of bed."

For a moment Judas studied Galway's face, perhaps wondering if it was genuinely possible for a loyalty-conditioned puppet of the Ryqril and the collaborationist government to have a conscience. Galway had often wondered the same thing, and wondered now what Judas would conclude. "Thank you," the other said, standing up. "Give me fifteen minutes." He was back in twelve, dressed for travel. "I didn't bother to pack anything," he said as Galway ushered him out into the cold morning air. "I assumed you wouldn't let me keep any personal items anyway."

"Quite right," Galway said. Taakh had moved up to join Weissmann at the end of the walk, and Judas's step faltered briefly as he caught sight of the big alien. But he recovered quickly and continued on. The two Security men flanking the door formed up behind them, paral-dart guns still held at the ready.

"Any trouble?" Weissmann asked as the group reached him.

"None," Galway said. "As soon as we're gone, you can lift the lockdown—" And without warning, a pair of high-velocity flechettes whistled past his back and head.

"Cover!" he snapped, grabbing Judas's coat collar and hauling him toward the ground. With his other hand he yanked his own paral-dart gun from its holster, his eyes searching for the source of the attack.

"Corner!" Weissmann barked, his gun tracking that direction.

~~There were two of them, Galway saw, crouched low beside a pair of houses on opposite sides of the street, the muzzles of their long-barreled hunting rifles dipping as they corrected their aim. He swung his own gun toward them, knowing instinctively that neither he nor Weissmann would make it in time. And in that single frozen heartbeat, Taakh moved.~~

He wasn't as fast as a blackcollar, a detached part of Galway's mind noted. Nor was he as graceful and his movements didn't carry the same ultrarefined precision and elegance theirs did. But he was fast enough, and more than precise enough. One of his huge hands grabbed the nearest of Weissmann's Security men by the collar, pulling him on top of Judas and sending both men sprawling onto the ground. The bits of snow from their landing were still flying when there were two silent bursts of green light from the laser in the Ryq's other hand, and both attackers collapsed on top of their guns.

"You all right, Prefect?" Weissmann demanded. The rest of his men were on the move now, three hurrying toward the would-be assassins, the rest spreading out for a sweep of the area.

"I'm fine," Galway assured him, watching Judas and the Security man as they untangled themselves and stood up again. "Judas?"

"I'm all right," Judas said, his voice shaking. "What in hell was *that* all about?"

"You really don't know?" Galway countered.

Judas's hands paused in the act of brushing the snow off his chest. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that wasn't a rescue attempt," Galway said bluntly. "Not with just two men. Certainly not with two men armed with lethal weapons."

Judas looked over at the sprawled bodies, a sudden tightness in his throat. "Are you saying they were trying to *kill* me?"

"Why not?" Galway said. "You're of no use to them anymore. They might as well make sure you're no use to us, either."

Which wasn't entirely true, he knew, a twinge of conscience tugging at him. The Resistance didn't have to actually kill Judas to make him useless for Galway's purposes. All they had to do was maim him somehow, either with a fresh scar or some minor but noticeable bit of muscle damage. The fact that the first shots had missed strongly implied that that was indeed what they'd been going for. But jumping to the wrong conclusion would help cut Judas's last emotional connection to the Resistance. And it certainly wasn't Galway's job to rectify any faulty reasoning.

Taakh turned to Weissmann, his eyes flashing with anger. "Yae rill 'urn down the town," he ordered. "All o' it."

Weissmann's eyes widened. "Burn down—? But Your Eminence—"

"Dae yae keston ne?" the Ryq snarled, lifting his laser warningly.

"No, Your Eminence, of course not," Weissmann said hastily. "But—"

"I don't think we need to destroy the town, Your Eminence," Galway jumped in, gesturing Weissmann to keep quiet. "We'll simply have Lieutenant Weissmann keep the area locked down for the next eight months."

Weissmann transferred his stunned expression to Galway. "Eight *months*?" he hissed.

"Yae rill 'e silent," Taakh ground out.

For a long moment no one spoke. Taakh gazed across the snow at the Security men as they examined the would-be assassins; and though Ryq expressions were nearly impossible for humans to read, Galway had no trouble seeing the conflict raging behind the alien's eyes. On the one hand, his pride demanded that he utterly obliterate the town that had dared to raise a fist against their Ryq overlords. But on the other hand, he also knew that the war was going badly, and that his people needed an influx of spirit and imagination and tactical skill.

They needed the blackcollars. And without Galway, they would never get them. "Ery rell," Taakh

said at last. "Yae rill seal the region. Re rill tell yae ren it rill 'e o'ened again." Weissmann took a deep breath. "As you command, Your Eminence," he said. Galway suppressed a grimace. So that was how the alien's pride was going to work itself out. He would allow Weissmann to seal the district as Galway had requested, cutting it off completely from the outside world. But it would be the Ryqril who would decide when that lockdown would be lifted. Until then, it would be the local government's job to figure out how to keep the people inside the ring area alive and fed.

But at least they would *be* alive. That was the important thing.

For another moment Taakh gazed at Weissmann, perhaps wondering if the humans were getting off too easily. Then, apparently dismissing the thought, he turned to Galway and gestured toward the transport with his laser. "Re rill go," he ordered.

"As you command, Your Eminence." Stepping to Judas's side, Galway took his arm. "Come on, He Judas," he said. "Time to go."

"Yes," Judas said, his eyes on the dead men in the snow. Men who'd once been his colleagues and allies.

"Maybe even past time."

\* \* \*

For a moment Sam Foxleigh lay in his narrow bed in the darkness, wrapped tightly in his blankets wondering what had awakened him. The wind had picked up since he'd gone to bed, whistling cold and wet off the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Probably that was what it was, he decided; the wind tearing around the corners of this one-room shack that old Toby had built to hide out in so long ago. Or maybe it was the dropping temperature. The fire in the wood-stove in the center of the cabin had burned down, with only glowing ashes visible through the slats of tempered glass in the cast-iron door. He peered at the old wind-up clock sitting on the rough nightstand beside his bed. Just after two in the morning. If he didn't restock the fire, it would get a lot colder in here before it got any warmer. With a sigh, he unwrapped himself from his blankets and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He winced as his feet hit the cold wooden floor, winced even harder as he carefully put weight on his bad left leg. The leg, he'd told his rescuers down in the tiny community of Shelter Valley, that had been damaged when he parachuted out of his crippled fighter in the midst of Earth's last, futile defense against the Ryqril. And the villagers, simple folk that they were, had swallowed the story whole. Hobbling over to the stove, he popped open the door and fed in a few sticks and a small piece of lard. The snows had come early this year, and he just hoped he had enough wood cut and stacked to make it until spring. Cutting wood in the dead of winter with a bad leg would be a great deal less than fun. For a minute he stood at the stove, stirring the ashes with the poker until the sticks caught. Then, closing the door again, he limped over to the south-facing window and pushed aside the shade, feeling a soft breeze on his fingers from the small leaks around the glass. A quarter kilometer downslope, Shelter Valley was mostly dark, but he could see a couple of lights still burning. Insomniacs, probably, up reading or watching television.

Or perhaps someone was tending to the Ryqril sensor pylon.

He gazed down at the lights, old memories burning at his throat. He'd been up here with Toby when the Security men had come by with their offer to allow the villagers to stay if they would accept the pylon and handle its day-to-day upkeep. Toby's family had argued against it, but the rest of the twenty-odd families had decided they had no choice.

Foxleigh's own opinion, of course, hadn't even been part of the discussion. For that matter, neither had Toby's.

One of the lights blinked off, the darkness flowing in to fill the spot where it had been. Toby's family had offered to run a power line up here back when the old recluse was still alive, a power line and phone line both. But Toby would have none of it. The closest he would come to communication

had been letting them rig up the multiple multicolored window shades over this particular window that he could use to signal whether he needed food or medical attention or—rarely—wanted some company. He hadn't wanted company very often, that was for sure. Eventually, even his family had mostly given up coming here and left him to his chosen lifestyle.

And what had been good enough for Toby was good enough for Foxleigh. Distantly, he wondered how many of the people down in the village even knew that Toby was dead.

He lifted his eyes from the town, turning his attention to the southeast and the dark mass of Aegis Mountain framed against the faint haze of swirling clouds, glowing with the reflected lights of Denver and civilization so many kilometers beyond it. Once upon a time, that mountain had been mankind's last stronghold against the Ryqril invaders, a place full of grim men and women and weapons. But the men and women had died or disappeared, and the weapons had gone silent, and the mountain had gone dark. The Ryqril had taken over the small town of Idaho Springs ten kilometers west of Aegis and set up a pleasant little enclave for themselves, with their ring of sensor pylons guarding against even the possibility of an air attack. The mountain itself they'd ignored entirely. But a year and a half ago, that had abruptly changed. They'd set up a heavily armed camp by the main entrance at the north end of the mountain and had begun picking carefully at the compressed hull metal of the door, trying to avoid the deadly booby traps that had been built into it so long ago by the humans. So far, they hadn't gotten through. But someone else had.

They'd been young looking, for the most part, young and scrappy and full of the energy Foxleigh himself had once possessed. He'd seen them from the cabin, several groups of them over the past few years, working like ants at some unknown project a kilometer beyond his east window. Their view of Shelter Valley itself—and vice versa—had been blocked by a low ridge, and it was doubtful they'd even known the village was there. It was for sure that the villagers themselves had never known about the visitors. For the first month or two they'd worked on the surface, and after that had simply hiked away with their equipment and disappeared somewhere, emerging days or even weeks later.

And then, all of a sudden, they'd stopped coming.

Over the next few months Foxleigh had occasionally toyed with the idea of going over there himself to see if he could figure out what in hell's name they'd been doing out on the back molar of nowhere. But given his bad leg, there was no guarantee he could manage such a trek on his own. He'd just about decided that whatever they'd been doing was over and done with when, in the middle of last summer, the others had suddenly showed up. Not the original workers—not those kids—but someone else.

Blackcollars.

There'd been no doubt about it. He'd seen them as clear as day with his compact little spotting telescope, and there'd been no mistaking the color and texture of the glimpses of flexarmor he'd seen beneath their outer clothing.

And with that, suddenly the whole thing had become clear.

He'd watched for days after the group had left, waiting for them to return, or for Resistance troops to arrive and reactivate the fortress under the distant brooding mountain.

But they never had. At least, not when he was watching.

He sighed, letting the shade fall back over the window. That had been five months ago, and now that it was winter he knew they wouldn't be back any time soon. Shelter Valley's sensor pylon was designed solely to watch for aircraft, but Security techs came by at irregular intervals, and fresh tracks in the snow leading nowhere would be a trail too obvious and too intriguing to ignore.

But maybe when spring came and the snow melted they'd be back.

He hobbled back to the stove. The sticks had mostly burned down, but the log had caught. That ought to bring the temperature in the cabin back to a decent level. Maybe once the weather turned nice again he would see about re-siding the whole place. Maybe add some insulation to the ceiling, to

And while he worked he would keep an eye on the mountain.

## CHAPTER 1

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The breeze whistled gently through the forest glade, rustling through the tree branches and sending mottled patterns of light and shadow across the rolling, grassy ground. Behind the trees, the majestic peaks of Plinry's Greenheart Mountains could be seen, the last of the previous winter's snow still clinging to them.

The young man standing in the center of the glade couldn't appreciate the view, of course. For one thing, his close-fitting blindfold didn't allow through even a glimmer of the warm sunshine. For another, he had far more urgent matters on his mind than mountainside scenery.

On the opposite side of the glade, standing well out of the way beside a thick tree, Damon Lathe raised an arm, his hand tracing out a rapid-fire succession of hand signals. *Caine, Skyler: move inward. Pattern two.*

Lifting his own arm, Allen Caine acknowledged the order. Then, feeling decidedly awkward in the thickly padded practice suit, he started across the glade. A third of the way around the circle, Ray Skyler, his normal hefty bulk looking grotesque in his own suit, did likewise. The two men had covered perhaps three-quarters of the distance when the young man's head turned slightly, his right eye now pointing toward Caine. Caine froze in response, a flicker of sympathy rippling through him as the other moved his head back and forth a few degrees. It hadn't been all that long ago that Caine himself had been in Will Flynn's position, standing blind in the center of the circle and trying to sense his opponents' approach. And, at least in Caine's case, silently but roundly cursing the whole ridiculous exercise.

Around the circle, Skyler was still moving inward. He'd made it another two steps when Flynn's head turned again, this time in the big blackcollar's direction. Lifting his arms into combat stance, Caine started forward again.

And without warning, Flynn did a long slide-leap toward him, twisting his arms and torso around like a berserk corkscrew and sending a spinning kick sweeping straight toward Caine's head. Even as Caine reflexively dropped into a crouch he saw that the kick was going to be short. A quick leap forward, a quick midsection punch and leg sweep before Flynn could finish his kick and get his legs back under him, and they'd get a chance to see how well the trainee could fight on his back. Flynn's foot shot past above and in front of Caine's face, exactly where he'd anticipated it would go. Shoving off with his back foot, cocking his right fist for a punch, he leaped to the attack. And staggered backward as a pair of somethings thudded hard into his ribs and upper thigh. He looked down. Embedded halfway into the padding were a pair of black, eight-pointed *shuriken* throwing stars.

Flynn finished his kick and spun around toward Skyler, and Caine looked across the clearing at Lathe. The other gave him a tight smile and drew a line across his throat with his finger. It wasn't a standard blackcollar hand signal, but the meaning was clear.

For Caine, the game was over.

Grimacing, he nodded and backed up. Setting his personal pride on hold, he shifted to analysis mode and settled in to watch the rest of Flynn's test.

\* \* \*

The exercise was over, and Caine had had time to get out of the suit and take a shower, when Lathe appeared at his room at the blackcollars' lodge. "So what did you think of Flynn's technique?" he asked as he came in, closing the door behind him.

"Odd but interesting," Caine said, studying the older man's lined face and gray-flecked goatee as he snagged a chair and pulled it over. Damon Lathe had been a commando commander—a comsquare—during the losing war against the Ryqril thirty years ago. Instead of continuing a guerrilla-style fight after Earth's defeat, though, as other blackcollar and special forces units had, he and the remnant

Plinry's blackcollars had chosen instead to pretend to settle down under the alien domination. For nearly three decades they'd played the role of bitter but demoralized veterans, allowing themselves just enough of the youth drug Idunine to let their outer appearances age normally while still maintaining their muscles and joints and stamina, nurturing their strength and hope against the chance that one day they'd find an opportunity to strike one final serious blow against the Ryqril overlord. That opportunity had come two years ago, when Earth's Resistance leaders had discovered the key to five hidden war-era Nova-class warships and had sent Caine to the Plinry archives to dig out the exact location. The end result had been a reactivation of the Plinry blackcollars, and five new warships in the hands of the Resistance and their alien Chryselli allies.

Five ships hadn't made that much difference, of course, considering the vast fleets arrayed on both the Ryqril and Chryselli sides of the battlefield. But it had made enough. Two of the ships had gone directly to the Chryselli, while the three kept by the Resistance had been pressed into service transporting humans around the TDE, Resistance agents as well as ordinary travelers, breaking the travel monopoly hitherto held by Ryqril-loyal government and business people.

The Ryqril hadn't been happy about the loosening of their travel restrictions, but they'd accepted the new status quo with the recognition that it was the lesser of many possible evils. If the Resistance had tried using their Novas as military weapons, harassing Ryq bases in the TDE or trying to foment open rebellion, the aliens would have been forced to pull some of their own warships off the battlefield and hunt them down. That would have bought the Chryselli a brief respite at best and the TDE nothing at all. As long as the Novas functioned exclusively as passenger liners, even passenger liners for undesirables like Resistance agents, they weren't worth the risk and effort of destroying. After all, the Ryqril probably reasoned, there was little a handful of zealots could do against their vast, loyalty-conditioned bureaucracy.

" 'Interesting' wasn't exactly the word I was thinking," Lathe said dryly, bringing Caine's thoughts back to the present. "He nailed you good with that double *shuriken* throw."

"That he did," Caine conceded, suppressing his reflexive flicker of embarrassment. As Lathe had frequently mentioned, there was no place for pride or ego in this business. "I never even saw him draw them."

"It's a trick Mordecai taught him," Lathe said. "He draws the stars as he starts into the kick, one in each hand, then uses the momentum of the spin to throw them. He doesn't even have to bend his elbows, which means his arms are out ready to whip across the head of anyone who might have tried to move in on him during his spin."

Caine nodded. "I should have guessed it was one of Mordecai's moves."

"Actually, Mordecai usually uses his *nunchaku* as the second move instead of stars," Lathe said. "And at the moment, Flynn still misses almost as often as he connects. But he's improving."

"I'd definitely recommend he keep at it," Caine said. "It's a technique well worth developing."

"I agree." A shadow seemed to cross Lathe's face. "It's really a shame he'll never be a blackcollar."

"It's a shame about a lot of them," Caine said, an old ache tugging at him. The drug called Backlash, given in a carefully prescribed regimen during training, permanently altered a person's neurochemistry, doubling combat speed and reflexes and turning what would otherwise have been merely a superbly skilled martial artist into a uniquely lethal blackcollar.

It was a transformation Caine had wanted for himself ever since his first encounter with Lathe's team. His first choice of mission as a team commander, in fact, had been to take a small group of trainees back to Earth a year ago in hopes of locating the formula in the still intact Aegis Mountain stronghold in the mountains west of Denver. But they'd come up dry, at least on the Backlash formula. What they *had* found in Aegis might ultimately prove to be even more significant in the long run. Still, for now, the bottom line was that neither Caine nor Flynn nor any of the other trainees had an

chance of becoming true blackcollars. "Maybe someday," he said.

"Maybe," Lathe agreed. "By the way, did you hear that Galway was back?" Caine lifted his eyebrows. "He's *back*? In one piece?"

"I'm rather surprised myself," Lathe said. "Even granted that none of what happened in Denver was his fault, I'd still expected the Ryqril to take out at least some of their frustrations on him."

"And if not the Ryqril, certainly whatever was left of Denver's Security hierarchy," Caine agreed, frowning. "Do we know whether or not he's resuming his position here?"

"Not yet," Lathe said. "Of course, from Earth's point of view, sentencing him to continue as Security Prefect of Plinry might be considered sufficient punishment in itself."

"We can hope," Caine said, and meant it. Loyalty-conditioned or not, Galway nevertheless genuinely cared about Plinry's citizens. After living under Assistant Security Prefect Hammerschmidt for most of the past year, Caine would be more than happy to have Galway back. "I wonder if he'll be inviting us to visit him in the Hub anytime soon."

Lathe shrugged. "If not, we may be able to arrange an appointment ourselves." Caine smiled. The Hub, the section of Plinry's capital city, Capstone, where the government people lived and worked, was cowered behind a tall, sensor-equipped wall guarded by armed loyalty-conditioned Security men, whose main purpose was to keep out the general, non-loyalty-conditioned public. But then, dealing with walls and guards was a blackcollar specialty. "Let's at least let him settle in first."

"And see if he's actually staying," Lathe agreed, standing up. "Anyway, Flynn should be about ready for his debriefing. You want to help Skyler run Pittman through his paces later?"

"Absolutely," Caine assured him. As far as he was concerned, if the formula for Backlash was ever discovered, Pittman would be right there in line with Flynn.

"Good," Lathe said. "I'll see you then."

\* \* \*

Lathe was halfway down the wide lodge staircase when the tingler on his right wrist came to life, tapping out rapid-fire blackcollar code onto two sections of skin: *Lathe: Lepkowski calling; urgent*. He slid two fingers beneath the sleeve of his black flexarmor turtleneck shirt. *On my way*, he tapped back.

Hamner Lodge, located in one of the most picturesque areas of the Greenheart Mountains and convenient to Capstone, had once been a retreat for hunters, hikers, and other nature lovers. After the Ryqril Groundfire attack devastated the majority of the planet, the lodge had been largely abandoned. A few years after the TDE's surrender, the blackcollars had reopened it, using it as a place where the old embittered veterans could get together to relive the glory days.

Or so the Ryqril and Security forces had been led to believe. Once the enemy had come to their conclusion and serious surveillance had ended, the blackcollars had turned the lodge into a quiet headquarters, running secret combat training for some of Capstone's youth and slowly turning it into what they hoped would someday be a fully operational command center.

The communications room in the lodge's basement had been one of their first upgrades, despite the fact that at the time there had been no one out there for them to talk to. It had been as state-of-the-art as they could manage, with long-range transmitters, encryption systems, and—most importantly—overlapping bug-stomper systems to make sure no one was able to slip any eavesdropping devices into the room. Chelsey Jensen was seated at the panel when Lathe arrived, his eyes shifting back and forth between the monitor displays. "How's the reception today?" Lathe asked as he closed the door behind him.

"I think we may have some ears to the door," Jensen said, tapping one of the displays. "If we do, though, it's a very slick tap. The signal shows barely a whisker of perturbation."

"Doesn't sound like anything Hammerschmidt's got," Lathe commented, sitting down beside him.

"Unless Galway brought some new equipment back with him."

Jensen shook his head. "There hasn't been enough time for them to set it up," he pointed out. "I'm guessing this is Ryqril stuff."

"Stolen from someone else, no doubt," Lathe murmured. "Probably the Chryselli."

"Could be," Jensen said. "If it was, they're taking a huge risk using it on Lepkowski. Most of the *Novak*

's upgrades are also Chryselli, which means there's a fair chance he's already nailed the tap."

"Could be," Lathe said, studying the other out of the corner of his eye. The *Novak*, one of the recovered TDE warships, had cost the life of Jensen's best friend, and even after nearly two years the mood, which sometimes seemed to have settled into a permanent twilight, went a little darker. "Have you had any kickers from him?"

"Not yet," Jensen said. "Probably waiting until you were here."

"Let's find out." Picking up the microphone, Lathe keyed it on. "This is Lathe," he said. "Welcome back to Plinry, General."

"One of my very favorite spots in the whole universe," Lepkowski said dryly. "How've you been Comsquare?"

"Bored out of my skull," Lathe said. *Very favorite spot/universe* —kicker given; *out of my skull*

—kicker acknowledged. The Ryqril were indeed tapping into the conversation, but Lepkowski didn't know whether or not they'd broken the current encryption. It was more or less what Lathe had expected.

"Any interesting passengers to drop off?"

"No interesting passengers, but some very interesting information," Lepkowski said. "I'm told the Ryqril are in the process of setting up a tactical coordination center on Khala." Lathe exchanged looks with Jensen. "How complete a center?"

"Very complete," Lepkowski said. "Full comm feeds and couriers from every unit in the sector, including a large chunk of the local battlefield. Full data analysis and assessment section. Full decision-making capabilities, including a permanent half circle of command-rank Ryqril there to make them."

"Interesting, indeed," Lathe murmured. "Why Khala? Wouldn't one of their own worlds do better?"

"Not necessarily," Lepkowski said. "For one thing, Khala's actually closer to that part of the battlefield than any of their own worlds. More importantly, I think they've finally tumbled to the fact that we and the Chryselli are genuine allies, and that it's not just a marriage of convenience."

"Even if it's mostly one-sided at the moment?"

"Even so. And since allies try very hard not to slaughter each other's civilians, putting the center on a captured TDE world actually makes it safer than it would be on one of theirs."

"Safer from the Chryselli, anyway," Jensen murmured.

"But *only* from the Chryselli," Lathe agreed. "How close is it to a sizeable human populace?"

"It's right on the edge of one," Lepkowski said. "It's at the western edge of the capital of Inkosi City, with the city on one side and scattered forest and farmland around the rest of it. You interested in taking a look?"

"Very much so," Lathe said. "What's our timeline look like?"

"I'll be heading to Shiloh as soon as I drop my passengers. After that, I'm swinging past Magr Graecia and Bullhead. That puts me back here in about six weeks."

"Good enough," Lathe said. "Any idea how far along the center is?"

"According to my source, the overall construction is complete and they've almost finished with the equipment setup," Lepkowski said. "If their ramp-up schedule parallels human patterns, I'm guessing

they'll be fully operational in three to four weeks."

"Which means that in six weeks they'll still be settling in and working out the last kinks in the security system," Lathe concluded. "Perfect."

"If you think *that's* perfect, wait'll you hear this," Lepkowski said, some grim satisfaction creeping into his voice. "My source for all this is a fine upstanding Khalan citizen named Kieran Shaw." He paused dramatically. " *Tactor* Kieran Shaw."

Jensen muttered something startled-sounding under his breath. "A *tactor* ?" Lathe echoed, feeling a little stunned himself. "I didn't know any senior officers had survived the war."

"He was wearing a blue-eyed dragonhead ring," Lepkowski said. "Unless you think he's just a comsquare who gave himself a promotion."

"Unlikely," Lathe said, looking down at the silvery dragonhead ring on his own right hand and the red stones of its eyes. "Has he got anyone with him?"

"He was a bit vague about that," Lepkowski said. "But that may have been because he didn't trust our comm connection. I'm guessing he's got at least a few other blackcollars hanging around you who might be able to borrow for the occasion. Anyway, he said he'll have a contact on permanent duty at the Guardrail Tavern on Teardrop Road at the south end of Inkosi City whenever you want to make contact."

"Sounds good," Lathe said. "One more question. After you swing back by here is there any chance we could rendezvous with any of the other ships?"

"Let me check," Lepkowski said. "Yes, I could arrange to meet up with the *Defiant* at either Shiloh or Juniper. You expecting to be getting tired of my company?"

"Something like that," Lathe said. "I may also have another job for you."

"No problem," Lepkowski assured him. "Well, happy planning. I'll see you in six weeks." Lathe gestured, and Jensen keyed off the comm. "You think it's a trap?" the other asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Awfully long way to lure us in just for a trap," Lathe pointed out, his mind racing. After all the waiting, this might finally be it. "You'd think they could come up with something a little closer to Plinry if all they wanted was to take us out."

"True," Jensen said. "Which doesn't answer my question, of course."

"Oh, I'm sure it *could* be a trap," Lathe said. "Especially with all of this coming right on the heels of Galway's return."

"Certainly an interesting coincidence," Jensen agreed. "So what's your probable scenario? We leave Denver's Security apparatus in a shambles, Galway gets caught in the middle, and he tries to save his own skin by coming up with some bait to dangle in front of us?"

"Actually, I was crediting the Ryqril with more brains than that," Lathe said. "Bearing in mind that Galway's probably the closest thing to a blackcollar expert they have available right now." He gestured toward the ceiling. "In fact, I'll lay you odds he's spent a lot of the past year on Khala."

"Helping make their tac center blackcollar-proof?"

"Why not?" Lathe countered. "Especially since there seems to be a blackcollar presence already there for them to guard against." He lifted an eyebrow. "Unless you think that's just part of the bait."

"All I know is that the Ryqril don't like guerrilla teams operating on their occupied world," Jensen reminded him darkly. "If this alleged tactor has been doing any serious damage, they should have taken him out years ago."

"Unless he's been playing it quiet, like we did," Lathe suggested.

"Maybe," Jensen said. "Unfortunately, there's no way to know for sure this side of Khala."

"True." Lathe shook his head. "Rather ironic, you know. All Galway ever wanted was to sit out here in the middle of nowhere and do whatever his loyalty-conditioning would allow to keep the people

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