



Citadel

Part 3

The bent Elfhorn Jork had brought his tall twisted excuse for a man into the citadel, Talon had watched them as they had passed his store and he would have liked nothing better than to spit and vomit all over them: but he had his best clothes on and he was in the company of his new lover Lumion, she was not yet promised to the dark guild of the first born. Her mind was still fresh, unspoilt and pure but he would change that. He watched the stunted forms riddle off to the tower where the flame guardian and the pathetic consort had started to change the citadel for the worst.

Jork had made the long journey with Cactus, they had travelled the path from the lush cavern under the sea of Jade and they had at last stood before the magnificent flame guardian whose voice had travelled the planet and the outlying star systems. He had brought Cactus to the guardian seeking forgiveness for his many, many sins. He was not bad simply misguided due to several hits on the head and a weakness for the ways of the mortals. He had spoke of how Cactus had served the outer realm well and unlike his vain counterparts he had hidden his deeds choosing the path of the humble silent custodians. The flame guardian had agreed and she had removed his transgressions. Jork reaffirmed his custodianship of the earth stone and they left the city to return to the luminous cavern deep under the sea.

He had fled into the void, not because he was afraid, he could have just as easily crushed the little ship that the humans had sent. He fled simply to maintain his illusion, he is a predator and any risk that could weaken him was foolish to take. So he had withdrawn and re assessed his options, also the neighbouring systems offered much in the way of feeding and he had sensed the presence of something that ought not to be in this realm, something that they had banished long ago. The guardian had denied him his main meal but he would take the smaller bites around the edges.

Gidion sat at his desk, the codex still in his hand. His ship had arrived at the Galsean system just as the shadow had swept past them and entered the void. Plex had told him not to follow just make way for the planet and the citadel. This he had done, the little Sariken had a way of making him feel humble, as if he was in the presence of something far greater than its sum. Gidion had come to realize that the little life form was quite shy, seeking solitude away from the crew who had been instantly warmed by his presence. His aid Vemus was quite the opposite, he had been curious wanting to know all about the empire and the peoples that made up her populations. They were a strange pair he had thought but quite likable. His thoughts shifted back to the codex and the instructions that the CORE had given him, and this had caused him to lock himself in his cabin and seek the solitude that had always given him guidance.

The citadel was bathed in a soft light of the moon; she had once again become the jewel that she had always been. The guardian had housed herself in the tower of the eternal flame; it had arisen out of the ground when she had emerged from the depths of her cavern. Now she watched over her city and her people as she began the slow task of healing. They had all come to see her in the tower, one by one the whole population of the citadel had sought communion with the flame guardian. She had healed the sick and the infirm and those that were beyond her help she had bathed in the light of purity. The Consort had become her voice, her connection to those that lived under her roof.

Grimor had become the advisor to the Consorts wife Helona; she had at last accepted him as the voice of the empire within the citadel, and would in time forge a greater link to the inner core worlds. Many still had forebodings regarding the empire that had left them to languish at the edge of the galaxy, yet the dumpy looking empire man had rekindled a light that had been dimmed by the ravages of time and neglect. Grimor had instigated the lost traditions within the citadel garrison and established the foundations for an effective assault force should the city require it. The arrival of the frigate Halkin had further strengthened the ties

with the empire and more importantly had brought with it a most unusual life form, one that had only existed in fables and songs of the old tribes.

Plex had taken his pills and his aid Vemus had watched as he had swallowed them, he waited satisfied that Vemus had returned to whatever it was that he was doing and he reached into his bag and took another pill. Vemus would have scalded him but he was in charge of himself and he knew what he needed. Plex could hear her calling to him, the guardian within the tower, she had arisen and soon he would commune with her. They had not seen each other for a thousand years and she needed to be stronger before they once again joined in the eternal peace of the cosmic strand. He was so tired but the humans had brought him here, back to the place where he had left her so long ago. He had thought her long dead as the Kraynum had told him that they had killed her and he had given up the search for the light that had always shone so bright within him.



Rhombus had been given a new home deep within the citadel and away from the Kraynum; he had started the scenarios that Chandlor had given him. He liked it here, the lost memories of when he was all man and the machine had not bonded with him. That was so long ago and those that he had known were all long dead and only Chandlor remained, a reminder of the times before he had been sent out into the desert . The calculations sped past his mind, an endless stream of data, possibilities, and potentials and onwards towards the final resolution.

Klawtoss had given him a wide birth, choosing to remain out of sight and out of reach. The mechanical spy had started to develop ideas and thoughts that ought to have been beyond him, yet he had defied his master, found his own path to whatever lesser creations aspired too. Rhombus had forgiven him just as the humans had forgiven his transgressions against them, it was the least he could do as the simulation had yielded the best possible outcome to an unwinnable situation and the Kreynum was still out there waiting and doing who knows what.

Klawtoss was in heaven, or a version of machine heaven that he had thought impossible. He had stopped his spying and his snooping and his eavesdropping. In his mind his house and his friends had stopped burning and the city had become whole and safe again. The master had been taken down below into the caverns and out of sight leaving him to scurry around at his leisure. He had found many new things to do. He had sat with his friends the roach and the slug as they danced and told stories of the things that they had seen the clumsy humans do too each other. Some of those things he had seen for himself like the time when he had come out of the crack in the wall to find a man sitting tied to a chair as a woman threw sickly smelling cakes at the thing in his pants. Klawtoss had left his friends and returned to the tower where the guardian gracefully wove in and around her chamber as the light danced around the walls forming soft shadows that swirled and blended. He had taken too many essential oils and he had slumped upon the floor looking up at the bright lights cascading all around him. He felt good, alive, even whole not like the machine that the master had made him to be. In the distance he could hear them talking softly, whispering a tune of how they would be able to break the seal and allow the seed into the chamber.

Chandlor watched as his city once again became whole and strong. He had accessed the archival stones and they had responded telling him that the alignment was almost complete. All but one of the outer planets in the remote colony systems had re entered the grid and their stones were already charging. The archive had

been unable to reach the small settlement on Nimbor V, the stone was simply not transmitting and Chandlor felt a cold chill run over his spine and he shuddered.

Gidion thrust the codex on his desk and clenched his fist, another order he could just not simply be able to follow. He was starting to hate the CORE; it was times like this that he wished he was a simple farmer on the colonial outpost worlds far from the sprawling mega worlds that encompassed the core planets and the centre of imperial power and meddling. Why the CORE would want the guardian dead was simply beyond him. He unlocked the door to his quarters and made his way up onto the bridge.

Leena and Rawlings were bent over the halo sphere as if attempting to locate something dropped.

“There got it.” Rawlings picked up the earring and turned to hand it over but Leena had already stood erect as the commander had stepped upon the bridge and the AI had announced and logged his presence.

“Commander.” She called, quickly taking the earring back off Rawlings outstretched hand. “We have just received coms that outpost on Nimbor V has gone dark.



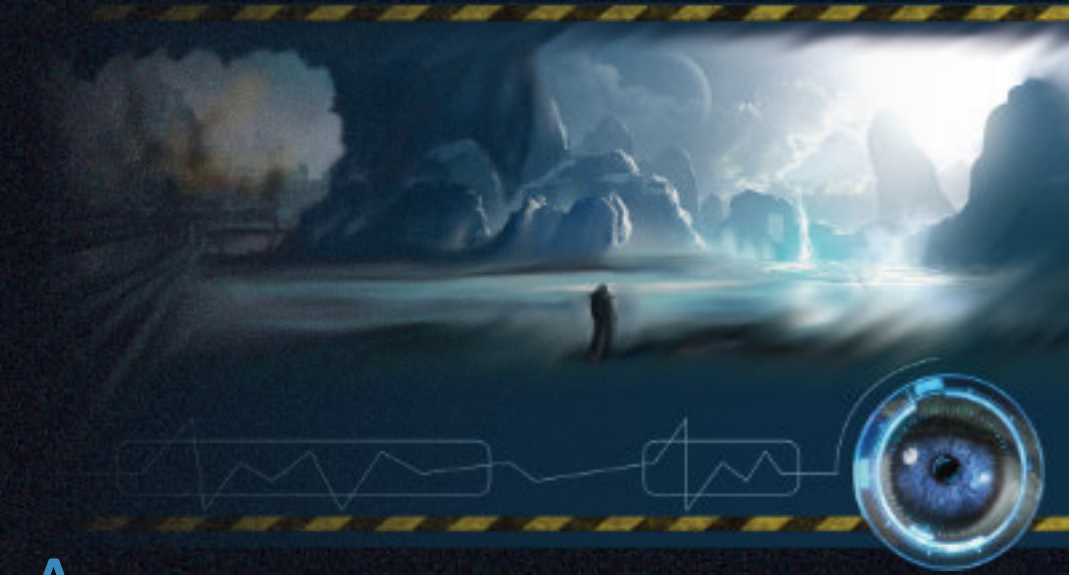
OUTER HIGORON PLANET NIMBOR V (R.I.P.)

It had come for them and they had no idea it was even there. The shadow had rippled down the corridor wall part in and part out of the fortified station settlement. Bramort watched the shapeless form enter the corridor and cross over into of his friend, it looked like half of him had become a silhouette, a black fathomless ripple had encompassed part of his body and his head. He did not even scream as he pulled out his knife and started to hack into his right arm, trying to sever it from his torso. Bramort stood horrified too shaken to react, and then he stepped towards his friend and the shadow had spread over him and he too was now hacking himself to death.

By the time Halkin arrived in orbit the settlement was destroyed, plumes of smoke rose up into the atmosphere and the landing party had found the remains of the six hundred souls that had once been the outer colony on Nimbor V. It was a blood bath, the half shattered remains of bodies strewn across the hubs and plazas of the settlement, bodies that had shot themselves to bits with their own pulsar weapons. Not a single survivor to tell of the horror that had been inflicted upon them.

Leena had vomited as she led the landing team into the settlement after the drone had finished it's reconnoiter and no threat had been detected. They had arrived too late and there was nothing that they could do accept catalogue and lay the remains to rest.

The landing party had returned to Halkin and the last formal act was for the commander to initiate and deploy the doom sphere, a beacon that would mark this place with a skull and cross bones icon that would appear on every cartographic chart as a place that had been erased and lost to the empire of man.



After that the crew moral had dropped and only the anger remained. Gidion had to channel that, had to turn that anger into something he could use, but he still had no target to unleash it against.

He had fed and it had been glorious, the colony was an easy prey, unable to see their fate. He had forgotten how sweet the essence of the life forms had been. He had drained moons and some small planets but this was nourishment that his kind was really made for. Satisfied he once again returned to the void and watched from afar as the human ship scouted his wake.

When the news of the dreadful events reached the citadel the consort ordered the evacuation of all outlying colonies in the systems under his dominion. Shuttles had started to arrive and the city had set up temporary zones to accommodate the influx of the colonists. He had also requested help from the CORE but it had simply quarantined them affectively isolating them from the empire. Now they were truly alone.

Plex had at last entered the tower and he looked up through the chamber and into her flames. She was truly magnificent, even more beautiful than he had remembered her all those years ago. Her face reached out and he was again young, the memory flooded his mind and so too the sadness and the loss.

Plex was inside of her as she rode the comet across the void dust, a burning arc scribing her path across the heavens as they dropped density and entered the realm of the mortals. They had fought as one, a last ditched effort to stop the genocide that the Kraynum had unleashed upon them but it was futile they had already won and the mortals would become their slaves. All that was left was to ignite the dust and fuse the barrier that would separate the realm of mortal from the Nexus, a forbidden act of interference that had consigned her to a fate of exile and banishment in this dark and lonely void.

Plex had been saved she had made sure of that, she had tricked him into leaving her and venturing amongst the humans where he would nurture their growth and hopefully elevate them to a place where the Kraynum could never again defile them.

Now in her chamber they were again re united and their power complete. She had given a part of herself to Plex, a flame that he must forever hold and cherish, a flame that he would use to banish the lone Kraynum back into the world of its own kind.

Klawtoss had recovered his senses after the essential oils had worn off leaving him dull and stiff but he still held the memory of the voices that he had heard, the ones that whispered the sounds of betrayal and death. He needed to remember but he had fried his mind and now it was playing tricks upon him. The walls were still moving and the corridors wove in and out like water lapping the side of a pond or basin. He scurried back to the black slug and the roach hoping that they might know something, anything that could help him in his quest to save the flame guardian.



Part 4

Talon had finished inserting his will into Lumion; he had told her over and over again that she would be his and his alone. She had of course squirmed under his tirade and actually wondered if she had made a terrible mistake in choosing a man years older than herself. She wished that the sun could be turned backwards arcing back to the days when she was a simple child growing up on the outer edges of the citadel. A time before Talon had taken her mother, used her, discarded her and turned his affections towards the child. Lumion had liked the many gifts that were sent her way and her mother had liked the new house within the plaza walls. The citadel had started to crumble and Talon had profited by undermining the consort and his extravagant wife Helona, he had told all who listened that they had brought a shame upon their great city, the baran Helona had no children and the city had no future. The Consort was weak unable to seed an heir and his health was failing like the city walls and half collapsed buildings that had created a dilapidation around the outer city. Talon had re formed the old guild of the first born, an order dedicated to restoring the older houses to a lost and forgotten glory. He was naturally the leader and he had amassed quite a rebellion out of the fearful, weak and the disgruntled. Lumion had become a young woman of outstanding beauty and he had kept her loyal using her sick mother as a stick, whilst the status and lavish offerings became the carrot.

He sat at his desk looking at the virtual seed encased within its sealed chamber. One of his trusted spies had acquired it after the guardian had arisen and reclaimed her power. He gazed up as the screen that had reported another loss from his rapidly deteriorating profits that his monopolies had brought him. Something had to be done, he was not about to lose it all now due to that flame creature purging the citadel of the merchants strongholds and ability to maintain the only order that mattered, the order of the pyramid, with him at the top and the rest knowing their place.

Klawtoss had started to get his shit together and he could again walk in a straight line. The black slug had pointed him in the direction of the mumbling disgruntles who had held their meetings in the outer chamber under the great tower. Klawtoss had scurried off seeking to find the source of the schemers that he had heard whilst watching the flame guardian. He had squeezed through the cracks dropped down into the crevices and emerged into the underground tunnels that ran throughout the citadel. Eventually he had discovered the chamber, a huge open room whose sounds echoed and ran up into the vents and into the tower above. It was empty so he had switched himself off and waited for those that would come back to return.

Chandlor had retrieved the stone from the lost colony on Nimbor V; it was black and its molecular structure held in a state of quantum degradation. Atrophied, inert and devoid of all life, it had like the colonists been drained of all its energy and now was but a stone useless. He placed it in the archival vault and deactivated it from the matrix, only the records of the lost souls a reminder for those seeking reasons for the unknowable. Grimor watched as he performed the solemn ritual, he had tried to access the CORE but there was no response, just a repeating code, isolate and contain protocols enacted, compromised territories, enforcers activated. Grimor knew that the CORE had drawn a line upon the outer empire worlds where it had complete dominion and all other territories would be considered compromised and potentially hostile. The events upon Nimbor V had pushed the CORE into adopting a fortress defence. Grimor knew that they had to deal with the Kraynum before the CORE would reactivate the grid that would once again connect this outer territory to the fringes of the empire. The other option that he feared was that the CORE would simply erase this star system from the galaxy and take the Kraynum with it.

Plex had made himself at home; the small house suited him just fine. He had his pills, his solitude and Vemus to take care of the lesser things. He had shut himself away after his bonding with the guardian, the memories had flooded his old mind bringing with it feelings that he had thought forever lost. He had

chosen to push the ember of love into the recesses to slowly smoulder rather than to simply extinguish it. There it had remained hidden and forgotten, but now it had again engulfed him, the flame of the guardian had rekindled itself deep within him and he would hold it until he was returned to the dust. Plex had given a technology to the human commander in his aid to rid the Kreynum from this realm. A technology that would weaken the Kraynum, keeping it at bay until a more permanent solution could be found. The predator would not easily be trapped but that is what they must do in order to contain it. It had fed and it had left its mark in this void, it was territorial and others of its kind would not seek to infringe upon its dominion rights. The barrier would hold for now so others would not invade this void but the lone Kraynum would have to be contained and forever held here and Plex knew that he would have to device a trap.

Lumion was starting to feel sick, he had spewed his venom all over her and she had retreated to her rooms. He was starting to ask her to do more and more vile things, degrading and perverse. He would always start with her mother and how she so needed the medications that he supplied her, and then came the demands and finally her submission to his will, a will that would destroy her if she could not find a way to escape his oppressive assertions. He was hatching some vile plan she was sure of it, not that he told her much, but she had seen him in his study looking at the thing in the containment sphere.

The red light spread across the mind of Klawtoss and he could see the shapes that had assembled in the chamber under the tower. The sounds were now starting to make some sense as he processed the information.

“Take this and keep it safe, well hidden. Do not tell anyone, I will tell you when to use it. Understood?”

Klawtoss watched as the tall dark man handed over a spherical container. The other man nodded and bowed as he carefully placed the container under his robes.

“Now go.”

Klawtoss had to make a quick decision which one to follow, which trail to take. The one with the item, yes him, must find out what it is, what it means.

The slow moving biped had taken his exit leaving the tall one alone. Klawtoss scurried along the wall of the chamber his fragmented eye catching a glimpse of the face that he had seen before. The one they called Talon, the one that controlled the merchants and the fat dumplings that swam in the corridors of the commercial districts.

Vemus had been sent to the outer city gate whose road led across the causeway and into the mainland and the desert beyond. Plex had given him a stone, a seal that he must show a certain life form that would be passing through the gate. Vemus never questioned why his charge knew of such abstract things, he had simply waited at the gate at the time he was instructed too. Sure enough the two figures had arrived at the gate seeking only to return home.

“Complemental greeting, I am Vemus.”

Elfhorn Jork and his apprentice stopped and nodded looking up at the tall elegant spade.

“Your master wishes something from me?” Vemus was slightly taken back, how did he know, and then he realised that his mind had been very subtly probed.

“I am to show you this seal.”

Jork looked at the seal and then turned to Cactus.

“You are ready my protégée, seek the path that is laid out for you, a great and wondrous journey waits.”

Cactus looked at his mentor for the last time and Jork handed him his shield then turned to take his path across the causeway and back to the underwater cavern where he would hold a light deep within him.

Shield of Jork

Technology mounted shield of protection. Guild level 1 – Citadel Class



Gidion had returned to the void and resumed his patrols of the outlying systems. He had looked over the new schematic that Plex had supplied: concussion charges that would ripple across the void in an arc. They were defensive measures at this stage but would provide a deterrent and a possible means to trap the entity that was now his single most pressing problem. All but a few of the outer colonies had been evacuated back to the citadel but some had resisted the call to abandon their homes. Gidion had visited the outer colony Suvium, a small remote mining settlement built upon an asteroid and responsible for mining the Orichalcix from the systems star. They were a stubborn lot, hardy and tough to the point that fear was never going to be a deterrent, he had tried to persuade them to leave but that had not worked so he had given them the means to end it all if the Kraynum came for them.

Klawtoss had followed the dumpling to his abode, a large house overlooking the gardens that stretched out towards the cultural district and the guardian tower. He had squeezed his way under the door and into the hall where he could hear the little fat flab as he plodded off to a room up the stairs. Klawtoss followed and hid himself under a table as he watched the flab man take the sphere from his robe and place it inside a cabinet and close the door where he then left the room and plodded off down the stairs. Klawtoss looked around, no one to bother him so he left his cover and scurried over to the cabinet. No way into the doors, too tight. Scurry around the side, still no way in, the other side the same. He squeezed around the back and found a small crack to riddle into. It was dark but not for him, master had given him the ability to see things when others could not. The item was there on the shelf and Klawtoss could see that he had seen this before, the seed that his master the simulator had given him to plant in the garden, a seed that would kill the guardian if it entered her.

Cactus had followed the unusual looking spade back to the humble house nestled on a sloping hill overlooking the citadel. He would miss Elfor and his quirky ways, his life in the underwater cavern had been a good one, full of fond memories that he knew he would miss, yet these attachments were now a binding and he would have to relinquish them in order to meet his trials and tribulations that would become his new home here in the realms of the mortal men.

Plex looked him up and down. Slim sturdy and strong. Good, elegant almost handsome yet not too perfect to be unworkable.

“The guardian has seen something within you, something that she wishes me to nurture and develop. You will stay here and join the others when they arrive, the ones who you will help to guide and learn the ways of the custodians.”

Cactus had been given a room in the house and his new life had started.

“If the master asks you about something, assume he already knows the answer.”

(Cactus’s book of survival, vol 1 page 18.)



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Colin Foster. 2018