

ORB

Chapter V

“Hold on son, you’re going way too fast. Did you say something about the ZX/2? How about hitting the high points and we’ll go on from there,” Matthew interrupted.

Dazed for a few seconds they lay back on the soft cushion until things began to come back into focus. As they sat up to get their bearings, they gazed about their new environment. They could see that they were in a room unlike any other they had been in before. In utter silence they inspected the room from where they sat. The ceiling of this room had the eerie iridescence of greenish-blue light. The ceilings were quite low which allowed the light to stretch out in long spooky lines and cast dark shadows about the room. Grotesque looking statues, inset in the walls, surrounded this circular shaped room. They appeared to be shrines or holy statues. In front of each of the statues were lit candles and a bowl of a red substance that oozed upwards towards the ceiling and out of sight. Bright amber light came from an opening at the far side of the room.

“Where are we,” Denise asked as she looked around the room in disbelief as she tried to adjust herself in the awkward uniform. “Are we dead?”

“I have no idea,” a familiar voice from behind them. There sat Conrad with a big grin on his face. “I’ve been expecting you to drop in,” Conrad joked with them.

“Do you have any idea how we got in here,” Joseph asked as he looked up at the ceiling only to find that there was no opening for them to have fallen through.

“From up there,” Conrad responded pointing to the ceiling.

“That’s impossible,” Joseph retorted. “There’s no way. Do you see an entrance up there?” Joseph demanded.

“No, I don’t, but that’s where you came from. Perhaps you should ask him,” Conrad said as he pointed to a withered figure of a man with his head drooped between his legs across the room; just barely visible within the dim light streaming in from the opening behind him.

“Who is he?” Denise asked.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Conrad responded.

Joseph maneuvered the bulky Reidforcian uniform out of the mattress onto which they had fallen and moved towards the feeble looking person across the room.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” Joseph questioned the man.

The man in the corner slowly lifted his head and when he saw Joseph coming at him he screamed, “Stop, don’t hurt me anymore! I can’t take it anymore,” as he curled up into a tight little ball, obviously terrified of the monster he saw hovering over him.

“Don’t be afraid of us, we are here to help you,” The bellowing voice came out of the Reidforcian armor as Joseph tried to calm the frail little man. “Look at me so I can help you,” Joseph pleaded with the man.

“Just leave me alone, PLEASE!” was the response that came back.

The tattered man in the corner raised his head one more time to see if the creature was still there. Why was this monster approaching, and what did it want of him?

“FATHER! It’s you. I can’t believe it. Look, it’s me, Joseph,” Joseph exclaimed as he moved closer to the timid man sitting on the floor.

“No, don’t hurt me,” the frail man screamed as the beast came closer to him. He put his head back between his legs and curled up into a ball.

Joseph realized that in the suit he looked like a Reidforcian guard, so he took off the helmet and repeated his plea.

“Father, look it really is me. Look, I’ve taken off the helmet,” Joseph pleaded with his father.

Matthew Xelco lifted his head to peek at the monstrosity descending upon him. The look of fear washed away to utter surprise.

“How When.... Who....” was all that Dr. Xelco could muster.

“Calm down dad, we’ll explain it all to you later, but first we need to give you some food so you can regain your strength.” Joseph interrupted his father.

Conrad and Mark opened the survival kits attached to their atmosphere suits and took out the manstaka jelly and di-hydroxide water, sharing it with Dr. Xelco, as they all ate.

“Manstaka jelly and di-hydroxide water, how did you get this?” Matthew Xelco questioned as he began to stuff the food into his mouth and then wash it down with the refreshing taste of the di-hydroxide water.

Joseph answered, “You probably won’t believe me, but we found it on the *ZX/2* experimental attack ship. We stole it from the *Burmi*. We were headed for the Sigmata colony after the attack on Lambdata when you were...”

“Hold on son, you’re going way too fast. Did you say something about the *ZX/2*? How about hitting the high points and we’ll go on from there,” Matthew interrupted.

Joseph introduced his friends. “This is Denise Wantis,” as she took off her helmet, “Do you remember her from my classes at school? I shanghaied her when I left the *Burmi*. She has been a big help in getting us this far. Believe it or not she was able to read the Reidforcian symbols on the cell doors, and then we were able to open them.”

“Did you say she can read Reidforcian?” Dr. Xelco said disbelieving.

“Yep, and it helped us get here to help you.” Denise smiled as Joseph replied.

Joseph continued to introduce the others, “This is Mark Cooter, we found him in the prison cell along with Conrad Darnoc.....”

“I know these men.” Matthew interrupted him. “I’ve shared the same cell with them since the day I got here. How did you get them out?” questioned Dr. Xelco.

Joseph then shared their story of how the others had helped. He told of how they had entered the prison yard and how they had encountered the security forces outside of the prison. He told his dad how they had found the prison cell, and how they had overcome the

guards in the cell. He told all about their weakness to bright light, and best of all how they had discovered the language interpreters in the Reidforcian helmets. Dr. Xelco could hardly believe what he was hearing.

As Joseph told his tale he could see from the sunken eyes and withered features of his father that he had been through a terrible ordeal while on Reidforcia.

Joseph hesitated and then informed him of his mother's demise at the hands of the Reidforcians. Dr. Xelco's complexion went totally white. He walked away from the others to be by himself. After a few moments he returned, more determined than ever to help them defeat the enemy who had perpetrated this terrible thing upon his family.

What was left of his uniform was now tattered and discolored from dirt and blood. His hair was greyer than Joseph had remembered and he had a scuzzy beard. Even so Joseph was able to recognize his father.

"I can't believe that we, of the CIG, didn't know about the technology behind those translators," Dr. Xelco questioned. "If they have that type of technology then I believe they know of your existence and where you are now," Dr. Xelco continued.

"Where are we?" Joseph changed the subject to matters more at hand.

Dr. Xelco explained. "We are currently in the Moulton Chapel where I was left to starve until I release the secrets of the McMarian Hyper-Warp drive system; which I have vowed never to reveal to these animals. The light you see coming through that portal is the Processing Room, and beyond that is where Lord Froth awaits my decision," Dr. Xelco continued.

"We've already met the great Lord Froth," responded Denise.

"You have!?" Dr. Xelco exclaimed with surprise. "Where did you meet him?"

"Just before we mysteriously appeared here, we saw him in the auditorium. He acknowledged that we were sentinals and he said that he wanted to interrogate the 'invaders', but when Mark and Conrad tried to shine their lights at him and jump him, he just disappeared," answered Joseph.

"He disappeared? Where did he go?" Dr. Xelco asked.

"We have no idea," was the response.

“It’s possible that he thinks since you were in the Reidforcian uniforms that you are still loyal to him. You said when you met with Lord Froth and he didn’t recognize you, right?” Dr. Xelco asked the question.

Joseph nodded in reply.

“Perhaps you fooled him and your presence here is an accident, or maybe you were brought here on purpose,” Dr. Xelco conjectured. He was trying to figure out the best way to proceed.

“What you’re saying then, dad, is that if we keep up the deception that we are Reidforcian guards, we might be able to continue to fool him. Is that right?” Joseph replied trying to understand his father’s plan.

“That’s right,” Dr. Xelco responded to Joseph’s question. “We’ve got to continue the deception that you are loyal guards and that you are still trying to bring the captors to him. If that doesn’t work, at least we gave it a try. I don’t have a better plan. You better put the helmets back on after you eat. Then we can put our plan to work,” Dr. Xelco said with renewed energy and determination.

The path they took to get to the Molten Chapel hindered their attempts to figure out where they were located on the map. Conrad and Mark wandered around the room looking for another possible way of escape, but they just kept coming back to the door at the far side of the room...where they thought that Lord Froth would be waiting. They were still outnumbered at least one thousand to one.

“If we can get past the guards we could get to the ZX/2 and make our escape,” thought Joseph out loud.

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves, we have to get out of this jam first,” Dr. Xelco slowed his son down.

After eating their fill of the manstaka jelly and di-hydroxide water, Conrad spoke up saying “I think that it would be best if I traded my atmosphere suit with Dr. Xelco so he can accompany the rest of you on your escape.”

“No way, Conrad, you have to finish with us,” Denise argued.

“Maybe Conrad has a point,” interjected Mark, “He can follow behind us and let us

know if there is a problem coming from the rear.”

“I..I..I... wasn’t exactly thinking about that,” Conrad stuttered, “I was thinking more about staying here and waiting for you to come back for me.”

“Well...I guess that could work as well,” responded Mark, “But, if you have any problems just catch up with us, OK?”

Dr. Xelco and Conrad exchanged the atmosphere suit with Conrad.

At the same time Joseph and Denise put the Reidforcian the helmets back on and assumed a position behind Mark and now Dr. Xelco, putting them under guard. Conrad moved about the room inspecting each nook and cranny to see if he could find another way out of the room. It soon became apparent that the only way out was through the portal at the far end of the room where the light was beaming in; and where the great Lord Froth was bound to be waiting.

Joseph and Denise showed Dr. Xelco and Mark all of the tools that they had at their disposal in the atmosphere suits. The Phaluvian knives were hidden in the belt straps of the suits so that they could be reached easily. They took the trazers and put them in their palm so they could easily fire them. The di-hydroxide water and manstaka jelly were securely stowed back in the packs attached to the suits.

The four moved slowly and methodically towards the light. Mark and Dr. Xelco in front and Joseph and Denise following behind, weapons in hand. The hole in the wall didn’t look big enough for even a Reidforcian out of his armor to get through, but when they were within two cordons of the wall the portal suddenly opened like the lens of a camera. The amber light filled the Moulton chapel and the gruesome figures on the walls seemed to jump out of their resting places; like a puppet in a 3-D movie leaping off of a screen to attack an audience in a horror show.

Dr. Xelco whispered back to his ‘captors’, “This is the Processing Room where I was tortured for so long. Lord Froth may be inside, so be prepared for anything.”

As they moved into this new room the odor that swept past overcame them. In front of them stood large stone pillars scattered throughout the room. Each one had metal bands nailed to their surfaces designed to fit over the head, wrists, and ankles of its victims.

Attached to these were long thick wires dangling from the ceiling. Around the chamber small cubicles carved into the rock, covered with opaque glass, had a foggy mist seeping out of the seams.

Barely visible in the corner of the room lay the remains of beings that had not survived the Processing Room; possibly for future study. Long shiny steel tables cluttered the floor. Each one extended and retracted from the center and had bonds at the head and foot of them. Above each table were suction cups attached to coiled springs dangling above where one's head would normally lie.

A large pit in the middle of the room oozed an orange molten rock that bubbled and gurgled as steam rose above. Hanging from the ceiling was a platform from which drooped ropes seared at the ends from contact with the bubbling brew below. Small lights inset in the roof sent rays of light through the mist and through the darkness. The stench of death emanated from the very walls and the screams of terror echoed as though the tools of terror were in use at that very moment.

“Do you see Lord Froth anywhere?” whispered Joseph.

“No, but that doesn't mean he might not show up at any moment though,” responded Dr. Xelco.

As they moved through this dungeon of pain they couldn't get it out of their minds that someone was watching them.

Suddenly out of the darkness, from the corner behind them, jumped out a creature so quickly that no one could tell what it was. It was hissing and showing its razor sharp teeth. It wasn't very big, but it was ferocious in its appearance.

Panicked by this surprise, Denise began to scream out, but caught herself, realizing that she could give them away if she screamed. Joseph aimed his weapon at the creature, but when it stopped in front of him, Joseph recognized it right away.

“It's a whittier!” Joseph said as much startled as relieved, “I haven't seen one of those since I was a little boy. Remember when you took me to the biological exhibit on Bignol when I was six years old, Dad?”

“I remember that,” responded Dr. Xelco. “They are extremely friendly if they know

that they are in no danger, but can be terribly mean and even dangerous when they sense that they may be harmed.” Dr. Xelco continued.

“I studied these creatures in medical training,” Denise jumped in. “They can become remarkably small when they need to and they have an unbelievable sense of smell. Their night vision is rivaled only by the reasty on Farodia,” she added showing off her knowledge of the animal kingdoms of the galaxy.

“Here whittther, here little whittther,” Mark called for the fuzzy little animal that spat and hissed in front of them.

Suddenly the little beast stopped its ferocious outburst and jumped into Mark’s arms as if it was his long lost friend.

(The whittther is a small ferret-like creature that is normally orange in color and may have black markings; particularly on males. The rear legs are larger and much stronger than the front ones which gives it remarkable leaping ability. Its long tail is used like another appendage much like a monkey’s. The whittther’s head is small with round ears on the sides. The mouth is small until it’s angered or it needs to eat, then it can open large enough to swallow a chicken whole. Its teeth are extremely sharp and can pierce through most metals; aluminum being part of its staple diet. They are trained throughout the universe as protection animals. They are extremely sedate when unprovoked and can make excellent house pets, once litter trained.)

“You know, this little critter could become very useful for us later on,” Mark said with a smile on his face. “He’s kinda cute, as far as whittthers go.” He put him back on the ground, and the whittther disappeared into the corner where he had come from.

“Knock it off or we’ll never get out of here. Keep moving. The exit is over there behind the curtain,” Dr. Xelco chided the others. “We need to be quiet or we might be discovered here,” he continued.

The curtains were red and thick. Just as our friends reached the drapes they suddenly flew open before them exposing the last thing that they wanted to see.