

Eden's Trial – Prologue

Barry Kirwan

General William Kilaney awoke, disappointed to find he was still alive. He tried to raise his head, but a metal rod pressed against the back of his skull, forcing his gaze to the floor. He knew this interrogator's trick – bend the body as a prelude to breaking the spirit. He willed his arms and legs to tug against the restraints, but whatever had stunned him on the space station had his limbs locked down cold. He'd seen his crew killed, and he had no false hopes about his own fate. He listened to his captor's footsteps. Female. He had a hunch who it was.

'Why am I here, Sister Esma? That is you, isn't it?' The Alician High Priestess herself. He prayed the four transports off Earth had escaped. He'd told Micah to leave just before they'd lost communications. If the ships hadn't left in time, it had all been for nothing.

'If you're after their flight plan, I never saw it. Torture me if you like, but it won't get you anywhere.' It should be over quicker if he pushed her, if she lived up to the reputation she'd gained during the four-day assault on Earth.

He heard a faucet, the rinsing of hands: blood, probably his own. Steel boots clacked across the metal floor towards him. He glimpsed them underneath drug-heavy eyelids: blue flow-metal with steel stilettos. So, not above vanity. Life held so few surprises.

Icy water drenched his head and neck. He gasped, shaking off as much as he could, squeezing it out of his eyes.

'Your battle tactics were quite unorthodox, General.'

Her voice carried all the arrogance he'd imagined from the leader of the terrorist sect who'd plagued Earth for the last decade. But he allowed himself a smile. 'Gave your Q'Roth locust friends a run for their money, did we?' While the rest of the world had been frozen by fear and panic, his forces had accounted for a quarter of a million Q'Roth dead in five separate hits. It paled in comparison to humanity being all but wiped out, but it was something. He'd put up a fight and – he hoped – four ships had escaped with their precious human cargo.

'What do you want, Esma? I'm not a fan of Alician rhetoric.'

Her cool fingertips anchored themselves on the back of his neck. Dull pain punched through his head as something was yanked out from the base of his skull. He blinked hard. A wave of nausea gripped him, then flattened out, dissipating. A prickling sensation flushed into his hands and feet. His muscle control returned. He flexed stiff fingers. Curiosity got the better of him. 'What was that?'

'A device to download your recent memories, in case you are lying about their flight plan.'

They made it. He hadn't admitted how much he'd needed to hear this sliver of good news, and let out a long breath. He hadn't been lying about not knowing their destination. When Micah had almost told him, he'd cut him off immediately. Ten thousand had escaped. He drew comfort from that. But he'd been in pain from cancer for years. Truth was, he couldn't face any more.

'You have what you want. Let's get it over with, shall we?' He waited. She reminded him of a cat playing with a mouse.

'The Q'Roth Supreme Commander wants you.'

He wished he'd gone down with his men. He'd damned well tried to. 'For torture or a light snack?'

She snorted. ‘You should have worked it out by now, General. They do not eat human flesh – they feed on bio-psychic energy. It is a critical part of their maturation process. But to answer your question, neither. She wishes to recruit you.’ Sister Esma sounded bemused.

Kilaney laughed; life held a few surprises after all. ‘Let me get this straight: I just nuked five of her ships and she wants to offer me a job?’

‘She said you showed potential. The Q’Roth are consummate soldiers, like you, General. They respect your... tactical ability.’

The disdain in her voice didn’t go amiss. He knew now, between the Q’Roth aliens and the genetically-altered Alicians, who his worst enemy was. ‘Well, Esma, I’m Stage Four. The cancer’s all that’s holding this sad bag of bones together. Can’t blow my nose without a transfusion. I have a couple of weeks, max. Anyhow, not sure it would look good on my resume.’ He wanted this over; he’d done his part.

‘They can cure your cancer, extend your lifetime by decades.’

She said it deadpan. He realised she wasn’t lying. They could cure cancer. He felt as if she’d kicked him in the stomach. The disease had eaten away at him for four years, robbing him of everything he once was. Being offered a cure now was the worst torture he could imagine. He clamped his lips.

Her voice became earnest. ‘General, you have seen the Q’Roth in action, but that is nothing compared to what they can do. All you have witnessed is freshly hatched warriors – newborns, primal rage instilled into their genes. But now they have fed, they will mature into the most potent armed force you could envisage. They are the footsoldiers of the galaxy, General. Respected by hundreds of races.’

And feared by many more, he supposed. But despite himself he had been impressed. He’d seen them tear down a whole planet in a matter of days: shock troops, destroying infrastructure in the first wave, dismantling communications, reacting so damned fast to every counter-measure. All of this straight after being hatched. He jammed his lips tighter, thought of his wife taken by cancer four years earlier, of the thousands of soldiers who’d served under him over the years, all killed in the last days’ carnage. All except Blake.

So there was still a chance.

‘General,’ she continued, pacing in front of him, ‘A war is coming. Not like the one you have just fought and lost, barely a campaign in Q’Roth terms. I do not know the details, but the Commander assures me it poses a threat to hundreds of races, maybe even the galaxy itself. She is interested in the creative tactics you demonstrated. She feels they could be developed. You are a soldier, General, and –’

He had to stop this. ‘The answer’s no, Esma. That’s final. Now, I’ve shown you respect, you show me some.’

The boots disappeared from view. Involuntarily, he tensed. A section of the metal floor beneath him receded to reveal a window. The sight unpeeling before him snatched his breath away. Earth hung below, a dull orange ball speckled with boiling clouds and glowing embers where the nukes had gouged his planet’s flesh. Even the oceans had taken on a sickened pallor.

His muscles strained against the restraints. He was furious he’d even listened to her poison. *Eden*, he reminded himself. This had all been about Eden, and where there’s the promise of paradise, there’s always a snake.

‘One day they’ll find you, Esma. Blake, Micah and the others. When they do, they’ll cut your heart out.’

She walked in front of him, so that her boots appeared to be standing on top of Earth. Her tone sharpened. ‘A task force is already hunting them down and will

destroy them. But even if they do escape, General, humanity will perish.’ She bent forwards so that her cheek was level with his. ‘Do you know why?’

He preferred it this way, the niceties and bullshit expended.

She whispered. ‘If humanity escapes – a very small if – they will undo themselves.’ She stood up, grinding her heel against the glass, as if she was stubbing out his native North America. ‘It is only a matter of time before your valiant refugees do something wrong, and are cut down like the weeds they are by superior races. Galactic Society values intelligence above all else, General. I do not mean the odd genius here or there. Coherent intelligence at the species level, so each race can act responsibly amongst its galactic peers. Now, does that description sound to you like it fits humanity’s resumé?’

He bristled. ‘If we’d known there was sentient life out there – especially a society – it could have changed everything.’

She tapped her toes on the glass. ‘I told them you would say no.’

He was about to respond when he noticed something. It was as if the world was changing colour, morphing into grey sepia. ‘What’s happening, Esma?’

‘The Q’Roth have finished. They do not believe in leaving loose ends. It is one of the galactic rules. After an incursion, the planet’s atmosphere is removed. It is for the best, especially following nuclear detonations on this scale.’

His eyes widened as whirlpools of smoke, like massive hurricanes, mushroomed around the globe. Glittering nuclear sparks snuffed out one by one, deprived of oxygen. He watched his beloved Montana, a smattering of green, fade to grey. The last whorls of atmosphere lost cohesion and flashed into space in a series of saccadic bursts which pricked his retinas. When the blotches in his vision faded, he saw Earth as no one ever had, as no one ever should. The oceans had boiled off into space, leaving massive smooth basins bordered by stark continental ridges. The planet was barren, dark, moonlike. Earth was... He didn’t even want to think the word.

‘It will lay fallow for ten thousand years. No race will be allowed into this system during that period. Which is why humanity never encountered anyone from Grid Society – Mars was also culled, not that long ago by Galactic standards. The ban on entering the sector was lifted only a thousand years ago, and the Q’Roth were first to stake a claim on Earth.’

He heard a click, and the metal rod behind his head eased back. He raised his chin despite the stiffness in his neck. She was tall and long-necked, wearing a simple grey robe with the hood down. Her skin was pale, framed by jet black hair pulled backwards tight into a braided pony tail. Broad, menacing eyes, like an ostrich about to attack, stabbed down at him over a hooked nose.

She spoke slowly. ‘You should thank me, General. You should actually thank all Alicians.’

The conviction in her voice almost made him retch. He tried to gather enough saliva for the only fitting response he could think of, but his mouth was dry. He watched her strut in front of him, and knew another lecture was coming. What he wouldn’t give for a grenade.

‘The Q’Roth first visited Earth a millennium ago on a scouting mission. Their intent was to return and harvest all of humanity, after their long hibernation period. My ancestor, Alessia, convinced them to spare some, and the Alician order was born. The Q’Roth taught us, re-engineered us, and then left. We patiently awaited their return, and now we will have a new home, taking our place amongst Grid Society. *We* are humanity’s evolution, General.’

He took one last look at Earth, then faced her, lifting his head as high as he could, speaking on behalf of his dead world. ‘You’re an abomination, Esma, and Alicians are humanity’s bastards. What’s to stop the Q’Roth feeding on you and your sect, now you’ve helped them?’

She looked away. ‘We have an agreement, a contract, you might say.’

He scrutinised her – there was something she didn’t want to admit, a secret too important to confess even to a dying man. He shrugged. ‘Watch out for the small print, Esma. In my limited experience, deals with the devil go south sooner rather than later.’

A bell chimed somewhere deep in the ship, and she glanced at her wristcom. ‘Your time is up, General. As you do not wish to come with us, I am going to send you home.’ She touched a panel and a glistening shroud ballooned around him. The glass beneath his feet slid away. His feet didn’t fall, supported by the tough cocoon which he guessed must be some kind of force-field. A savage, biting cold gripped his soles, coiling around his ankles, drilling into his bones. He cried out with pain.

‘It will actually feel warmer outside, believe it or not. Right now the field in contact with your feet is conducting your body heat to the outer hull, which is in darkness, fractionally above absolute zero.’

A steady hiss forewarned him of the dizziness he began to feel. His thighs and arms struggled against the restraints, trying to lift his feet. Her voice sounded fuzzy.

‘You see, General, even if humanity escapes, the only way they can hope to survive is to evolve beyond what they are. And the sad truth is that humanity would choose to die as they are, rather than evolve.’

His eyes fogged as their water vapour evaporated. He closed his mouth. She touched another panel and his leg and arm straps released. He fell forward, hands and knees hitting the bottom of his cocoon, the skin of his palms and outstretched fingers welding to the freezing layer separating him from hard vacuum.

His body wracked with shivering, knocking his teeth together. When he spoke, it sounded like he was underwater. He shouted to compensate. ‘They’ll... survive.’ His arms were numb as ice cubes. Through slitted eyes he watched his hands turn a sickly wax colour. His breath ran out, his throat asteroid-dry. He hunted the last oxygen molecules inside his shroud. Her voice was distant, fading.

‘I can see why the Commander was interested in you. Goodbye, General. Oh, and a word of advice: do not hold your breath.’

Out of the corner of a frosting eye, he saw her hand, as if in slow motion, move to activate another control. He had no doubt what it would do. The cocoon cracked apart beneath him like an eggshell.

As he tumbled into space, he knew he had only a few remaining seconds of consciousness. As the minute quantity of air in his lungs expanded to bursting, he let out a long, space-silent yell of rage. He squeezed his eyes shut to protect them as long as he could. He suppressed the needle-like pains as nitrogen flashed out of his bloodstream into his joints, competing with the grinding ache from his bloating limbs. The naked glare of the sun slammed into him, searing his face like a whip with each turn of his somersault. None of it mattered anymore. As his body convulsed, venting blood at every orifice, he choked off the idea that she might be right about humanity. Instead, he willed his last thought out into the void: *Prove her wrong, Blake. You and Micah can do this. Wherever you are, for God’s sake, prove –*