

Logging Faith and Cutting Flesh

Chapter One - In the beginning...

*"In the beginning all things were as one.
God parted them and breathed life into his creation
Divided the parts and gave each its place
And unto each, bestowed purpose"*
[- The Scriptures, Book I 1:4](#)

A vision at the end or conscious perception loomed. A red Autumn Tree, running black from the roots and growing its branches at an unnatural speed. The branches twisting in distorted ribbed vines. Hundreds of leaves detaching; swirling and growing, never falling.

Zakara was reminded of his surroundings in his pod inside of the gleaming Harbinger battlecruiser "Axe", which stood resolutely in orbit of a dusty planet.

"I will not foolheartedly jump my men into the void seeking imaginary demons" Zakara was telling his trusted teacher and age-old friend Dannair inside the simulated communication room.

"These loyal Ammarians were attacked, Zakara. You are duty bound to find out what happened here and hold responsible..."

"These are Ammatarians," interrupted Zakara, "they can't be trusted to govern themselves, let alone believe their words telling demons came from the sky and burned their worthless settlement on their forgotten planet."

"This is unlike you Zakara, your visions are troubling you again. You need..."

"I need to be left alone now, Dannair! I thank you for this council but I now wish to be alone. Ready yourself and your fleet wing. We will leave shortly."

"... leave and find the attackers, terrorists or demons, I know you will do the right thing, Zakara." and the simulation faded as senses returned in sync with their respective ship feeds.

His mentor was right, once more, irritating as this can be - Zakara was indeed affected. He needed to hide this, his position of authority leading this response fleet was no trifle. He was not in the mood to chase a band of Minmatar terrorists, a chase he was sure was to be fruitless. His head was buzzing, he was tired. He kept seeing the autumn tree in his head, now clearer than ever. Sleep was barely possible and the recurring dream was always leaving him sweating and troubled. He knew the headache was caused by his ageing implants and modifications. He was old, really old. One of the first Ammarian holy men to receive the gift of cloning and eternal life. But augmentations and implants throughout the years were varying in quality and purpose, some of which might even be illegal in this age. Maybe they were the cause of the visions and ails? He hoped.

Chapter Two - Punishment

*"Our Lord visited his flock and saw that all was not good.
Blasphemy and heresy ruled the land.
The Lord punished the sinners and drowned them in their own blood.
But the people of Amarr lived righteously and in fear of God.
Thus they were saved and became God's chosen."
- The Scriptures, Book II 2:1*

The seven cities of the dusty planet below were ruins in black smoke. The clouds above were unnaturally spun, merging condensed clouds with the inky gaseous tar. Terrorists don't usually do orbital bombardment. Settlements, even this poor and dusty, had strong enough shields to prevent such devastation. An impressive and deadly fleet is needed to break through that. They won't risk the attention. Maybe Dannair was right? Maybe it was not terrorists. That leaves the only other suspects - demons?

The evacuation was underway. A wing of transports had joined the response fleet. A transport for each city. The handful of remaining survivors were being evacuated. Zakara was scanning the system for anomalies. Something that his subordinates should have been doing, but this was something he did to relax. Scanning made his headaches subside. There was nothing but derelict ruins, leaking gas and combusting after an unknown amount of years adrift.

There was, however, an anomaly he was not able to fully scan. No matter how close he got, to its position it seemed to keep moving and could never be scanned past 31% scan resolution. His implants were buzzing now. This can't be, he was thinking, his cranium was more machine than man at this point. He was an expert explorer, no anomaly in space could ever be unscannable.

"Zakar to fleet," ego aside, he spoke to fleet comms "scan down the XZX-010 anomaly in the system. Scan it fully and report" firmly echoed the order inside each pod and mind.

A fluid distorting bubble radiated from the centre of the Timeor star. The distortion turned the yellow glow into a suffocating blood red.

"Report!"

"It responded to our probes, sir. We all tried to scan it... we lost communication with the probes and *this* happened."

"What is the status of the..." his head was throbbing, the headache... "evacuation." he quickly composed himself. This was no time for weakness.

"Transport 3 boarding, sir. Transports 1,2 and 4 are leaving the stratosphere and warp ready in 40 seconds."

"We have incoming," came in Wingleader one. "I count twelve, no twenty..." he hesitated, "I... I can't make count, they keep appearing..."

“What are they?” Overviews were not able to get an ID. The red boxing targets were showing ‘Data Corrupt’ designations. “Wing one, give me ranged fire. Scouts circle round and give me a close scan and ID on who or what they are. Transports?”

Energy beams started splitting space between the golden fleet, dark invaders and the planet.

“They are targeting Transport 3 and 5, the rest are warping to the fleet now” the pilot coordinating the evacuation was struggling to keep up, his ship was taking heat and his shield was already down. He winced as his armour was running up and down thanks to his puny repairer and the angels (Logistical wing) remotely sending repairs from the back lines.

Dark blobs loomed in the midsts of the unknown attackers. Larger black energy beams emanated from the dark blobs, passing through the fleet and directly towards the scouring transports.

“Transport 3 is getting the most damage - their shield is going down. Its too close to the surface to warp out.”

Zakaras head was heavy and unresponsive. He was under pressure before, but this was different. Patterns developed in front of his vision. The distortions in space started congealing, turning into patterns; into leaves, branches and more... The vision. No longer a distant dream - now a reality, it was speaking to him. He shook inside his capsule, military training resisting the distraction. He was ready to shout his orders when Dannair spoke with righteous indignation.

“You have no jurisdiction over the Heavenly Domain, Demons! Wing one and two, anchor on me, we must shield the transports!” His Paladin battleship ventured forth with frigates and cruisers in formation towards the dark blob that now resembled a titanic ship.

“Rest of the fleet,” picked up Zakara, “align to the gate.” The visions creped in again. His head pulsed with the dark space around him. He took control of himself again and shot a private message to Dannair “You are coming too, Dannair, keep your ships aligned to the gate.”

“Scout wing reporting sir, they appear to be a combination of Sleepers and Drones. Some of these ship configurations are wildly different from what is usually seen around known space. One of my scouts is down, he got webbed and scrambled...”

“Six transports have checked in fleet formation.” reported the transport logistics officer.

“Transport 3 did not make it.”

The tree expanded, the branches enveloped more and more of the nebulous surrounding and light broke through the trunk. The heart of the vision and core of being revealed. Its subdued white light soothing, touching. “Fleet,” commanded attention Zakara, “take this fleet warp!”

The fleet jumped into warp. In the few moments that it took to accelerate, Zakara glimpsed at Dannair's battleship standing in place, warp scrambled and webbed by hundreds of tangly drones, keeling to one side in flames. The wrecks of his cruiser wing in pieces and smoke around the fading giant.

The fleet arrived at the gate.

"The gate is disrupted. Sir, we can't go through its not responding."

"It's the muck from the Sun it... its that thing it's disrupting the gate link."

"Its a trap, we're trapped here in the system" continued the fleet chatter.

The Amarr gate's gold and gleaming fields of energy were corrupted. They were now black and crooked. The vision engulfed Zakara's vision once again, the heart at the core of the tree expanded - the white light shone through, ever brighter, and it spoke: "The Word. You know it, we are one. Come. This is the way." Zakara felt enormous relief. The white light cured him of his ail, he was no longer hurting. But as the vision faded, the pain returned once more. He had seen what needed to be done. The way was revealed. He adjusted his scanner, rearranged the probes and the wormhole signature was fully scanned and revealed.

"We have lost good ships and good men in this battle. For some of us, empire soldiers, revival into a new clone is imminent and guaranteed, but not everyone is as fortunate. In the name of our beloved brothers and teachers, we must protect the lives of the civilians with our gleaming armour and conviction. For if we do not, our souls may not recover. Dannair sacrificed his wing to buy us time... I expect the same from each and every soldier here. It is not your duty to me - it is your duty to God and His Will.

Align to the Sun. Prepare for warp."

Comms were clear, everyone aligned without hesitation. The wormhole was very near the sun and only Zakara was able to scan it, thanks to the divine revelation.

"Incoming hostiles..."

"Take this fleet warp." and the golden ships glided into warp, straight for the distorted black sun, growing ever closer revealing its true imposing size. The ships flew dangerously close to the distorted Sun, the fleet exited warp next to the wormhole which was bending light and space-time next to them.

"Commander Zakara, you are not expecting us to enter this wormhole to 'god-knows-where' do you?" the self appointed leader of the Ammatar survivors protested cautiously.

"This is no time for argument or blasphemy" interjected Zakara with newly bolstered conviction, warmed by the light of the autumn tree's core. "Scouts first, then cruiser wing, frigates and logistical wing last".

"Check, check. We got incoming. It's a big ship..."

“Dannair!” Exclaimed Zakara as the flaming battleship warped next to his battlecruiser. “We counted you for dead, dear friend.”

“I bring shame, for my men lost their ships and lives. I may be alive but my soul is tattered for their loss. I hope to see them again, when we are back to the tangible world. The demons; the ships disengaged as soon as the fleet warped... they had me and they left, I do not why” spoke with despair, Dannair.

His ship started receiving repairs and his armour was almost replete, but the golden shine that his Paladin used to have, was blackened by blood, death and ash.

“Scouts reporting, it's some kind of wormhole space, possibly a shattered system. It looks stable and should have other wormholes back to Empire space.” report was almost done as overviews flooded with unknown signatures once more.

“Into the wormhole, in order.” commanded Zakara. “Dannair - you're last with me. Take the lead of the Destroyer Wing, we may soon need your gallantry once more.”

The distorted ships flooded in, warping only kilometres shy of the remaining fleet. Distorted turrets charged and discharged into and around the voids left by the gleaming fleet that disappeared into the wormhole.

Chapter three - The Path

*"To know the true path, but yet, to never follow it. That is possibly the gravest sin."
- The Scriptures, Book of Missions 13:21*

Zakara and his wing arrived into the shattered remains of a plasma planet. An asteroid filled with rocks and crimson dust, thick and suffocating fog prevented sight further than ten clicks ahead. All was quiet for just a moment. It was the light, it was God that revealed this place to him. Is this heaven or were our souls thrust into hell?

“Sir, it started after we arrived. Watch out!” and lightning struck. The plasma was polarised and agitated. Streaks of titanic lightning bounced through multiple ships knocking them from their place, sometimes spinning them wildly and away from the others, but would quickly pull together and gravitate into each other.

“The wormhole has collapsed too, it's no longer there.” The logistics officer was wildly reporting and tending to as much of the flock as he could, while Commander Zakara was still reviewing his surroundings. “Watch out for the rocks, stay in fleet formation.”

Zakara's overview was empty, the storm was interfering with scans, sight and faith. It looked more like hell, he concluded.

“Orders, sir?”

“Quiet boy, clear comms!” interjected Dannair.

Zakara gazed into the crimson void. The shadows of prehistoric titans flickered into the distance, rogue moons and planet sized asteroids loomed through the murk. Small rocks struck the ships causing their shields to flicker from the repulsion. A vision once again formed in front of Zakara's vision.

The autumn tree mutating and pulsing, but its gleaming core of light soothing and speaking. "Surrender. Submit. Dispose of your projected cage and the road shall be revealed. Lead your people on to me, to you, to your God."

This time Zakara snapped out of the vision, he did not regain his senses after a fever, he was connected and then disconnected from the source, from God.

"God is guiding us. He is calling us to him, to salvation. I..." he hesitated, he should not hesitate "I hear him, here, louder than ever. He guided me to find the Wormhole that ensured our safe retreat and he is guiding us now."

Comms were clear. Lightning struck the ships.

"I don't think we're moving anymore," hesitantly reported the logistics officer again, "the storm pressure appears to have squeezed us between two faults of 'material' and no matter how much we push our drives, we're stuck."

Zakara was deep in thought. He was commanded to surrender and submit. What could that mean, why does the voice of God need be so cryptic! Plasma. 'What kind of plasma is this?' he wondered, trying to access his memory and knowledge implants. His mechanical brain portions whirling faster than the fleshy bits could ever go. Letting go, committing to his machinery relieved the headache and a burden was lifted.

The ships were stuck in a dead plasma fault, but the giant rock asteroids and shattered planets around them were not. Distant lightning illuminated an incoming swat of crystal and rock that was closing in. The incoming formation was tens of thousands of kilometres in diameter and ever growing in front of them.

"Big one, incoming. If we don't move fast, that thing is gonna swat us like a tungsten shell hitting a camera drone... we'll be nothing but dust."

"Drop your ship shields, everyone. Turn them off." commanded Zakara. "This is God's command, we must surrender and he will guide us through."

Comms were clear. Everyone was frozen, lightning flashed around them with the rock ever closer bigger, ever closer. Dannair's battleship, large and resolute, followed the command. His shield flickered and turned off, with space dust and rocks bouncing off the gold and metal. The rest of the ships followed moments after Dannair, shields popped and folded. A noticeable gust of particles swept the ships and they flowed together below into the murky void. Showers of gleaming plasma and dust shined the golden plates, restoring their factory-new splendour.

The fleet swooped along with the current and below the racing rock above them. A single blistering pop appeared on their previous position. A frigate stayed behind, refusing to lower its shields. An Ammatarian from the rescued civilians, noted the logistics officer in his ongoing report.

“The plasma was agitated when we arrived with the fleet, our shields were causing the discharges. With them off, the plasma balances and the dissipating polarisation pushes us...” and the thick fog subsided revealing the orange red nebula surrounding the shattered system. “... it pushes us out into his bathing light - reborn. God has shown us the way!” The overview flickered and started registering the system and orbital bodies. The yellow Sun, revealed, flickered its rays on the golden stainless hulls.

Chapter Four - Path

*"There will be neither compassion nor mercy;
Nor peace, nor solace
For those who bear witness to these Signs
And still do not believe."
- The Scriptures, Book of Reclaiming 25:10*

“We got dozens of signatures in the system. Divide them up and scan them. Report any structures, gates or wormholes you find.” Zakara relaxed as the expected command was forwarded. He relaxed? He relaxed?

“I am okay, Dannair,” he was again in conference with his mentor. “I am better than okay, in fact, I'm feeling young, inspired, zealous to serve his Word! God is calling to me, leading us out!”

“I am glad you are reborn this way, dear friend, but this troubles me. We are old enough to be cautious with tricks and manipulation. I doubt not your prophetic visions, Zakara, I only hope that you have the foresight to anticipate any ill intent they may bring. May the true Word of God be with you and not lead you astray. We do this for those who cannot come back from the dead, but we also do it for our souls. For whatever this place is, I am not too sure we can make it out should we perish.”

“Our clones will awaken, sooner or later if we don't return, friend...”

“But our clones will be none the wiser,” interjected with conviction Dannair, “with our souls still lost here forever swirling in damnation.”

“Do not despair, dear friend. I need you again. I do owe you, again. In my moment of weakness...”

“A moment of weakness that you should have never allowed to happen, Zakara. I am relieved that you have composed yourself. I trust in you,” he held back and repeated “in - you. Not whichever voice is calling you.” and Dannair, cut off the private feed.

"We got relics, debris and ruins, Sir. No signatures showing any kind of life. This shattered system is very much dead."

"Scout two." introduced himself one of the Magnate frigate pilots "we got only one wormhole signature in this entire system. It could be our way out, but there is a catch... *They* are waiting for us. Some type of interdiction installations are set up around the perimeter. If we warp in, we're still going to have to slug through their forces to reach the wormhole and jump out."

The mutated forces of the still unknown enemy were surrounding the warmly glowing wormhole. Their arrangement looked like busy noise but from far enough away they resembled something alive, winding and connecting in patterns.

"Do not fear, child. We are one. Fight not out there, forgo your flesh and turn to faith." God's voice echoed in Zakara's head.

"Fear not," said Zakara to his fleet "God is on our side!"

Chapter Four - Salvation

"I will not hesitate when the test of Faith finds me, for only the strongest conviction will open the gates of paradise. My Faith in you is absolute; my sword is Yours, My God, and Your will guides me now and for all eternity."

- The Scriptures, Prophet Kuria, Paladin's Creed

Zakara's response fleet swung into the bubble from warp, in a spear formation. With fire and fury the rod of metal stood strong as it penetrated the interdiction sphere. Warp engines whirled down and weapon systems sung ready. Holy weapons of energy fired out of every ship, delivering the power of the light to the enemy. Swaths of unknown enemy drones perished in droves as they rushed in, responded in counter attack.

Scout ships were repurposed for logistics, transmitting feeble but useful power and repairs to ships in need. The transport ships, tanky by design, were in a centre fleet position. As the battle raged on, the rod swivelled in a trained manoeuvre and bended in a crescent. The dark ships flooded in like insects, focusing the transports primarily. The shields and hulls of the civilians held firm, with the invaluable help of the logistics core. They stood at the back shaft of the spear, which now kept bending into a crescent and luring in the enemy forces inside and slowly enclosing them.

One small, very fast Executioner slipped off the northeast part of the crescent and flew right behind the enemy, nearly colliding with the pillar of ships pouring into the ever pinching formation of golden ships. "Mark!" the pilot yelled, as his ship was webbed on his way to the south part of the crescent and struck down when the enemy had a clear shot. His sacrifice was not in vain as Dannair's Paladin and several brave destroyers warped in at the marked location.

The golden circle was now complete. The enemy was clamped and shot from all sides. The circle started spinning out into a spiral, transports in front, heading for the wormhole. Zakara was directing everything with machine precision. Calm and composed orders came for every ship; a target was directed for every turret and power was redirected for every cap, shield or armour where needed.

Despite the well executed plan, the enemy was not wavering. They kept coming. Like an autumn storm they kept coming in, as if carried by the wind. The transports were not the only ones getting targeted anymore. Dannair's wing started receiving deliberate and direct fire as soon as they arrived. No logistics were in range to offer any tangible help and they were busy enough with the transports that they were barely keeping alive.

In blazing fire, Dannair's battleship, this time truly shattered, combusted and exploded in a grand eerie splendour. His loyal soldiers were also smouldering wrecks by his side, however, their combined killcount eclipsed the rest of the fleet. Focus fire resumed on the transports.

Zakara was numbed by the loss of his friend. The plan was going well until this happened. The core of the fleet was still 20 clicks from the Wormhole. They can make it. "Non believers shall perish," thundered the voice of God. It was no longer in his mind, however, this time it was coming from the comms on all ships. A dark object of immense size appeared; it formed inside the enemy fleet. A dark pulsing tree with branches of battleships and leaves of frigates. "Unworthy flesh; consumed as holy penance. Fight not, believers, surrender to me and to metal incarnate. Hold not to your primal fear and embrace this *Deus Machina*."

It was clear now, to Zakara, that this is definitely not heaven. He understood that nobody from his augmented or elite soldiers was taking any fire. The Autumn swarm around him was only pushing the refugees; the fleshy humans. They were unworthy. And those with implants, with minds and jaws more machine than human, they were chosen and it seems dragged here on purpose. Was this truly God? Or a God? A false prophet. Zakara was torn, he witnessed and he never felt this alive. Who but God himself can deliver him from pain and show him the path towards true redemption. This may not be God, he certainly did not look the part, but his visions of this Autumn Tree were there before he even faced it. 'This must be a herald of God, an angel. A titanic being of prehistoric purpose and design. Not equal to God, but his herald.'

His Imperial training and implants were, meanwhile, calculating. The implants were faster than before. His mind was expanded. This link, coming from the Autumn tree, had a two way connection that was easy to abuse. It likely never had to compete with a strong enough mind, Zakara told himself and directed more orders. "Keep moving, larger ships - circle around the transports, keep them safe. We are getting *them* out of here." He noticed a bond between his loyal soldiers that was stronger than before. This was no ordinary mind link, this was a soul connection 'facilitated' by the godly being. No, it was awakened by this being. He felt their emotions and desires, their faith. This made him stronger and the adversary weaker and more confused.

"Remove flesh. We are one. We are... you are, God." came the word of the herald once more.

“Transports and all civilians jump as soon as you are in range of the hole.” Zakara commanded and his ship veered from the defensive blob as soon as the transports were ready to jump. “And those that understand, those that felt what I felt” he continued in a different tone “disengage, drop what's left of your shields and anchor on me.”

The wormhole gulped and rippled as the living passed the threshold on to salvation. Inside the dark twisted dead space remained Zakara and a few of his men.

Zakara's mind was clear. His hand steady and his body invigorated. His battleship “Axe” was an extension of his mind and body. He felt closer to his loyal soldiers, their light closer to his hearth than ever before. He was now an axe. He focused on ‘becoming one’ with the Autumn tree. This being was imperfect, but only really God is perfect. It was easy to chop and reconfigure in pieces. No shots were fired, this was not a battle - it was destiny.