

EARTHRISE

William C. Dietz



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EARTHRISE

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GALACTIC BOUNTY
FREEHOLD
PRISON PLANET
IMPERIAL BOUNTY
ALIEN BOUNTY
McCADE'S BOUNTY
DRIFTER
DRIFTER'S RUN
DRIFTER'S WAR
LEGION OF THE DAMNED
BODYGUARD
THE FINAL BATTLE
WHERE THE SHIPS DIE
STEELHEART
BY BLOOD ALONE
BY FORCE OF ARMS
DEATHDAY
EARTHRISE

For Marjorie, with all my love.

I

DEATH DAY MINUS 80

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 2020

Man is born free: and everywhere he is in chains.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

The Social Contract, 1762

HELL HILL

The sun had risen, the early-morning air was crisp, and Manning could see his breath. From his vantage point, standing atop the vast stack of cargo modules known as “Big Pink,” he could also see a generous swath of the strange almost surreal landscape in which he and thousands of slaves had been forced to live during the last few months. Months that felt like years.

What he and everyone else referred to as “Hell Hill” was located on a finger of land once known as Governors’ Point, located just south of the once thriving city of Bellingham, Washington. A place that had once been home to a well-respected state college, a small but charming central business district, and a population willing to trade the hectic pace of a city like Seattle for the pleasures of kayaking on Puget Sound, snowboarding on Mount Baker, and hiking in the Cascades.

But that was prior to February 28, 2020, the day that the Saurons destroyed the cities of New York, Paris, Moscow,

Madrid, Cairo, Beijing, Sydney, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Tehran, and New Delhi.

The worst damage was inflicted by powerful energy cannons mounted on Sauron spaceships. Dreadnoughts that measured almost a mile in length, were more than two thousand feet wide, and carried upward of twenty thousand aliens plus the slaves required to support them.

Though unable to descend through the atmosphere, the largest battleships had no difficulty firing their weapons from space itself. Earth's atmosphere shrieked in protest each time a bolt of energy tore through the air. Those located within a half mile of the impact experienced a chest-thumping concussion, and if they were fortunate enough to survive, could watch skyscrapers topple, bridges collapse, and entire neighborhoods erupt into flame. The fires spread to suburbs, grasslands, forests, and jungles. Soon the entire planet was wrapped in a blanket of thick gray smoke.

But that was little more than the beginning. Confused by the nature of the attack, and uncertain as to who the instigators had been, the humans turned on each other. The cities of Bombay and Islamabad were consumed by mushroom-shaped clouds, while three neighboring countries launched subnuclear missiles at Israel.

All of this occurred not over a period of months, not over a period of weeks, but in a matter of *three days*. Nor was the attack over when the orbital shelling finally ended. That's when the Saurons employed space-to-surface missiles against hardened military installations, when the systematic carpet bombing started, and when swarms of manta-shaped alien attack ships sought to clear the skies, roads, and freeways of human life.

With the exception of assets which their superiors had identified as potentially useful, the Sauron pilots destroyed

anything that moved, including airplanes, trucks, cars, and the long ragged columns of refugees that snaked out of the cities searching for shelter.

More than 3 billion people died, enough to eliminate any immediate resistance, but not so many as to drive the human race to the edge of extinction.

No, the Saurons were careful to stop short of complete annihilation, not because they had a system of ethics, but because they *needed* the survivors. Needed slaves to construct the enormous citadel-like fortresses within which a new generation of Saurons would hatch, each killing its progenitor during the birth process, and each taking its place within the complex racial hierarchy upon which the alien culture had been built. A social structure in which each caste had a distinct function: The Zin governed, the Kan fought, and the Fon performed menial work, or *would* have performed menial work had it not been for the diminutive Ra 'Na, a slave race upon which the aliens were heavily dependent.

A relationship which over hundreds of years had become so entrenched that something approaching a symbiotic relationship had evolved. A reality that helped explain why many of the whip-wielding Fon overseers carried Ra 'Na technicians on their chitin-covered backs even as they forced thousands of humans to ascend Hell Hill.

The reason for this became apparent as one of the Fon flexed his deceptively slender legs, propelled himself high into the air, and landed some thirty feet away from the point where Jack Manning stood. The Ra 'Na, a relatively small being with reddish fur, a short muzzle, and brown beady eyes absorbed the shock with slightly bent legs, and murmured into a handheld radio. The process of herding the secondary slave race to the top of the hill had to be coordinated, and he, like many of his peers, took pride in a job well done. His mount's whip made a loud cracking sound as the neatly braided leather cut into a human back, and the

victim fell face first into the heavily churned mud.

Manning winced. He knew, as did those around him, that the whipping, like the ceremony thousands of humans were about to participate in, was part of an elaborate effort to keep the slave population under control. A task made increasingly difficult, as word of the birthing leaked to the previously ignorant Fon, and to segments of the human population as well.

Even as the Zin called Hak-Bin strove to complete the great fortress at the top of Hell Hill—the resistance movement continued to gain strength. Especially now that the humans realized that the entire Sauron race would be momentarily vulnerable once the nearly simultaneous birthing process started.

All of which explained why the aliens had gone to such great lengths to find a hospitable planet, build their defensive citadels, and install the automated weapons systems designed to keep enemies at bay. Had they remained in space, had they undergone the change there, the entire race would have been vulnerable to the Ra 'Na.

Manning's thoughts were interrupted as Vilo Kell's voice came over the security chief's military-style headset. "Snake Three to Snake One . . . Over."

Manning did a 360 and used the elevated vantage point to scan the surrounding rooftops, shacks, clotheslines, and stacks of firewood. Below, down in the heavily rutted streets, the Fon continued to jump from place to place. Their harakna hide whips popped like firecrackers. "This is One . . . go. Over."

"We're ready—or as ready as we're likely to get. Over."

"Roger, that. Stand by . . . The Big Dog is on his way. Over."

Manning turned to the man who stood beside him. He had even features, quick intelligent eyes, and medium brown skin. "Time to go, Mr. President."

Alexander Ajani Franklin, the onetime governor of Washington State, the politician the Saurons had chosen to head their puppet government, the individual many humans referred to as “Frankenstein,” and the man who Manning and hundreds of resistance fighters were counting on to lead them out of slavery, managed a wry smile. “Yes, it would be rude to keep Hak-Bin waiting.”

“Rude *and* dangerous,” Manning responded gravely. “I don’t know what the bastard has to say—but it must be important. Important enough to take thousands of slaves off the job and sacrifice six hours’ worth of production.”

Franklin lowered himself through the hatch and looked up into his security chief’s face. “I don’t care what Hak-Bin says . . . it’s what he might *do* that bothers me.”

Manning’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Such as?”

Franklin shrugged. “Such as a show designed to get our attention, scare the crap out of us, and reassert Sauron control all at the same time.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” Manning said slowly. “Did you pick up on a rumor of some sort?”

“Nope,” the president answered as he ducked out of sight. “But that’s what *I* would do if *I* were a Sauron. Let’s hope Hak-Bin is different.”

Manning hoped . . . but knew it was a waste of time.



Dr. Seeko Sool, University of Nebraska, class of 2011, was in the process of suturing a cut when she heard her nurse say, “You can’t go in there!” followed by a loud commotion and a clang as something hit the metal floor.

Little more than a makeshift curtain served to separate the surgery from the rest of the cargo-module-sized clinic. The walls were painted green and badly in need of washing. The Kan warrior jerked the flimsy divider aside, shuffled into the space within, and regarded Sool with a baleful gaze.

Her patient, a man dressed in gray rags, seemed to shrink, as if trying to disappear.

Like all his kind, the Sauron had a sharklike snout, three backward-pointing skull plates, and large light-gathering eyes. His highly specialized chitin shifted to match the paint on the wall behind him. Sool blinked as her eyes attempted to focus on the miragelike image. The voice, as reproduced by the translator clipped to the Kan's combat harness, was harsh and grating. "Slaves have been ordered to assemble on the top of the hill. You are a slave. You will depart *now*."

Sool used the needle holder to gesture toward her patient's foot. The wound was only partially closed. "We can't leave yet . . . not until I finish suturing this cut."

The patient, a skinny almost skeletal figure who had managed to survive almost three months of brutal slavery by doing exactly what he was told, jumped off the table, snatched a boot off the floor, and hopped toward the door. A thin strand of 4-0 nylon snaked after him. The Kan produced something like a predatory grin. " 'Now' means *now*."

Sool sighed, put the instrument on a Mayo stand, and removed her disposable gloves. Then, with her nurse in tow, she left the clinic. The crowd flowed upward as if determined to defy gravity.



Hell Hill's original profile, as viewed from the opposite side of the ironically named Pleasant Bay, had been that of a gently rounded hill covered by mature evergreens.

Now, after months of work by thousands of slaves, the long-abandoned stone quarry at the base of the hill had been reopened, most of the trees had been cut down, terraces had been cut into the steep side slopes, and empty cargo modules had been stacked for use by the slaves. A sort of instant city that the humans had modified and expanded as they proceeded to create a sub-rosa economy.

Higher up, the hill wore a necklace of freshly built crosses. The lumber, all of which had been looted from a yard in nearby Vancouver, Canada, had a slightly greenish hue. Each piece wore a small white tag intended to reassure its new owner that it had been pressure treated and would last for the next twenty years, a fact the Fon named Mal-Dak was unaware of and unlikely to take much comfort from.

Like most of his lowly caste, Mal-Dak had been forced to queue up for any number of things over the years—but the opportunity to be crucified had not been one of them. Not until now, as the line shuffled slowly forward and the unfortunate Sauron had a moment to reflect.

The focus of his thoughts was the fact that insofar as he knew, based on the roughly two standard years' worth of memory currently available to his mind, he had never joined or even commingled with the organization called the Fon Brotherhood and was therefore innocent of the charges lodged against him.

Had Mal-Dak been acquainted with the now notorious Bal-Lok? Who, along with some twelve members of the nascent organization, had been foolish enough to attack a Kan checkpoint? The answer was "yes," but knowing someone and belonging to their organization were two different things. Something he had explained over and over but to no avail.

Assuming the Kan who arrested him had been truthful, and there was no reason to suspect otherwise, Hak-Bin had ordered his subordinates to identify and crucify "twenty guilty parties." No less and no more. How could everyone ignore the obvious unfairness of that?

Mal-Dak's thoughts were interrupted as a Kan shouted an order, a cross was raised into the upright position, and a Fon hung upside down with his arms stretched to either side. The Sauron made a pitiful bleating sound which ended

abruptly when a Kan kicked him in the jaw. Though conscious, and in pain, the Fon no longer had the capacity to speak.

That's when Mal-Dak felt graspers lock onto both of his arms, heard a Kan say, "Now it's your turn," and was wrestled onto a newly constructed cross.

"No!" Mal-Dak shouted. "It isn't fair! I'm innocent!"

"That's what they all say," a warrior said unfeelingly. "Now mind the way you act—humans are watching. Here's an opportunity to show them that even the lowliest and most insignificant members of the Sauron race can die without complaint."

Mal-Dak was about to object when an order was given, his cross was raised, and the world turned upside down.

Then, his weight hanging from the plastic ties that secured his wrists and ankles, Mal-Dak was left for the crows. There were hundreds of the fat black birds—and they circled the morning's feast.



The few surviving members of the Fon Brotherhood had learned a thing or two during their organization's short but tumultuous life.

The first learning ran contrary to everything they had been taught since birth: Fon were as intelligent as the Kan and Zin . . . a fact many had proven by teaching themselves to read.

The second learning was that humans, especially *white* humans, who claimed to be part of something called the "brotherhood of the skin," were completely untrustworthy.

The third learning was that even though the white humans had tricked Bal-Lok and sacrificed their brethren to the Kan as part of a complicated slave scheme, the Fon had proven their valor. Though dead, every one of their bodies had been found facing the enemy with a weapon at pincer.

Now, having learned those things, the Fon Brotherhood was in the mood to teach a lesson of their own: the meaning of respect.

Jonathan Kreider, a.k.a. Jonathan Ivory, a name he had chosen as a way to celebrate the lack of pigmentation in his skin, didn't know he was being hunted until the trap had already closed.

Flushed out of hiding by the Kan, the racialists had been absorbed into the steadily growing crowd and pulled toward the top of the hill.

There were fewer of them now, after the disastrous assault on the Presidential Complex, and the loss of brave Hammer Skins like Parker, Boner, and Marta Manning, a hard-core racist who, had it not been for the efforts of her brother Jack, would almost certainly have killed Alexander Franklin.

But six remained, which by either coincidence or divine intent was the exact number mentioned in Ezekiel 9:1-2: "... Then he called out in my hearing ... 'Let those who have charge over the city draw near, each with a deadly weapon in his hand.' And ... six men came ..."

A skin nicknamed Tripod was the first skin to die as a Fon dropped off a roof and buried a six-inch blade between the unsuspecting human's shoulder blades. Four of his companions died within seconds of each other. The last of them took a pipe to the side of his head, staggered through a complete circle, and collapsed.

Ivory, who caught the motion from the corner of his eye, started to turn. He never made it. *His* Fon, the one to whom the ancestors had given a mental likeness of the racist's features, struck the back of the human's head with a length of two-by-two. It was a glancing blow, but sufficient to drop Ivory in his tracks. There was the jolt of the blow, followed by an explosion of pain, and the long fall into darkness.

The Fon, satisfied with his grasperwork, jumped to a

nearby roof. A debt had been incurred . . . and a debt had been paid.

The racialists, their bodies left to rot, were but a small down payment on the long bloody day to follow.



Consistent with the fact that they had what amounted to a genderless society, the Saurons had a marked tendency to regard their slaves in much the same manner as earlier generations of humans viewed horses. The aliens placed a definite premium on size, strength, and, to a lesser extent, on color, favoring blacks over browns and browns over whites, in what observers like ex-FBI Agent Jill Ji-Hoon knew to be conscious racism.

So, given the fact that *she* had white skin, stood six-foot-two, and had the broad shoulders of a competitive swimmer, the onetime law enforcement officer was often chosen for tasks which the alien overseers considered to be physically demanding but appropriately menial. That's why she was not especially surprised when a Kan leaned over the parapet above, ordered her team to meet him on the plaza below, and promptly disappeared.

The team, what the Saurons considered to be a matched set in terms of physical ability, consisted of Ji-Hoon and three reasonably well built men. Two had come on to her and failed. Only the third, a man named Escoloni, remained true to his wife. Something Ji-Hoon admired. Their eyes made contact as they maneuvered the five-hundred-pound block of limestone into place on top of a long, gently curving wall. It was the last oversize brick of that particular run and fell into the assigned gap with a gentle thud.

The six-foot-long steel pry bar clattered as Escoloni allowed it to fall on the stone pavers. "So," the man everyone called Loni, said sarcastically, "what now? High tea?"

Ji-Hoon grinned and used a faded red bandanna to wipe

the sweat off the back of her neck. "Don't I wish . . . No, some kind of shit detail most likely."

Loni looked doubtful and gestured to the dry set wall that circled the citadel's third level. "Shit detail? What do you think *this* is?"

"There's worse," the man named Hosker said somberly, "unless you think the stone mules actually enjoy what they do."

An entire lexicon of slang words and terms had evolved on and around Hell Hill. The term "mule team" referred to those slaves assigned to haul the quarter-ton blocks of limestone up the hill. A backbreaking job that could have been performed in a tenth of the time through the use of machinery. But the Sauron Book of Cycles dictated otherwise, that was the rumor anyway, and Ji-Hoon believed it. She had seen the stonemaster poring over what appeared to be a large volume of weatherproofed manuscripts and heard the overseers refer to it.

The way Ji-Hoon understood the matter, the Book of Cycles, plus the memories that the stonemaster had inherited from his ancestors, laid out not only the plans for the temple itself, but the methods used to build it. Processes and procedures long outdated but still adhered to. A practice reminiscent of some human religions. All of which meant that Hosker was correct. There *were* worse things than setting stone.

The slaves made their way down to the plaza below, were automatically berated for being too slow, and ordered to follow a path that switchbacked down to the beach. A large manta-shaped shuttle wallowed in the swells offshore, looking for all the world like some sort of prehistoric sea animal, its atmosphere-scarred skin slick with spray. It was difficult to walk, what with thousands trying to make their way upward, and the team was forced to halt.

The Fon opened a passageway with his whip, and much

to her surprise, Ji-Hoon noticed that many of the individuals thus punished directed dirty looks to *her*, as if she and her teammates were responsible for the alien's actions. It didn't make sense, but what did? The crowd parted, the work detail passed through, and wondered what awaited below.



The Ra 'Na were a clever race, and like most shuttles of its tonnage, this particular craft had been designed to serve a multiplicity of purposes. The main compartment could be used to transport cargo or converted for passenger use. And, given the fact that there were various kinds of passengers, three different seating configurations had been devised. There were slings for the Saurons, large, oversize seats for the humans, and smaller, better-upholstered chairs for the Ra 'Na, who, having been being forced to build them, saw no reason to compromise their own personal comfort.

That being the case, Dro Tog, along with his many peers, could hardly complain about the size, fit, or comfort of their respective seats. As for the overall ambience, well, that was another matter. The cargo compartment, which had most recently been used to transport canisters of a liquid presently being brewed deep within the bowels of factory asteroid A-12, still stank of sulfur, and made Tog nauseous. Or was it the overly large lunch consumed just prior to departure? Or the nature of the outing itself? An exercise the entire College of Dromas had been *ordered* to take part in.

"Please join Lord Hak-Bin in a lavish entertainment." That's what the so-called invitation read, although the prelate harbored the suspicion that the "lavish entertainment" wouldn't be, not by *his* standards, which were the only ones that mattered. Conscious of the fact that his thoughts were less than politically correct, and fearful lest someone pluck them from the ethers, Tog eyed his peers.

They were an eclectic group, some attired as he was, in