

WILL WIGHT

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



HOW ABOUT A SNEAK PREVIEW OF

THE
ENGINEER

THE LAST HORIZON
BOOK TWO



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THE ENGINEER

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PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR AGO

NEAR THE BORDERS of the Free Worlds, on the fringes of civilized space, Starhammer carried a damaged star-cruiser to safety.

An invisible field of his power covered the vessel, spreading out his strength so that he dragged the civilian cruiser forward instead of tearing it to pieces. He had a good grip on a ledge outside the ship's bridge, but without focus, he would have accidentally ripped their armor apart.

Through the viewport, he could see inside, where a few dozen crewmembers of the *Halcyon Days* had gathered to watch him in awe. Many of them snapped pictures, so he flashed them a smile.

That caused them to gasp and murmur among themselves, which he heard and interpreted through the vibrations of the metal beneath his fingers.

Their appreciation warmed him. That was why he took care of his appearance, why he smiled and posed, why he wore a golden cloak designed to ripple even in the vacuum of space.

To inspire them. Not for his own ego, as many of his Subline critics claimed. It had taken him many years to tolerate the attention;

he still wasn't comfortable with it. A true hero should do their work whether they were recognized for it or not.

But recognition carried inspiration. It pushed them to greater heights, maybe encouraged them to save others. Or even to join the Advocates. Every time Starhammer made a splash on a major Subline network, Advocate applications ticked up several percent.

Plus, it helped them feel safe.

Halcyon Days was only a pleasure cruiser, and navigational failure had led them to drift off-course. They had run into a swarm of living asteroids, which would have stripped and devoured the hull if Starhammer had not arrived in time.

When the citizens of the Free Worlds saw this, they would know that someone out there could save them. No matter how dire the situation, there was always the chance that Starhammer could get there in time.

That was his purpose.

As he was carrying a population of unprotected civilians and the hull was compromised, he had to keep them out of Subspace. It took several days of tireless flying to reach the nearest colony, which had been warned of his approach.

While Galactic Union colonies tended to be rings of gray metal floating in space, those in the Free Worlds were more individualistic. This one was an expanded mining colony, and as such it resembled an ordinary mountain, except one covered in tunnels, machinery, shielded buildings, and blinking docks.

Several orange-and-yellow shuttlecraft flew out from a nearby dock, magic circles appearing on their hulls as they took *Halcyon Days* from Starhammer's grip with industrial telekinesis spells.

Starhammer flashed another smile and waved goodbye to the people on the bridge, minor spells in his cape sending it fluttering again. With a small effort, he primed the weapons in his eyes, causing them to shine white.

He had no intention of attacking, of course, but glowing eyes showed up better on camera.

While he had avoided entering the colony's atmospheric field—

he had no time to celebrate with the locals or endure interviews, not when he had a family to return to—he was close enough to pick up some Subline reception.

An icon began blinking at the corner of his vision, indicating an urgent message. Usually that meant another assignment.

He focused on the icon to open it, and a video unfolded over his view.

When Starhammer saw who it was, his skin ran cold.

The man in the video was nothing extraordinary to the eye. He was an Aethril, thin even for his kind, the blue of his skin pale enough to be almost gray and starlight hair cropped short. Only a bit of that hair was visible beneath three hats, all of which had been perched on his head at various angles.

He wore several coats of clashing colors, at least two neckties, and the gloves on his hands were mismatched.

Those hands were crossed in front of him on a dented steel table. The wall behind him was cheap fabricated plastic, with a thick port-hole looking out onto distant stars.

Starhammer knew the room. It was an Advocate holding cell. One of their most secure.

There should have been no way to get a video out from in there. Not to mention all those clothes.

Reverent light shone in the prisoner's eyes as he looked into the camera. Less than a second after the video began, he spoke.

"You have been given chance after chance to repent," the prisoner said. *"First, you should know that this punishment comes not from me, but from the Aether itself. There is nothing you can do to stop it. By the moment your hands touched the poor, wayward Halcyon Days, your judgment had already been carried out."*

The prisoner spoke softly, earnestly. He believed in his message, and in that belief, he was capable of unspeakable atrocities.

He called himself the Priest of Night, and he considered it his duty to "liberate" the Free Worlds from the protection of the Advocates.

The Priest tilted his wrist to check the time on one of four con-

soles that had been strapped to the outside of his coat-sleeves. *“Approximately two hours ago, as of this recording, your home on Rythar has been reduced to dust by seven separate proton bombs.”*

Starhammer almost dove into Subspace on instinct, but if he did, he would lose Subline connection. He ignored the other messages blinking at him and initiated a call. He had to know.

His wife might not have been at home. The other Advocates would have seen the attack coming, or intercepted this transmission, or...something. She would be safe.

While the call tried to connect, the Priest of Night continued speaking in his low, earnest voice. *“You thought anonymity was her strongest defense, but you should know that no secrets can be kept from the Aether. I made sure she was at home. How else would this be a punishment?”*

The call hadn't connected yet. How long had it been? It would be difficult to connect with her from out here. How difficult? How long should it take?

While those thoughts raced, there were other, darker thoughts that dripped down from a place Starhammer didn't like to consider.

This wouldn't have happened if he had been at home. If he had controlled her security better. If he had eliminated the threats.

How could anyone be safe unless he saw to it himself?

The Priest of Night had paused to look into the distance. *“I know you're still hoping, even praying, that some miracle will save her. The sooner you accept the truth, the sooner you may embrace the change brought by pain. I did not record this message until I was sure the job was done.”*

The call still hadn't connected.

More messages flashed at him, and even shuttles from the nearby colony began hailing him, but Starhammer was absorbed in this one.

There had to be some chance.

“There is no chance,” the Priest said. *“Look into the Aether and—”*

The video glitched.

Rather than a usual fragmented transmission, this time the

video was brushed away like a flickering cloud blown by a gust of wind. For a startled instant, Starhammer wondered if the Priest had edited his terrorist video with special effects.

Then he noticed subtle Aetheric symbols flickering at the corners of the feed. This was magic.

A glove waved in front of the camera now, and Starhammer saw only the hand, the sky between its fingers, and what he thought was the edge of a blue cape flickering in the wind.

"Good, I made it," a relieved, unfamiliar voice said from offscreen. Presumably the one filming. *"Sorry that took so long."*

The hand was removed, and Starhammer saw his wife.

Leilari's long, dark hair was in disarray, she had no console on her wrist, and she wore only a white robe and a startled look that said she had no idea what was going on.

She waved at the camera. *"Hey, honey! I'm not dead. Do you know him?"*

"He doesn't," the stranger said wearily, *"and neither do you. Just a passing wizard. You're safe, your home is fine, and I've removed the bombs. That means there's no reason for anyone to take over the galaxy in a fit of grief-induced rage, right?"*

"Right," Leilari agreed, clearly baffled.

Starhammer was having trouble thinking anything through his overpowering relief.

The camera turned, and suddenly he was looking into a blue, hooded face. The face itself was masked in shadow, hidden by some enchantment.

"She's fine, everything's fine, so please don't conquer the galaxy. Just be more careful next time, all right? I can't help anymore. Well, there is one more thing."

The video flickered again, and once more Starhammer was looking into the Priest's cell. It seemed the Aethril had continued talking the entire time.

"...repent of your pride. The Advocates are an unnatural blight, an insult to the true state of the Aether, a—What is that?"

Something offscreen had caught the Priest's attention. Only a

moment later, Starhammer saw what it was: a strangely muscular man-sized rabbit with scarred fur and a notched ear.

The warrior-rabbit walked around the table and—with one casual wrench—snapped the Priest of Night’s neck. As the man’s body slumped, the rabbit checked his pulse, nodded, and vanished.

The Priest’s body gradually slid beneath the table as the video shifted back to show the anonymous wizard.

“You’re welcome,” he said. *“No offense, but I’m hoping we never meet.”*

The video ended.

At that moment, Starhammer’s call finally connected.

“Honey, can you hear me?” Leilari’s voice soothed his soul. Even after seeing the video, he had still worried.

The audio-only call was scratchy and low-quality, stretched as it was over several Sublines, but it was good enough to ease his terror. *“Thank the Worlds,”* he breathed. *“You’re alive.”*

“Yeah, I’m fine, but Farsight and the others haven’t eaten or slept for two days. I think they’re going to kill themselves trying to figure out how someone got a bunch of bombs into our house. And who was that wizard?”

“I don’t know,” Starhammer said. *“But we owe him our lives.”*

Without the intervention of that wizard, Leilari would have died. Died to one of *his* enemies, to hurt *him*.

He couldn’t imagine what he might have done under the influence of that pain. What he might have done for revenge.

Thanks to the strange wizard, he would never have to find out.

How great was that?

You can get the whole book on December 5, 2023!



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