

Cathar Prime – The Present

The Negotiator sat in the semi-darkened room, waiting for the arrival of The Emissary. Decades earlier the D'lai had been vanquished in the skies above Gathung'l and Earth. The shame and failure of Negotiator Ret D'iash left an immutable scar upon the D'lai consciousness. Those few survivors who remained, fled to the scorched and ruined planet Cathar Prime in a desperate bid to find a shred of peace. In systems all over the Orion Arm, countless D'lai ships had been disabled and destroyed, thanks to the discovery of smuggler Zea Windrow. Her FTL jump trick sent many thousands of D'lai to their doom in the stars they still believed theirs to rule.

Now, alone and virtually homeless, the D'lai remnant waited and planned for their triumphant return. It took years, but they rebuilt Cathar Prime in their own image. Any native Cathari who dared to defy their right to rule the scarred planet was banished into space. The D'lai meted out the same cruelty the Cathari imposed upon them centuries ago.

Cathar Prime had once been home to the vast Cathari Alliance, and boasted beautiful cities and graceful countryside. The Alliance crumbled after the war, leaving Earth and its allies to form the Three Worlds Alliance in its place. Now,

twenty years since the violent conquest of the Cathar Prime, no corner of this once majestic planet was free of devastation. The planet's former capital city had never been rebuilt. The D'lai cruelly left its smoldering remains as a memorial, and a reminder, for the ordinary Cathari of their enduring shame, and crushing defeat. With time, smaller cities slowly sprang up out of the ruins, and the D'lai overlords and Cathari survivors now maintained an uneasy peace.

Among the successors of the D'lai, a new Negotiator arose. He studied under the disgraced Ret D'iash, and expanded upon her cruel but cunning methods of conquest, command, and fear. Negotiator Brik Zat'ol had been aboard *The Spector* when the final battle was lost. He witnessed first-hand the barbarity of D'iash in not only implementing her conquest plans, but in how she dealt with the secretive cabal of Commanders that attempted to overthrow her rule. Zat'ol, then a junior officer on board *The Spector*, had himself been recruited to the cabal and worked to undermine her authority. Despite this, his greatest accomplishment in the final battle did not shower him in glory, but it did bring him personal pride. As he was traveling down a corridor of the ship, he stumbled upon the ill Negotiator outside her quarters, and after helping her inside, he murdered her with his bare hands. The dark memory of that moment still brought him

undiluted pleasure.

Now he sat in this poorly lit room, awaiting the visit of an Emissary from the ancient Umawei Empire. Anticipation of the meeting thrilled him. Centuries in the past, when the D'lai had been expelled from Cathar Prime by a religious sect called the Däk'in, the D'lai encountered the remnants of the Umawei Empire in a system they called Ryi Bruai. Awed by the mega structures left by these mysterious aliens, the D'lai believed they found the origins of life on their planet.

The ancient Cathari long ago reasoned that a superior race of beings must have seeded all the habitable planets in this region of space with the building blocks of life. Their reasoning was simple. As they explored their region of the galaxy, they discovered that far too many species resembled each other in appearance and basic anatomy. A coincidence of nature? Probably not. They believed that if they could find the source, they could bring about a true galactic peace. The D'lai, on the other hand, held very different ideas around the source. They maintained that knowledge and possession of this seeding technology, if it fell into the right hands, would be an unstoppable source of unlimited power.

In an effort to prove their early theories of this ancient civilization, the Cathari sought them out with their vigorous exploration of nearby stars. As they

explored, they encountered planets teeming with life comparable to their own. It grieved them, however, that only a few planets had advanced civilizations capable of space flight. Their travels through the stars increased their belief in the ancient aliens, however, they also began to realize that what they sought was a darker, more menacing, and immensely powerful civilization. They found scattered relics of this extinct culture in multiple systems, but none as enormous as those the D'lai encountered much later, after the schism.

As they fled Cathar Prime, the D'lai ran across an entire star system filled with planet and star-sized constructions. The discovery thrilled the D'lai, and enabled them to greatly advance their own technological prowess. D'lai leaders recognized that if they might ever recover from the horror of war and banishment, they needed superior knowledge. The Umawei Empire's remnants provided that ability. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances of their exile, the ancient D'lai never fully assimilated the abandoned Umawei technology. Their search for a home far outweighed the thrilling discovery. Centuries later, Zat'ol aimed to correct that early blunder. The D'lai would rise from the ashes of their failures, and assert their rightful place as masters of the galaxy.

As Zat'ol pondered the history of his people, something interrupted him. An

aide approached and bowed. The Emissary had arrived.

Cathar Prime – The Ancient Past

“*Viug! Rois! Father! Help!*” Pulled from the arms of her father, and thrust into the air transport crammed with a dozen other crying children, the young Cathari girl screamed and kicked. Hours earlier, local Magistrates ordered Am’oll and his family to leave their home in Rai province – a home the family had owned and maintained since the time of the *Vdo Däk*, four centuries in the past.

Am’oll and his family were part of a breakaway sect of Cathari that called themselves the D’lai. Both spiritually and politically, Cathar Prime burned. Centuries passed since the first so-called divine religious leader, the *Vdo Däk*, taught the Cathari his particular brand of peaceful existence, and abhorrence of violence in any form.

“Life is sacred and cannot be violated,” the *Vdo Däk* said.

Not lost on some congregants, pacifism made them wary. They believed that this new religion of the Cathari people would lead the planet into ruin.

The political leaders of Cathar Prime soon adopted this new religious movement called Däk’in, and in stunning fashion swept aside the multitude of

religious belief systems that pervaded the planet. A small group of extremists refused to give up their beliefs and formed small secret cells all over the planet. At first, these cells were seen as harmless, and provincial and military leaders generally ignored them. Over time, the asceticism of Däk'in grew more extreme and permeated so much of Cathari society, that it became first immoral, and finally criminal, to believe anything else.

The small groups of breakaway D'lai grew and merged over time. The D'lai adherents saw most Cathari as being hypocritical in their beliefs. To use peace as a weapon could not be tolerated by the leaders of the D'lai. In an attempt at self-preservation, the D'lai faithful kept their religion hidden in the shadows. They developed ever more elaborate methods of greeting a fellow believer, and in time began to congregate on rural farms, in caves and abandoned factories, far from the prying eyes of the Däk'in.

The two rival faiths might have co-existed peacefully, with each secure in their own ideologies, if not for an inciting incident that not only exposed the D'lai faith to public scrutiny, but also endangered the Däk'in faith. In the four hundred years since the religious split between the two sects, the Cathari people as a whole explored with almost religious zeal nearby space in an effort to better

understand the civilizations they discovered early in their observations of the stars.

Not long after the rise of the *Vdo Däk*, Cathari astronomers stumbled upon an erratically behaving nearby star. They discovered multiple planets based on the changing intensity of that star's light. They decided to point their radio telescopes at the nearby star, and reacted with astonishment when they detected sound waves emanating from one of the exoplanets. At first, they dismissed the detection as background noise. However, after careful study, they began to discern distinct patterns that could only be described with one word. Life.

Cathari scientists doubled their efforts, and began launching rudimentary space craft and satellites into orbit in an attempt to better understand their discovery. The Däk'in seized on the opportunity, and began morphing their religion to match the discovery of otherworldly intelligence. The *Vdo Däk* began teaching that the ancient Cathari gods were not spiritual beings. They were aliens. In time, the Cathari developed the ability to leave their own star system and began the long trek between the stars. Their discoveries would forever change the planet, and set into motion a chain of events that would eventually bring about their own destruction.

While the planet as a whole made tremendous scientific strides, The Däk'in and the D'lai grew ever more apart. Where the predominant Cathari religion believed in non-aggression and harmony with nature, the cast outs of the D'lai faith conformed to the belief that it is in the nature of all living beings to take what one required for survival, regardless of the consequences. D'lai ritual centered on the selfishness of life and threw aside all notions of peace and co-existence for mutual benefit. Living beings possessed the divine right to do as desired.

Cathar Prime orbits a red dwarf star and, like most planets in the galaxy, experiences seasons, day and night, and periods of increased solar activity. The Cathari evolved in cycles that closely matched their local star. Their religious activities mirrored those periods, and in time, despite a strong scientific awareness, their myths and superstitions still pervaded the advanced, space-faring society. Their missions to learn more about neighboring planets exposed the existence of other, less advanced civilizations. It also made the Cathari keenly aware of a much older, and darker community of aliens that seemed to have gone extinct but left its mark on multiple worlds.

Dozens of rituals evolved among the Cathari, including the annual

celebration of Çäi, or summer. The ceremony became more elaborate in time, and after the teachings of the *Vdo Däk* began to merge with scientific discovery, Çäi became the most important day in the life of the Cathari people. However, a major problem soon emerged. The D'lai and the Däk'in held differing views on not only the importance of Çäi, but also on how to memorialize the day.

In the year 3710, a group of D'lai faithful celebrated Çäi in their usual fashion. The worshipers grew incautious as time elapsed, and allowed their secretive ceremonies to become more public. Incidents of intolerance between the religions grew far less frequent, and the D'lai became more comfortable practicing their faith publicly. The D'lai ritual surrounding Çäi involved the sacrifice of grazing animals called keṭ. These animals, a key ingredient of most D'lai rituals, offended the extremely peaceful Däk'in, and they found all animal sacrifice to be abhorrent. A group of Cathari happened to observe the opening scene in the D'lai celebration, and became so revolted by the slaughter, that they failed to remember their own ideals of pacifism. Enraged, they attacked the worshipping D'lai and in the act, killed a young boy who had been observing his first celebration of Çäi with his parents.

The leader of Rai Province, Varoth the Elder, incited further violence when,

during a speech in front of the Cathari legislature, he declared “We must drive this evil from our cities!”

A loud stirring of assent could be heard among the gathered leaders. “We have tolerated the D’lai for far too long,” continued Varoth. “It has infected our homes and filled our streets with a grotesque mockery of all we stand for!”

All over Cathar Prime, violent mobs began to form, intent on rooting out D’lai believers and in the process, exposing their own Däk’in faith as a lie. They abandoned almost overnight the peaceful ideals of *Vdo Däk*. Civil war was coming.

Earth – The Present

Cormac Gallagher had a massive headache. The pounding kept him up all night, despite the fact that the next day was going to be overly busy for him. Leaders from Gathung’1 and Mars were due to arrive for their semi-annual Three Worlds Alliance Summit.

“I’ve got to get some sleep!” Gallagher grumbled to no one. He tossed and turned and tried to count sheep, but sleep eluded him.

Several years earlier, after the successful cloaking of Earth and the defeat of

the D'lai, Gallagher had been assigned as a military aide with then Secretary General Marsha Allen. She thought that by giving him such a cushy assignment, it would be a reward for his efforts at saving the planet. Gallagher disagreed.

He loved space and wanted to be back out there. To Gallagher, it didn't matter if aliens tried to kill him. He loved the adventure. Secretary General Allen, on the other hand, had other plans for the planetary hero.

"Gallagher, we need to put your face out there!" Allen said in one of their early meetings.

"My face...isn't there someone else who..." protested Gallagher.

"Nonsense! You are the hero of Earth!"

"Hero? All I did was follow some stupid orders and not be killed."

Allen smirked and then ordered Gallagher to report to the Office of Public Relations. Gallagher dutifully did as directed.

"Damn."

Now, rolling over in his bed, Gallagher decided to get up and do some work. Three years ago he had been unanimously elected as Secretary General. He didn't relish the idea of sitting in an office all day, but he figured why the heck not.

“Might as well get something out of this.” He said to himself.

He sat down at a comfortable desk in the corner of his bedroom and scrolled through some messages on his pad. One particular message caught his attention, so he opened it up and smiled.

His old friend, Corey Hodges, had been working off-world helping to build a new orbital platform intended to replace the aging planetary cloak that protected Earth. While the old cloak worked well, and with routine maintenance did what intended, the limitations imposed by the old tech made communications and routine naval operations problematic.

As part of the new project, the old cloak had to be taken offline and stored in a cargo hold so the new platform could be tested. Gallagher smiled as he read the message from Hodges while holding a picture of his old friend standing next to the slightly battered cloaking satellite they deployed around Earth. The caption said “Remember this?” Gallagher tapped out a brief reply, and reluctantly moved on to more important matters. He vowed to have dinner with Hodges on his next visit. It had been too long.

After he read and replied to a few more messages, Gallagher stood and groaned. His back recently began aching in the mornings, and he wondered

when he had started to grow old. Only yesterday his younger self paraded around the galaxy. Now here he sat, a middle-aged dude with the beginnings of a spread around his stomach.

“Computer, remind me to exercise more,” he said as he looked in a mirror. He grunted and then hopped in the shower.

Mid-song and soapy, Gallagher was startled when an alarm began blaring from his workstation. He tried to ignore it, but the software geeks that invented the system made sure the sound would not be easily dismissed. He turned off the water, wrapped a towel around his waist, and rushed to his console.

“Computer, shut off that damn noise!”

The computer complied. Gallagher sat down and read the message. He froze as he scanned the document. An instant later, the face of his military advisor came on the screen. She didn’t seem fazed at all by the bare-chested planetary leader as she cleared her throat.

“Sir, we’ve just received word of an enormous explosion in orbit.” General Janina Agda looked stern. An able commander, the 48-year old Swedish General stared back at him. Only urgent business would cause her to interrupt Gallagher’s morning.

“Explosion? I need more details General Agda.”

“Sir, the new cloaking platform is the source. We don’t have much...”

“The platform? Damn.” Gallagher’s mind instantly went to the safety of his friend Hodges. “Survivors?”

“We believe no one has been critically injured, sir.” The General said.

Gallagher breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m getting dressed. I’ll be in my office in fifteen. I’ll need a full briefing.”

“Yes, sir.” General Agda clicked off. Gallagher got dressed and left his quarters in less than five minutes.

Cathar Prime – The Ancient Past

Am’oll paced the small detention cell as he feared for the safety of his daughter and wife. A few days earlier he sat with his frightened family in their darkened home. The mobs of enraged Däk’in became increasingly violent and murderous as they sought out anyone who did not hold to their belief system. Am’oll, for his part, believed that his own D’lai faith mirrored the Cathari soul with greater authenticity.

“Shhh,” said Am’oll to his cowering family. “I can hear them...outside.”

The rowdy noises of nearby rioters emanated from neighboring streets.

Am'oll did his best to barricade his small family inside their spacious home and hide their existence from the mob.

"So much for non-violence," said Suha, the wife of Am'oll. "I thought they wouldn't raise a fist in anger!"

"Suha, we've long understood that the pacifism of Däk'in is a sham. The Cathari soul..."

"Yes, yes!" Suha interrupted her husband. "I know!"

Suha and Am'oll held each other in an embrace as they consoled their frightened daughter. All Cathari valued their children. The D'lai taught that children embodied the *vdo hyëb*, or great spirit, of the Cathari gods. Until Däk'in became the major religion of the planet, they worshiped an entire pantheon of major and minor gods and goddesses. The *Vdo Däk* violently swept aside the gods as a child-like belief that an advanced society should shun. The D'lai still believed that the gods influenced their lives. They pointed to massive structures in a nearby star system discovered by Cathari explorers that could not be comprehended even now, as evidence of a superior intelligence.

The discovery of the ancient and seemingly extinct Umawei Empire rocked

Cathar Prime. The subsequent discovery that the ancient civilization seeded its genetic material in primordial planets, including Cathar Prime, propelled the Däk'in believers to move beyond their past superstitions. This created conflict with the D'lai who still believed these ancient forebears to be gods, not beings like themselves. They believed that any sufficiently advanced civilization would destroy, not create. Nevertheless, the recent unrest on the planet threatened to undo all the advancements their society made scientifically. Cultural and religious bias overrode the more reasoned and thoughtful leaders among the planets inhabitants.

Suha screamed when a particularly violent explosion rocked their hiding place. Am'oll attempted to soothe her to no avail. She dashed from their hiding spot and ran from the room. Am'oll would have gone after her if not for their young daughter. The violence outside threatened their safety, and he had no intention of leaving her unprotected to run after his foolish wife.

That violent night ended in his daughter being taken, and he and his wife imprisoned. Am'oll fumed. He also plotted. Unknown to all but the most senior Däk'in, Am'oll was secretly the leader of the D'lai. For decades, they planned for an event such as the one now overtaking the planet. Their mystics foresaw the

phenomenon now engulfing Cathar Prime in metaphorical flames, and their leaders organized and developed worst-case scenarios.

Most Cathari possessed the uncanny ability to devise plans within plans. While the violent mobs of Däk'in faithful acted from pure impulse, the D'lai silently activated their long-term objectives. Even now, scores of them gathered in preordained locations and dusted off long abandoned, but meticulously maintained space craft. If necessary, the D'lai would leave Cathar Prime and venture into the stars. Am'oll hoped this would not be necessary. He still believed that the vast majority of the populace would come to their senses and avert the impending disaster.

A ruckus from outside the small holding area drew his attention. Am'oll expected that his fellow D'lai would mount a rescue attempt. However, if the plan failed, he believed the sect would survive without him. He understood that no matter how his life unfolded, the D'lai faith would go on.

"Am'oll, get down!"

The shouted warning startled Am'oll, but he knew better than to ignore it. He dropped to the ground and scooted under a bunk. An instant later, an explosion shook the holding area as dust and debris filled the air. Strong hands gripped

him and whisked him from the wreckage of the cell. Blinded by sudden daylight, he closed his eyes while his rescuers guided him to the waiting transport.

After a few moments of adjustment, he was able to open his eyes and look around. Several dusty Cathari filled the small cabin. Among them, he recognized his cell-mates, and it relieved him to see his wife Suha crouching in a corner. She smiled at him.

“Suha...what...,” Am’oll started to say.

“Just be grateful we got you out,” said the driver of the vehicle, “we almost couldn’t find you!”

The Cathari authorities tried to hide the whereabouts of Am’oll for just such a fear as an attempt to free him. They reasoned the D’lai movement would collapse without its leader. They could not have been more wrong. However, Am’oll’s family and friends insisted upon attempting the rescue.

The air transport sped out of the city toward one of the D’lai gathering locations in a nearby cave system. They understood the importance of ushering Am’oll to safety. It would do no good for him to be recaptured. Am’oll sat back and grasped Suha’s warm hand. The pair sat on the hard floor of the transport and smiled at each other. The odds were good they would not have many more

opportunities for affection in the coming days.