

Sample Chapter

Tarizon: Supreme Mandate

by

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**Tarizon Saga
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1

Almighty Pelgrem

19 BU

Eleven-cycle-old Sandee Brahn climbed to the top of a nearby hill to look out over what used to be the Brahn Ranch. A stiff fall breeze rustled his sandy blond hair. He used to love sitting high on the hilltop, known as Five Trees, where he could look in every direction over the Hills of Loctula that stretched from Lago Lat to Baca Rue across northern Lector and Serie. But now the view sickened him. The once lush green hills had turned a ghastly black and grey. The five trees that once proudly crowned this hill had been vaporized in less than thirty ticks after a nuclear strike on nearby Lago Lat Airbase. What the bomb hadn't destroyed the radiation took care of in the days that followed.

After the strike, each day was an impossible struggle for survival. Warned of the imminent strike by the alarm on their wrist arrays, his family had survived by retreating into a deep cave, but most of their herds and all of their orchards had been wiped out. This once proud Brahn family was now, five cycles later, with few productive assets. Of course, it didn't much matter anymore, Sandee thought, there wasn't a road or a bridge still intact in all of Lector and Serie on which to take their products to market. He wasn't sure about the rest of Tarizon but he suspected it was the same everywhere. The rulers of the world had gone insane and now each citizen was on his own to live or die depending on his own wits or good fortune.

After a while, Sandee hiked to the east bank of the Loctula River which was the eastern boundary of Lector. The once clear blue water had turned a dark green and was cluttered with debris, dead fish and animals as well as an occasional human corpse. The water wasn't fit for human consumption without a complicated and time-consuming filtration process. First, the water had to be collected and allowed to settle for several kyloons. Once the sediment settled, the water was poured through a wire mesh to remove any debris. After the debris was removed, the water had to be treated with chemicals to remove the radiation poisoning and finally boiled to destroy any bacteria that had survived the radiation. Even rainwater and water from deep wells had to be treated, and every member of the family spent several kyloons every single day just doing this tedious chore.

Sandee held his nose as the river's smell made him sick. He thought back to the days he could breathe deeply, relishing the wonderful scent of the river. Now the stench made him gag. He recalled many days that he would actually wade into the water and immerse himself, letting the current carry him downstream. Being a good swimmer it took little effort to make it back to shore. But those days were over, and he knew it would be many cycles before he'd ever set a foot in the river again.

It was starting to get dark and he was expected home, so he began walking toward the family's reconstructed ranch house. The new house wasn't nearly as nice as the original one that had burned to the ground, but it was a roof over their heads which he knew was more than most people had these days.

As he started up the last hill overlooking the house, he saw smoke rising into the sky. Frowning and feeling uneasy he picked up his pace until he got to the top of the hill. The sight of the homestead burning sent a jolt of fear and foreboding through him. He began running. As he got closer to the house, he saw a body laying lifeless twenty strides ahead of him. He knelt next to it, his heart racing, and felt his brother's wrist for a pulse. His heart sank as he felt nothing.

Overcome with grief and panic, he got up and began to run mindlessly toward the smoldering house. Along the way, he couldn't help but notice that the pribett pens were empty and the barn door wide open. Bounding up the front porch steps he kicked the front door open and ran inside. His mother's charred body was lying in the kitchen with a bullet hole in her forehead. Sandee gasped in shock and horror, then kneeled in utter despair. Gathering her into his arms he rocked her back and forth, crying and moaning hysterically. Their life together raced through his mind. She had been a wonderful mother and he had so dearly loved her. *Who did this? Why would anyone kill my mother and my brother?*

It took a while for him to collect himself, but eventually, he got up and started searching the rest of the house. It wasn't long before he found his sister lying in a pool of blood, her throat slit. *Why God? Why have you allowed this to happen?*

He gagged at the stench of burnt blood then let out an agonizing scream. "Father! Are you alive?" His pulse quickened as he moved to the next room, another dead body but not someone he recognized. A deserter from the Lector Army he surmised by the patch on his uniform. The soldier's skull had been cracked open. He assumed it was the handiwork of his father. When he'd searched the entire house, he went out back and there he found his father and two more dead soldiers. There had been a fierce struggle from the looks of it, he thought. He knew his father wouldn't have gone down without a tenacious fight.

Kneeling down at his father's side, he wept. Everything he loved was now gone. *Why God!? Why has this happened?* Sandee's father had been a devout Pelgremist. Pelgrem was the God who reigned over Tarizon's mother-planet, Pharidon. The Pelgrem Church was the largest on Tarizon but there were others. The Forsaken was its most formidable rival. Its advocates believed in Pelgrem but insisted his domain did not extend beyond Pharidon's solar system, and therefore there wasn't a god looking out for the people of Tarizon. This is why so many people believed Tarizon was doomed from the beginning of its human habitation and one day would self-destruct. No civilization could survive without spiritual guidance and an occasional divine intervention, they argued. Sandee was starting to wonder if they had been right and the day of reckoning was at hand.

He sat there next to his father for some time feeling empty and listless. The horror of the day had drained every bit of his energy. He felt guilty that he was still alive and wondered if there was any point in his living in such a hostile world, especially without his family. His father's knife lay beside his still body. Sandee picked it up and gazed at its

sharp blade. One quick slice to his wrists and his suffering would be over. If ending his life would have taken him to the place his parents and siblings had gone, he would have done it then and there. But he had been taught in his religious training that those who gave up on the gift of life would not transcend to the second stage of existence but would be expelled into the void and lost forever.

A door slammed and there were voices in the distance. Alarmed, Sandee stood up and rushed to the side of the house. He peered around the corner and saw two soldiers coming out of the barn and heading his way. Retreating quickly, he took off running back up the hill. The soldiers saw him and yelled for him to stop. He ignored them and kept on running. A bullet passed over his head, so close that he felt a whisper of wind on his ear. He hit the dirt fearing the next bullet would pierce his back. *If I can just get to the top of the hill, I can lose them.* On his feet again, he ran in a zig-zag pattern this time, hoping it would make him a difficult target. Bullets hit the dirt beside and behind him but none of them found his flesh. A surge of relief washed over him as he crested the hill, but it didn't last.

A huge, greenish-grey, four-legged beast stood before him and gave him a ferocious growl. Sandee recognized it immediately as a rhutz and figured it was twice his weight. Feeling like the wind had been knocked out of him, he froze for a moment and then just sank to the ground. There was nothing he could do. The rhutz could easily outrun him if he tried to get away, and then there was the beast's third hand to consider. The rhutz were telekinetic. *At least if I am shot or killed by this beast I will go onto the second stage of life and be with my family.* The soldiers' footsteps grew louder and louder. Sandee closed his eyes wondering if his death would come from a vicious bite from the rhutz or from a bullet to his brain.

He waited with clenched teeth for the final blow, but nothing happened. Opening his eyes he saw the rhutz rush past him and launch itself at the first soldier. Taken by surprise, the soldier could do nothing to stop its razor-sharp teeth from sinking into his throat. Blood spurted from the gash as the soldier tumbled onto his back. The other soldier looked on in shock and when he finally pulled up his rifle to take aim, the rifle shot out of his hand and landed twenty feet away. As the rhutz was finishing off the second soldier and turning back toward him, he was again overwhelmed with fear. *Am I next?*

Normally it was unusual for a rhutz to attack a human but these were not normal times. Since the rhutz had attacked the soldiers, Sandee figured he would suffer the same fate. Sandee turned and began running away. He knew he had no hope of outrunning the rhutz but he hoped the rhutz might be occupied long enough with his kill that he wouldn't notice that he had slipped away. When he looked back, however, his hopes were dashed as he saw the rhutz trotting after him. Quickening his pace he prayed the rhutz would lose interest and end the pursuit, but after two kyloons the rhutz was still behind him but keeping his distance.

Exhausted, Sandee stopped and sat on a large rock. It was almost dark now and he had to think about finding food and water and getting some sleep. His anxiety over the rhutz following him had waned. *If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it by now. What do you want from me? Why did you save my life?*

The rhutz's behavior was baffling to Sandee. Rhutz were savage beasts but they weren't stupid. They knew better than to attack humans because, even with their strength, speed, and telekinetic abilities, they were no match for the humans' long guns and jet copters. *Is it because I am unarmed that you are stalking me?* Sandee gave the rhutz a hard look. The rhutz, who was sitting now, watched him intently. Finally, Sandee looked away and began listening. In the distance, he could hear the sound of the rushing river.

The sound made him thirsty. Unfortunately, he couldn't drink contaminated water and live very long. He didn't have his decontamination kit with him, it was back at the ranch, but he didn't dare go back there for fear other soldiers might be lurking about.

Sandee looked at the rhutz wondering how he had survived without clean water. The rhutz perked up, stood, and then started trotting away. Sandee was glad to see him leaving but wondered why he'd suddenly lost interest in him. The rhutz stopped and looked back expectantly. Sandee frowned, wondering what he wanted. Then it hit him. *You want me to follow you?* Sandee didn't know where the thought came from. It just popped into his head. The rhutz continued on and Sandee felt compelled to follow him.

The rhutz trotted north several kyloons through the scorched terrain, over a hill, through a canyon and then up a steep embankment. Sandee struggled to keep up with the beast, and several times nearly gave up the pursuit. Finally, the rhutz came to the mouth of a cave, stopped and looked back. Sandee gasped for air. *Don't worry, my friend. I'm still here.* The rhutz seemed almost to nod and then continued on into the cave.

Sandee hesitated. It was against all his instincts to go into a dark cave that he knew was occupied by a pack of rhutz. He'd been in caves before with a light stick and knew how dangerous they could be even if they were unoccupied. He could easily trip and fall and injure himself, or walk off a cliff into a bottomless pit. He wondered if the rhutz was bringing him home to his pack to be their next meal. If they were sentient beings, they were probably laughing at his stupidity in walking into their den. But, he also knew the rhutz could have killed him earlier or just let him die at the hands of the soldiers. So, summoning all his courage, he cautiously moved forward.

Twenty strides into the cave it was pitch dark. Sandee stopped to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. After a few loons, he began to see shadows and could make out the walls of the cavern. He heard the trickling of water, so he carefully followed the sound praying the ground beneath him wouldn't give way. Several loons later he felt a fine mist and knew the water was nearby. He heard the rhutz lapping up water, so he got on his knees and felt around. His left hand found the shallow pool of water. It was cool and smelled delicious. Since the rhutz was drinking freely, Sandee assumed the water was somehow clean. *Perhaps it comes from a deep artisan well that hasn't been contaminated or has been cleaned over time.* After his thirst was quenched, he thought about food. *Okay, my friend, now what are we going to do to quench our hunger?*

Without hesitation, the rhutz was on his feet and trotted off. He went so quickly Sandee didn't even think about following him. He heard a scuffle in the distance and then a deathly squeal from some kind of small animal. A few tiks later the rhutz came back with a furry rodent in his mouth. Sandee recoiled at the sight of the small lump of fur with its grotesquely twisted face and bulging red eyes. *Pelgrem help me! I'll starve before I'll eat a cave rat.*

The rhutz dropped the rat, sat and waited patiently. Sandee turned away. "I'm not going to eat that thing! Take it away. I don't even want to look at it." The rhutz did nothing.

Suddenly feeling very tired, Sandee looked around for a place he might sleep. The ground was mainly rock and gravel but he managed to find a sandy spot where he curled into a ball and closed his eyes. Neither the rhutz nor the rat moved.

Kyloons later, he woke with a start. He'd been dreaming about his family and his life in Lecton but the dream hadn't ended well. His mind had conjured up a version of his family's last day and it had been violent and ugly. He noticed his hands were shaking and he felt a terrible pain in his gut. *Was it the water? Have I been poisoned by the water?*

Finally, he realized he was hungry. He hadn't eaten for a full day, and he had no

spare fat on him for his body to metabolize. He looked over and saw the furry rat still there as ugly as ever and now smelling foul as well. His body involuntarily convulsed at the thought of eating the rodent, but he felt weak and knew he didn't have the strength to find or kill a more appetizing game in the hills around them.

Reluctantly, he crawled over and took the offering. He smelled it and nearly gagged again. *Now, what am I going to do with this?* The rhutz didn't respond but just watched with great interest as Sandee continued to inspect the creature. Finally, he got out his knife and began to skin it. When he was done, it was no more appetizing and he certainly wasn't going to eat it raw. Not only would that be disgusting, but the rodent would likely be carrying a whole host of infectious diseases. Sandee finally decided he'd have to make a fire and cook the meat to be safe.

He remembered seeing a partially charred tree just outside the entrance to the cave. He wondered if he dared try to find his way out. The rhutz stood up like he had read Sandee's mind, and headed in the direction in which they had come. Sandee struggled to catch up. After a few loons, the light began to filter into the cave indicating to Sandee that they were close to the entrance. Sandee breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped out of the darkness into the dim light of Clarion, Tarizon's largest moon.

His eyes lifted to the hazy red jewel in the sky and a sense of foreboding washed over him again. After pondering the feeling a few tiks, he shook his head to break the trance and looked around for the charred wood. Spotting it, he broke off an adequate supply and stacked it in a square configuration like he'd seen his father do a hundred times over. Then he stuffed the center of the structure with small twigs and leaves for quick combustion. Finally, he took a stone out of his pocket and began striking it against the backside of his knife. A steady stream of sparks began to fall onto a flat piece of charred wood. A moment later it began to smolder and smoke rose into the air. He blew on the embers until they had sufficiently spread and then he dropped the charred wood into the leaves and small twigs. A tik later he had a blazing fire.

After cutting off the vermin's ugly head, he soon was roasting his dinner on a stick and eating it gingerly. It tasted horrible but felt good in his stomach. He looked over at the rhutz, who hadn't taken his eyes off his new friend for a moment, and smiled. Thank you.

Once Sandee had eaten, he went over the day's events in his mind. He didn't understand why his family had been murdered. *Why didn't the soldiers just take what they wanted and leave my family alone? What was the point of killing them?*

"Skutz!" he screamed angrily.

The rhutz stood up and walked over to him. Fear shot through Sandee's body. "Sorry, friend," he said aloud. "I'm not mad at you."

The rhutz inched closer and looked directly into Sandee's eyes. Their eyes locked and Sandee suddenly felt a rush of energy through his mind. He closed his eyes and tried to shake off the sensation but it only intensified. He held his head with both hands, fearing it would explode if he didn't, then he began to twitch and shake violently. A jolt of fear shot through him.

"What are you doing to me?" he screamed as he scrambled away from the rhutz in fear and terror. After a few tiks, the rhutz backed off and sat a few strides away. Sandee took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He could feel his heart pounding from the pain of his splitting headache.

"What did you do to me?" he asked angrily.

The rhutz just stared back at him without making a sound. Suddenly, the fire exploded into a magnificent display of glowing embers. He looked at it in awe, mesmerized

by a thousand points of light seemingly hovering in suspended animation. Sandee's eyelids became heavy. He struggled to keep them open but to no avail. They involuntarily closed and his mind opened to a desolate landscape that he recognized.

It was Lake Orage that once supplied water to Lago Lat. During the nuclear missile attack, one of the bombs hit near the lake and created an explosion so hot that it evaporated the entire lake in a few ticks. Since it had been an artificial lake and the dam had been destroyed, the lake did not refill after the explosion. Now it was flat, dry, and without vegetation. What appeared to be an old man in a brown robe stood tall with his hands raised to the sky. The ground shook and his voice echoed over the land as He spoke.

"I am Pelgrem, God of Pharidon and all the multiverse. The human inhabitants of Tarizon, through their selfishness and greed, are destroying this wondrous planet which was my gift to them. Unless a leader emerges soon to restore sanity to the human race, all will be lost."

Sandee said nothing, being completely thunderstruck and overwhelmed by the images before him. The rhutz walked over and sat at Sandee's side. Sandee looked down at him curiously.

"You, Sandee Brahn, are Tarizon's last hope," Pelgrem continued. "You must go forth and lead the people of Tarizon out of the shadow of doom and into the glorious light of peace and renewal."

Sandee swallowed hard. He wasn't sure if Pelgrem would allow him to speak but he felt he must try. "But how could I possibly do what you ask? I am but an orphan child without even food for my next meal."

"You have a quick mind and a kind heart. You are one of but a few humans on Tarizon who have not been corrupted by other humans. I have ordered the rhutz to provide you with food, water, counsel, and protection while you work to bring the human race to its senses. Do not fear, although the journey will be long and treacherous, you are resourceful and have what it takes to save mankind."

"But what do I tell them?" Sandee pressed.

"Tell them their God Pelgrem is here with them on Tarizon and is watching over them. Tell them they must turn from selfishness and greed, and respect and cherish all that I have created. For it is my will that there be peace, justice, and liberty on Tarizon and that the world be returned to its original wonder and splendor. Go forth and do as I command!"

The ground shook again and a lightning bolt struck the ground beside them. Sandee closed his eyes and turned away quickly from the blinding flash of light. Suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw bombs falling and exploding around him. People were screaming, moaning and crying out in great pain and despair. In the distance he saw glowing mushroom clouds billowing up into the sky, planes crashing, forests burning, troops marching, and people dying everywhere.

When he opened his eyes, Pelgrem was gone and he was back in the cave. He looked curiously at the flickering light of the campfire and the rhutz sleeping nearby. *Was that a dream? Or, was I really visited by the almighty Pelgrem himself?* It didn't feel like anything had changed. He tried to dismiss the dream. *But what if it is true?* He wondered about this until weariness overcame him and he fell asleep. Again vivid dreams came to him, and he saw Tarizon as it had been given to mankind at the beginning of time. He marveled at the clear air, bright sun, high mountains, never-ending plains, gorgeous deserts, and vast oceans, and then understood what God expected of him. When he awoke, he remembered his dreams and wondered how he could accomplish such an impossible task.

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