The Tree Farm av Paul Hathcoat

'Dancing on the Dead'

Chapter 1 ~ Sybarinian Devil Dancers

"Robert, sit with me."

"Have I done something wrong?" I try to look stunned. I knew he would find out. He always does. He probably knows exactly what I did, but which wrongful deed, I have no idea. There are many. Father may raise his voice, but to his credit has never physically or mentally abused me. He has withheld food.

"No, you haven't done anything wrong today," he carefully references his timepiece, "that I know of. Come sit with your father." He beckons with a friendly wave, broken smile, and watery, bloodshot eyes.

Deeply concerned, I sit with my dear father. "You look sad." I've seen him cry. I know this melancholy mood. He misses my mothers.

"This might be my last night on Sybaris."

"I knew it. You're shipping out. When are you leaving?" I focus on him with an extremely concerned expression.

"Hang on to that thought," commands Father. "It's seventeen-hundred." The drinking lamp is lit. His attitude improves. There's dancing to be done. Father rushes to the galley and enthusiastically extracts a frosty cold bottle of Sybarinian Red Devil Dancers™ dark amber ale from the beverage chiller. If he counts the bottles, I'm a dead man.

Father sits back down, takes a healthy swig of cold beer, and says, "Aah, that's good. Dust off tomorrow at eleven-hundred."

"Where are you going?"

"It's classified."

"Am I coming with you?"

"No." He glares.

"You're going back to Caesuria."

"Who told you?" He snaps upright in surprise.

"No one, I read the signs." I'm smug and very pleased with myself. I'm a Sybarinian-Atlantian hybrid. I see things. I hear things. I know many things.

"What signs?" He asks.

"I realized you were going on a long campaign when you hired Eleni."

Father glances around the luxurious twenty-four cabin containment complex he warmly refers to as the Overlook. "The place needed cleaning. Your clothes are a mess, and I like a good home-cooked meal, don't you?"

"True. How about this? You reported for duty twice last week wearing your jungle Ghillie."

"A flight captain must be prepared for any eventuality."

"Is that why you took your shotgun out of the gun-safe? I say you're training for jungle warfare, and the nearest Jungle-Class planet is Caesuria."

"You can't come. End of story." Father glugs his grog.

"I'm not afraid." I stand in defiance, "I will kill the Goddess damn mutants that killed my mothers," I scream in red-faced rage.

"Settle down, and watch your mouth when talking about your mothers," Father thunders.

"Yes, Sir," I sit and sulk.

"Robert, look at me. I'm going on a dangerous military mission, not some frilly-family, Sunday-sunrise, joy-ride across the desert in spring bloom. In all likelihood, there will be casualties, and my favorite son will not be one of them." He gesticulates; you're number one with his beer bottle.

"I'm your favorite son? I don't recall you mentioning any other sons."

Father takes a deep draft and swallows with self-satisfaction, "You are my only son." He hastens to add, "That I know of, on this planet, in this timeline. There may be others."

"Others? Please explain."

"Open your mind. There is an infinite number of possible Roberts living in an infinite number of possible universes. You are bound to have brothers in some dimension."

"We're not talking about the multiverse. Does that mean I'm your only son or not?" I'm still confused, and now I'm irritated with his little game.

He hesitates, "There's something I need to tell you."

"Here we go. What's the bad news? I've had more than my share, but I want more. I can't get enough of it." My blood boils. I'm going feral in another minute.

"Relax, there's no bad news." He smiles and sips his brew. "It's all good."

"Good? Let me guess. I've got a mutant half-brother named Blob on some backwash planet you once laid to waste with your white angels of radioactive death. But you stuck around afterward just long enough to doink a pretty glow-in-the-dark survivor," I accuse.

"Blob," Father chuckles. He doesn't use primitive nuclear weapons, and there are never any survivors.

"What's so funny?"

"You have it all wrong," Father insists.

"I understand loneliness, and I sympathize, but I'm telling you upfront, man to man, I don't want some mutant that looks like a hideous version of you to come knocking on that door, ever. So help me, Goddess, I'll call base security and have it quarantined." I cross my arms and scowl.

Father smiles. His eyes light with loving pride, "In this universe, you are my only son. You're my most precious treasure. Please understand I wanted many strong, handsome, and brave sons just like you to carry our essence into the future."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning this," Father takes a deep breath. "I have a wife on Port-Dawn, and you have three beautiful half-sisters."

I'm shocked, "Did my mothers know?"

"Of course they did, and by the way, all my wives and daughters want to meet you someday," Father smiles.

"All of them? Why haven't you told me?"

"I'm telling you now. You're old enough to know."

Wow, what an instant eye-opener. My father, Western Fleet Commander, Gilbert Ganymede Wog, sails starships across the outer rim of the galaxy, hunts Zumans, collects treasure, takes

exotic wives on distant planets, and sires hybrid super children like me, only girls. I want Father's job. "Take me with you."

"You're not ready," he says.

"For girls?"

"For battle." His eyes glass over.

I know I'm not ready. I've seen the utter horrors of Nyt in father's eyes, but I gather my courage, leap to my feet, face him, and stare into his cold blue eyes. "I'm a Seeker. I'm a warrior. I was born to lead an army of Titans into battle, and on to victory, and on to glory!" I reach for the light in the east. "It is written in the stars," I clasp my shoulders in prayer, close my eyes, and bow my head.

"You're a Goddess damn fourteen-year-old junior-cadet, and you are going to finish school or so help me, I'll cut your allowance, take away the keys to your bike, and you can take the bus to school. Furthermore, I don't give a damn what some flower lady said to you in a dream."

"The dream is real. So is Su." I sit and stew. "The last time you cut my allowance, I almost starved to death."

"You don't have to eat at Minka's every day. There's food in the galley. Eat it, shut up, and be grateful. You don't know a Goddess damn thing about deprivation. You've never once gone a day without a meal, a roof over your head, or a soft bed to sleep in."

"I was stranded in space."

"And whose fault was that?"

Father shames me. "I'm sorry."

Father contemplates his bottle, looks up, smiles, throws a long, strong arm over my shoulder, and draws me near to his side. "What do you want to do with the life Goddess has given you?"

"I want to fly starships."

"Start learning how." He slurps the red foam oozing from the Devil's fountain and chokes it down with a smile. "It's not that complicated."

"Start where?"

"This fall, specialize in Light High-Speed-Transport. If you want to travel through space, time, and dimension, it's your ticket to the top." Father points his bottle skyward.

"That's what I want."

"Don't get too excited. You need to qualify first."

"How do I qualify?"

"Captain Omri Imogee commands Blue Wing. He's a good man. He's my first recommendation. We fought side by side in sixty-five. If you show interest, ability, and aptitude, he'll let you try out for flight school."

"Are you sure? I imagine he has access to my criminal record."

"Yep," Father guarantees with a wink.

"Captain Imogee's an Altarian. I like Altarians."

"So do I. They're humans you can trust. Your mothers and I visited Altair when you were a baby." Father smiles at the memory, then turns deathly sullen.

"Father, I want to fight the Zumans."

"That's not what your mothers and I wanted for you. Fate gave me no other choice, but you can still choose." Father hangs his head and sighs.

"I believe you wanted more for me, but I'm perfectly okay with killing Zumans. I like the idea. You did not fail me. Now get a grip," I squeeze father's wrist as hard as I can to drive home my point. "Where do I start?"

Father reanimates. "First, you must learn how to kill. Slaughtering a snarling red-eyed demon with your bare hands is very different than glassing a nest from orbit. Either way is fine, but you must begin with hand-to-hand combat."

"I'm in. Teach me the Art of War."

"Ede Rhodan will be your instructor. I'm out of here tomorrow."

"You said he died."

"Billy Rhodan was killed by Zumans in seventy-six. Ede's their oldest son, and he's agreed, against his better judgment, to take you on as an apprentice this fall."

"What's his better judgment?"

"He doesn't think you're ready. He thinks you're a hotshot, and that you need to chill."

"Tell Ede I'm cool."

"I told him all about you, so consider yourself lucky. Ede was with me during the First Caesurian Campaign. He took a battlefield promotion after his sergeant was cut in two by a scranchula at White Stick Creek. Ede's going to train you in close contact combat, and more importantly, he'll continue your Fling-Chee lessons. Did you do your breath kata today?"

"I swam laps at Temple Pool."

"What else have you been up to?" Father is suspicious.

I tell the truth. "I dove cauldron ledge and looked for lunkers. Didn't see any."

"Lunkers?"

"Yes, father."

"How deep did you go?"

"One-hundred, I don't know, it was dark."

"You're going to run into something very nasty down there one of these days. Be careful."

"Yes, father."

"Swimming is good, but a flight captain must be master certified in Fling-Chee. Get your basics out of the way."

"Will I get to work with Sigs?" Sigs are my heroes. I have an action figure on my desk.

"Damn straight, if you can't work with a Sig, you might as well stay home and knit doilies."

I laugh. Knitting sounds girly. "We love Sigs."

"Yes, we do. Sigs are cunning, clever, and dimensionally intuitive, but they're more than a cruel quarter-ton of armor-plated death. They have a sunny, warm, sensitive side. You should get to know one if you can. On a personal level," Father nurses his bottle.

"I want one for my best friend."

"Who wouldn't? I've got frames for six more Sigs on order. My tech team is working as fast as they can, but crystal cores and titanate shells take time to fabricate. I'll let you in on a little secret, but you can't tell anyone," Father confides.

"I promise."

He leans in and whispers, "The Maker is working on a quantum cradle for a lightweight fast-attack female. He calls her Sigurity. She'll tip the scales at two-sixty."

My hormone-saturated adolescent mind runs amok with erotic images of Sigurity, the beautiful, titanium-titanate goddess of war, which reminds me, "Who will take care of me and the Overlook while you are gone?" I hope and pray it's Eleni. Goddess, I beg you, let it be Eleni.

"You're old enough to take care of yourself, and like it or not, Eleni is coming by at least once a week. Her responsibility is to manage the Overlook, not babysit you. Your responsibility

is to exercise, eat right, and get to class on time. Father polishes off his beer and heads for the galley.

"No need to sell me on it. I don't mind if Eleni comes over every day. She's nice."

"She's an angel." Father takes another bottle of Devil Dancers from the chiller. Can I snag you anything while I'm up, juice box?"

"Since you're leaving tomorrow, and since we're having a father-son talk about responsibility and such, could I drink a Devil Dancers with you?"

Father furrows his brow and nods, "You'll be the man of the house while I'm on gone. If you're old enough for that kind of responsibility, then you're old enough to have a beer with your father." He grabs another bottle of Devil Dancers from the chiller and a fresh five-pound can of salt-roasted nuts from the cabinet.

"Here you go. Remember to eat something when you drink. Don't let your mind post toasty. A lot of my friends did."

"Thank you." I gratefully accept the bottle of Devil Dancers. I'm drinking my first officially sanctioned beer with my father, 'The Legend'. I'm a man.

The Legend of the Devil Dancer is true, especially to the men that were at the Battle of White Stick Creek.

I did not witness the battle. I was only five at the time. I did, however, see Father's reaction to the news my beloved mothers who were on an interplanetary mission of mercy were attacked, raped, tortured, and eaten alive by Zumans raiders.

Father tracked the creatures to the planet Caesuria, and systemically exterminated tens of thousands. His descriptions of the slaughter are graphic. In my early formative years, he retold my favorite stories many times.

"Pools of blood and piles of bodies covered the ground. We collected their weapons and left the stinking carcasses to feed the bugs."

"Did you see bugs?" I snuggle comfy pillow and pull fuzzy blankie up under my chin.

"Good Goddess, yes, scranchulas, and skultulas as big as your bunk, grrr," Father playfully growls and tickle claws at me. "Mean damn things, they bite off your arms and legs, then eat you alive and screaming."

I pull the covers over my head.

"Are you sleepy, Son?"

"No, I'm hiding." I cautiously peek from under my fuzzy blankie. "Tell me about the bugs," I plead.

"They came by the thousands." Father stares into the void. "Overnight, they picked the remains clean, and the hot sun bleached the bones white. And that's how the battle of White Stick Creek got its name. Skeleton bones. The end. Now tuck in little Robot, bedtime stories are over for tonight." Father bends in and kisses my forehead. "Goodnight, I love you."

"Father, what shall we drink to?" I ask.

"To Justitia," Father respectfully raises his bottle.

"Justitia. I love her, father."

"We both do."

We clink bottles. I take a thoughtful sip. The beer is cool, delicious, and satisfying, and further opens a line of mature father-son communication. "Father, can we talk about girls for a minute?"

"We can talk about anything you like for as long as you like. What's on your mind?"

"Do you think Eleni is pretty?"

"Eleni is beautiful. Why do you ask?"

"I'm glad you hired her." Eleni's relatively new weekly domestic visits are looked forward to in eager, aroused, anticipation.

"You'll be in good hands. Treat Eleni with respect and dignity," growls Father. "That's not a suggestion."

"Yes, Sir."

"Try to make her life a little easier, a little brighter, a little happier."

"I'll try my hardest."

Father continues his lecture. "For one thing, try putting your dirty dishes in the sink and your dirty clothes in the laundry. I'm leaving a detailed list of orders and instructions."

"I'll redouble my efforts."

"Good. I have faith in you. Robert, there's something about Eleni I need to tell you."

"Me first," I gasp for breath and hold it.

"Speak."

"I love Eleni. I want to marry her."

"Whoa, hold your horses, son." Father sets his bottle down on the coffee table.

I deflate. He disapproves of a match made in heaven. My love song will never be sung. I will die lonely, without love, without music, a sad virgin staring at his reflection in the wishing pond. "I don't want a caretaker, I want a mate," I snip, and I want her now.

"Eleni's too old for you, but there's something more important you should know about her."

"Wait what's too old for me? I'd like to know. Eleni seems like a perfect mate for a guy my age. She's pretty, shapely, cleans, and makes my food."

"You two haven't talked much, have you?" Father questions.

"No, she's usually gone when I get home from school. But I don't care how old she is." I snarl at the hand that feeds me.

Father stares. "Go on."

"Eleni challenges me. She's brilliant and beautiful. I want that in a mate. I want her. How old is she?"

"Oh, dear Goddess, how old is my Eleni? I should know this. What did she put down on her security clearance? Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, hell, it doesn't matter she's not the right girl for you, find someone else."

"You think I haven't been trying?" I growl. "What's wrong with ten years older? I don't care how old she is, I love her. Eleni is perfect. She will be my queen." The Devils are kicking in, I want to dance.

"Settle down and listen a minute. Aren't there any girls at the academy you like?"

"Sure, I like them all."

"There you go. Problem solved."

"Father," I strain, "Everyone's gone on summer vacation. I want a girlfriend to do stuff with now, not in three months."

"What kind of stuff?"

I shrug. "I don't know, hiking, biking, swimming, hanging out. I just want someone to talk to."

"What about your little AI friend, Haley?

"She has to work for the next twenty years."

"Sorry I can't help you then."

"If Eleni is too old, then my age is the only limitation."

"You're fourteen, the answer is no." Father takes a swig of beer and chases the bitterness with a handful of nuts.

I can't argue with his math, I'm fourteen-metric years old. "I'll be fifteen at the end of the month." Nuts look good, I

want some too. I grab a handful and chomp. These things are delicious. I carry a Zippy Nut Bag™ mixed nuts and dried bingo-berries in my backpack for nutritious, on-the-go snacking.

"Eleni is the perfect human." I crunch my nuts," spitting nut particles as I over-pronounced the P in perfect. I wash the chunky nut-buttery goodness down with a swig of cool Devil Dancers. "Ahh," I enjoy.

"No, she's not, she's..."

"Father," I groan. "You're not listening to me. I have a plan."

Father groans, "I'm listening. Plan Alpha is not your only option. Do you have a plan, Beta, Gamma, or Delta in place? Do you think that's air you're breathing?"

"I don't have another plan at the moment. Wait, what am I breathing?"

Father scratches his three-day unshaven chin in thoughtful contemplation. "If you're ready to meet lovely, intelligent, young ladies, several of my senior staff members have daughters, but they wouldn't let you near their girls without an armed escort."

"Why? I can be trusted."

Father smiles, he knows I cannot.

"Who can I meet?"

"They all want to meet you someday. First on the list is Captain Imogee's oldest daughter. She's your age, smart, and pretty. Omri said she asked about you. "

"When?"

"Before she left on her summer-school field trip. Where did Omri say Po was going this summer? Darg'Dnalsi, I think."

"You said we would go to Darg'Dnalsi someday. I would go now."

"We'll go there when this damn Zuman business is over. I want you to see it. There is no other planet like it in the quadrant."

"Who else do you have in mind?" I take a big gulp of beer. Some froth spills on my shirt and leaves a brown dribble stain. I'm a slob, I know it. My mothers didn't teach me table manners. They were dead.

"Captain Zothan on Port Dawn. We attended flight school together and fought side by side on Caesuria in the summer of sixty-five." Father reverently tips his bottle.

"Oh goody," I cup my palms. "Let's start with his girl."

"Good Goddess, Son, its girls. Z's got two red Altarian wives and a flock of pretty mix breed daughters. No sons, not one. He always wanted a boy, but I don't think he cares anymore. He loves and spoils those girls. There's a pack of wild, happy ginger snaps living with him by the lake. I'll ask him for specifics the next time I speak to him."

"When's that?"

"Soon. I'll see Zee in the next three months or so."

"Three months? Are you out of your mind? Isn't there anyone closer?"

"Further out there's Q. His daughter's name is Oreon. Q and his wife are Lumarian-Adepts, handsome people, wise, empathetic, beyond genius. But don't plan on meeting Oreon anytime soon. They live on Saturacon, and you don't want to travel through Zuman controlled space just for a girlfriend."

I'm downcast and take a less than cautious draught of ale to drown my sorrows.

"Cheer up, there's one more option. Captain Tommy Walker has an adorable little copper tone blonde named Auria. She's a pureblood Sybarinian and someone to look forward to, but she's

way too young now. Give her ten years on the timeline. You'll meet her someday, I promise.

"That's it, that's all I've got for you." Captain Gil drinks to Plan Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. "Don't look at me in that tone of voice. You come up with plan Delta."

"Your plans are useless. Why would you even suggest them? I'm lonely now, not in ten years," I scowl.

"You're impatient, I understand."

"I don't think you do understand. I want to explore intimate interpersonal communication with someone I love."

"Do you? What does that mean?" Captain Gil questions.

"I don't know, I learned it in school."

"Son, I get lonely too. You're a healthy young man, and it's only natural to have urges, needs, and desires at your age. Give it some time. Believe me, I know. I was your age once. You'll meet someone perfect someday when you least expect it."

"Pursuant to my light high-speed transport plan, what are the best classes to meet girls in?"

"Good question," Father nods in approval. "Take aquaculture, ocean biome, and tactical swim. You'll need to certify in all three to earn a midshipman's commission."

"I love the Temple pool. I was there all afternoon."

"I can tell, you got some sun today," Father smiles, "Well, there you go, you can run around half-naked, meet half-naked girls, and improve your mind all in one fell swoop.

"Sign up for Captain McVail's class. He's the best of the best. We fought the Frogs together under Oceana in seventy-one. Goddess, it was a wet one." Father stares at the floor and bites his knuckle reliving some awful memory. "You'll need a shload more math," he adds, then empties his bottle.

"I'm signed up for spherical-trig this fall. We get to make geodesic models, bridges, space docks, spheres, and domes."

"Good, don't forget languages."

"Jaa, min-boor." I purse my lips exhaling the oor. "Altair Uma see-oop." I drag the O and pop the P.

"Damn, you sound just like one of them," Father comments.

Draining the last drop of my first official Devil Dancers with my father, I spring to my feet, too fast, and do the wobble dance. The ethanol in my empty belly bursts into flames. I'm lit, and I'm going to get toasted with my father tonight. I may never see him again. "I'll have another. Can I grab you one?"

"One more dance with the devil." Father gazes hypnotically. Is it sadness I see in his eyes, or is it a dimension beyond time?

"Skipper?" I snap my fingers.

Father wanders back from eternity and smiles upon his son. "Pull out what Eleni made us for dinner. I told her to make something special tonight."

"There's a shipload of food in here," I regard the cornucopia of food filling the chiller.

"Eleni's going to take good care of you while I'm gone. I promise you won't starve."

I hand Father his third Devil Dancers and sit happily with my second. I close my eyes.

I hear tortured screams, cries for mercy, and the agony of those who lay dying. I see fire leaping and dancing.

I shake the awful vision from my mind. I only like happy visions. "How long is Eleni staying?" I gulp my grog.

"I asked that very question earlier today and guess what she said."

"I don't know, tell me."

"She said she will stay, and she's vowed to love, serve, protect, and never leave you."

"Never? That's a long time."

"It's until the end of days," Father clarifies.

"Serve goes without saying. Protect, don't make me laugh. Love, love is good." Love is what I want.

"Eleni loves you, Robert."

That's touching. I'm loved by someone other than myself. "Father, I love her too. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Where's she living?"

"At the Visiting Officers Quarters."

"Eleni doesn't have to live at the VOQ, we have tons of room. Invite her to stay here in one of our empty cabins," I suggest.

"Yes, I'll ask her if she'd like to move in." Captain Gil makes a command decision.

"Ask her tonight, Skipper. I will respect her privacy, I promise," I lie.

"I know you will. I specifically chose Eleni to care for you and keep you in line. She has a lot to teach you, she will help make you a better man."

Smiling devils dance in my head, tears of joy fill my eyes, what a happy surprise. My father, in His infinite love and wisdom, has selected the perfect bride and brought her to me. Eleni's love will fill the emptiness in my heart with laughter and joy.

"I'll miss you, Father." I tip my bottle and drain the remaining contents of my second Sybarinian Red Devil Dancers.

"Robert."

"Yo," I belch.

"Hold up here a second. Do you remember the part of our heart to heart, father-son talk where you said, "may I please have a beer, I'll drink it slowly" and the part later on where I said you have sisters? Because I think we got separated back there."

"No, maybe."

"There's something I've been trying to tell you about Eleni."

"What?" I keel over on the couch. Whoopee, we're all going to die.

"Eleni's your half-sister."

"Sister?" I slobber. "Seriously?"

"She's your half-sister, Hotshot. Eleni has her mother's beauty, but I'm warning you, behind her good looks is ugly street mean. She's a stick of molecular explosive waiting to go off. Do not shake, rattle, or roll. Boom, baby."

I sit up sobered by the news Eleni is my sister and that she's a psycho. "Thanks for the warning." I peer into my empty brown bottle. The Devils have escaped and are dancing around the room. Nuts, I want nuts.

"You're welcome. Happy to be of service," Father tip's his bottle in a Devil Dancer salute.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I crunch and sputter nut chunks.

"I've been trying to tell you the last half-hour."

"I mean before today." I think my feelings are hurt.

"She's heard the stories about you and didn't think she'd like you," he chuckles. "She asked me to wait, so I waited."

My feelings are intact. The stories are true. Eleni was wise to wait. "Father, call Eleni and order her to move in

tonight. She should be here with her family, not alone at the VOQ. Let's go get her."

"We will, and I'm proud of you, Son."

Father pulls out his communicator and shushes me with a finger to his lips.

"Eleni, sweetheart, it's Daddy.

"Nothing's wrong. Would you like to come over?

"Not to work silly, to move in.

"I told him. He says he loves you and wants you here.

"I know he does.

"I can be over in a half-hour.

"Let me ask him," father covers the mouthpiece. "Eleni says there's a cute red-headed Ebo-6 orphan girl your age staying at the Visiting Students' Quarters. She wants to know if she can bring her over for dinner."

Does father look for my approval? I vote, yes. "Bring her over," I wave a flaming flourish into the sky. I adore redheads if they're not too tall or toothy. Grabbing another heaping handful of nuts, I head to the galley for some serious food.

"Robert says yes," Father smiles. "Of course, she's more than welcome too. Bring her along if she wants to come.

"I know, sweetheart, it's been difficult for all of us, don't cry. Get ready as soon as you can."

"I love you too, Angel. Bye-bye."

Father flips off and pockets his communicator. "I'll be back with the girls in about an hour. Go easy on those damn Dancers, Hotshot, and put on a clean shirt," Father commands.

"I want to go," I plead.

"Not looking like that."

"I'm sorry; I didn't know we were entertaining tonight."

"Wash the drool off your face, suit-up, and make it snappy. I roll in five minutes with or without you. Don't have me be hanging around, boy. Move it."

"I'm moving." I hesitate a moment to snitch a generous sample of smoked fish lovingly prepared by the hands of my very own brand-new half-sister.

"Robert, your sky-blue jump-shirt looks good on you; wear that one for the girls."

"What's her friend's name, Skipper?" I race to my room with a mouth full of fish.

"Sara."