

THE PALADIN CODE
THE HUNTED
2ND EDITION



An Epic Science Fiction Adventure

Bradley C. Heer

THE PALADIN CODE

BOOK IV

THE HUNTED

2ND EDITION

THE EPIC
SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE
CONTINUES . . .

Bradley C. Heer

FictionFun™ Publishing

THE PALADIN CODE • THE HUNTED

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THE PALADIN CODE • THE HUNTED

For Family



Thank you for all the support and love.

To my family, who were always there for me.

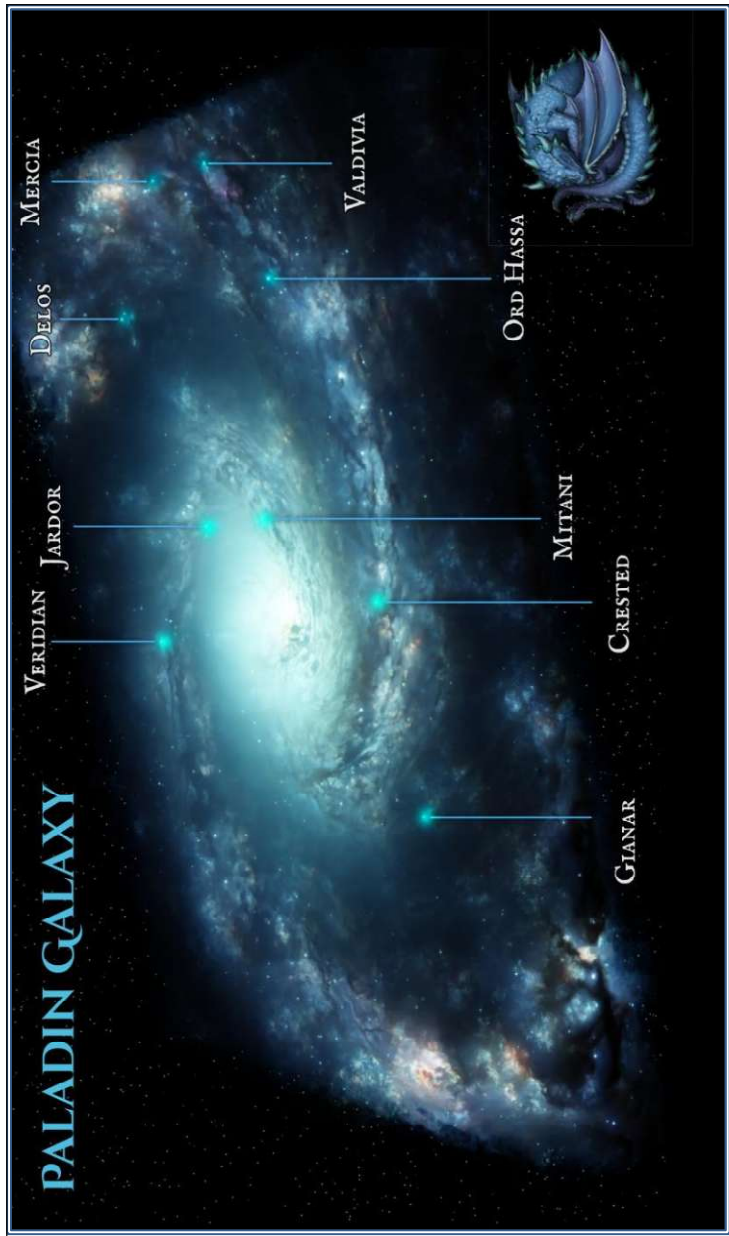
To my editors, who have endured my imperfections.

To my friends, who encouraged me through the years.

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THE GALAXY



*Freedom is nothing
but the distance
between the
hunter and the hunted . . .*

Bei Dao

PROLOGUE

*PALADIA • OSCAILTE • ABDITUS • IANUA •
EFFUGERE • TRI • PORTA*

The two moved quietly through the dark streets of the capital on Jardor. Their hooded forms kept their faces hidden from the street cams. They moved casually, but an experienced eye would be able to observe that they tended to move from shadow to shadow.

The Gang Un Shea district of the capital wasn't the best neighborhood. It was where the maids and servants of the wealthy lived, in the shadow of the mansions and high-rises of the rich. The two slipped through a back alley to knock on a worn, blue wooden door. The door opened, and they entered a small antechamber. A bot appeared on a screen.

“Who knocks?” asked the bot.

A male voice answered with worry in his voice, “Paladia, Kofar, Librium, Silveria, Operaria, Nova, Vita.”

The screen darkened at those words. Had they been rejected? The smaller figure looked behind her. She thought she heard something on the street. Had they been followed?

Desperation and fear had brought them this far. Sensing his partner's nervousness, the taller figure reached down to take her hand. “It will be all right. We are almost there.”

CHAPTER I

— CRESTED —

Hunter sat upon his steed and gazed down the long, snow-covered valley that lay before him. The peaks of the Gray Mountains on his home planet of Crested towered above him. Everything appeared to be peaceful as he breathed in the cool mountain air, but Hunter couldn't shake a chill in his soul that was more than just the cold. He felt as if the landscape had been altered. He felt as if the mountains were watching him.

He had returned to his family and the familiar haunts of his childhood. Castor and Pollux, Hunters' hounds, sniffed the air. The mountain goats bleated in the cool air, carrying packs full of supplies for their stay at the summer cabin.

The goats were just one of several breeds of livestock his family bred. They raised bovines for meat and leather, and morinos for their wool. There were several different milk-producing animals. The ranch was large, encompassing over a hundred thousand units of farmland and forests that covered some of the most productive upland areas on Crested. It straddled one of the highest mountain ranges on the planet.

Hunter was brought back to the present by the sound of the goats' bells. The goats were great pack animals. They require very little water and feed on the grasses along the trail. Since they were herd animals, they naturally stayed with Hunter. If something were to spook them, they would come running to him. No chasing them down if they happened upon a predator.

Hunter raised his binoculars to give the valley a good look before descending into it. He didn't like surprises, especially this far up into the mountains. This was ursis territory. The great bears ruled over the mountains. Hunter and his family had long understood that this was the animals' land, and humans were just here temporarily. The spring thaw had begun, and the bovines would come up to the high mountain meadows to feed on the new growth.

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The valley was the traditional summer grazing grounds of his family's bovine herd. He had spent many months in the small cabin and forest that surrounded it as his cattle grazed and fattened during the summer.

Clarissa would join him in a few days. She and his mother were going to the annual craft fair. The two had been making items to sell for several months. They had become close while Hunter had been wandering the jungles of Veridian. He had helped them load up that morning for the weekend-long event at the city market. There had been coats, cloaks, hats, and packs. Clarissa had been exploring a completely new experience in clothing design. She had found creative energy in designing for the fair with Hunter's mother, who sold quilts and knitted scarves.

This time alone would be good for Hunter. He wanted to wrap his mind around what had happened over the last several months on Veridian. The entire experience had shaken his world and turned what he thought he knew about the galaxy upside down.

Hunter turned his mount down the trail. He would have just enough time to get to the cabin and open it up for the season. He wanted to settle the goats and horse into the barn for the night as well.

High on the ridge crest, a giant ursus stood watch as the human and his animals descended into the valley. The old ursus had watched every spring for countless years as they had come from the forests below his mountain kingdom. He tolerated their presence because they brought good food, but he didn't want much to do with them. He would go down after dark and patrol the valley, taking a look around the cabin.

The large mammal stomped the ground, sending its brown fur rippling across its muscular body. The silver-tipped fur blew in a breeze that spoke of a coming rain. He would descend and settle in for the night in the pine forest below. The great bear could run into the valley within minutes, but the human and his livestock would take hours to get down,

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so the ursis sauntered over to a grassy patch overlooking the valley to watch Hunter's progress.

— INDEPENDENT SYSTEMS —

The Stardust bustled with people who had come for the concert and to play at the game tables. Silvia sat up at a corner table on the second floor of the main gallery. She didn't have a show tonight, so she was relaxing in a quiet corner of the ship. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Silvia tapped into the spirit and let her consciousness drift to check on those she was called to protect.

There was Tim up in the techno booth that Jixx had made for him. He was getting ready for his music and light show later tonight. Tim had developed a name for himself in the EDM world. He was known as T-Man. Silvia smiled as she scanned Tim's spirit. It was bright and golden with pleasure as he went over the last-minute details of the show. Tim's shows were known for their sensory narratives. Instead of a drug-induced overload, he guided his guests through a story that left them often in a state of peace. Many of the guests experienced a release of emotions and burdens. His shows were always sold out.

Silvia moved on to the gaming tables, where Conner was supervising security. She sensed that he was scanning a suspicious guest. Silvia looked over his shoulder, so to speak. Sure enough, the guest was using a grifter device to cheat at the wheel game. Conner made a subtle hand gesture, which sent two of Jixx's toughs into action. The device was quickly found, and the alien was escorted out. Conner left the gaming area, which was being shut down for the evening, to sit at a table upstairs with Scrap. Silvia had to correct herself. Scrap had taken the name Ari.

Silvia let her spirit drift away from Ari and Conner. She hovered over the bar where Amira was making some drinks for the staff before the main event. Silvia listened in.

"You have become very good at mixing," said Elizabeth, who was referring to Amira's bar-tending skills.

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“Thank you. Jixx and the boys have taught me all they know. Yesterday, my sommelier’s license came when we stopped at Aldar,” said Amira. Elizabeth high-fived her. Amira slid a cocktail over to Elizabeth. “I’ve been working on a new mix. It’s nonalcoholic, with energy juice made from itsy beans. Since you are my best taster, please give it a try.”

Elizabeth looked at the bright blue drink that was in a martini glass. The jelly-like itsy beans floated on the surface like ice cubes. She stirred it with her finger, causing the clear beans to glow a bright blue and purple. Elizabeth smiled. She tasted a drop of the drink from her finger. The girl looked up at nothing in particular, savoring the latest of Amira’s flavorful creations. “Yumm,” said Elizabeth.

“Yumm? That’s all?” asked Amira.

Elizabeth grinned teasingly. “It’s cool, refreshing, and tingly. I love the fruity flavors along with the zing from the itsy beans. It’s sure to be a hit. What are you calling it?” asked Elizabeth.

“I’m calling it a blue itsy,” replied Amira.

Jixx hurried over to where they were standing. The diminutive little mammal rushed over to Elizabeth with a holo pad in tow. He began showing her the supply requests. She reassured Jixx that the supplies had already been ordered. Jixx had found out that Elizabeth had a knack for running things, coming from a large farm family, so he had made her the entertainment manager. The two of them walked off toward the entrance to the Stardust.

Up above, Conner chuckled.

“What is so funny?” asked Ari.

“Jixx,” replied Conner.

“He does have a way about him,” said Ari, who had known the little alien the longest. “He can be very generous, and very demanding.”

“I wonder how long we’ll keep doing this?” asked Conner.

“I have a feeling that our time here is going to come to a sudden end,” replied Ari.

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“Why do you think that?” inquired Conner.

Ari got a faraway look in his eyes. “Umm, just a feeling. We do have the Paladin Library crystals to find, so we can restore The Paladin Library.”

“I have been looking into some of the planets where Silvia said the crystals are located. We have the ones that were on Veridian, but there are Marin, Valdivia, Thonis, and Gaiantar to name a few,” said Conner.

“A long list. None of which are on Jixx’s entertainment schedules,” stated Ari.

“We will need a ship of our own to go to all those remote places,” said Conner. The two drifted off into silence as guests began to arrive for the evening show.

Silvia pondered what the boys had said. Well, mostly grown men now. They were right. There would come a time when the Paladins would have to part ways with the little Ardinian. They would need their own ship.

— C R E S T E D —

Hunter walked out onto the front porch of the cabin on a bright new day. He had settled into the cabin and opened it up for the season. A bit of dusting and sweeping, along with a fire in the fireplace, had made it cozy and warm. A nice, hot, home-cooked dinner made in the fireplace set the mood, so they all slept well last night.

Castor leapt off the front porch and began to run around the freshly snow-covered yard. Pollux quickly followed to chase Castor. Suddenly, they both stopped to look back at Hunter. They stood still, but their tails waved back and forth in the cool morning air.

“All right, we will go for a walk,” said Hunter with a smile. “But first, we need to feed the horse and the goats,” Hunter put his cup back in the cabin and closed the door. He walked across the yard, looking past the pond up to the mountain. In the meadow, the mountain lopes were bugling, trying to call in a female. It was mating season. He opened the

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barn door, and the goats came out, bleating. They began to nibble on the green grass poking out of the snow. He fed the horse and spread some feed for the goats.

“OK, let’s go for a walk. The day is growing long after the morning chores. It will be afternoon before you know it,” Hunter scooped up a backpack off the porch. “I have some snacks in here for lunch.” The canines ran ahead down the trail, tails wagging as they sniffed their way forward. The pack goats followed along. The bells on their collars tinkled as they trotted.

Hunter entered the forest. The tall pine trees shaded the forest floor, which was covered with a thick layer of pine needles. He made his way along a path that he knew well. The trail wound through the forest, then skirted the edge of the trees to head across a broad meadow. The trail then headed up to a high point overlooking the valley.

Hunter was still in the trees when he noticed that Castor and Pollux had picked up the scent of some animal. They were diligently sniffing at the base of a very large pine tree.

“What have you found?” asked Hunter. Castor turned to look at Hunter and wagged his tail enthusiastically. Pollux barked and stood up against the tree, barking loudly. There were scratch marks at least 15 feet up the tree. A large chunk of the tree had been removed by scratching. A very large bear had been in the area recently, as it had not been there the day before. The great beast had marked its territory, letting the newcomers know that it was there.

Hunter examined the ground, most of which was covered in needles, but Castor had found a patch of bare earth where a print had been left. Hunter squatted down to examine it. There in the earth, was a paw print that was three times as large as the width of his hand. The print was very fresh. “Come on, guys. Let’s leave this big guy alone. We don’t want to run into him today.”

They made their way into the sunny meadow, where they were greeted by Clarissa from down the valley. Hunter’s mother had accompanied her. Clarissa and his mom, Kate, waved at them from

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horseback. Hunter waved back, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, which he was.

"Come on, boys, let's get back to the house. If we don't hurry, the girls will beat us there!" he exclaimed. Hunter started to run back up the trail. The two hounds tails rose into the air. They watched for a moment and then ran after him, quickly passing their master in a lightning-fast dash back to the cabin. Castor and Pollux barely beat Hunter to the front yard. Hunter laughed loudly as the two celebrated around him, barking and jumping.

Just then, Clarissa and Kate rode up on their equines. Clarissa looked up at the bright blue sky. The snow-covered mountain peaks pierced the sky, towering above them. The shoulders of the mountains were covered in glaciers that had begun to melt with the spring thaw. Through the trees, she could make out a tall waterfall tumbling over steps of rocks, running into the valley. The river ran through the forest, winding its way past the cabin, where it slowed to a gentle stream before continuing through the meadow. Eventually, it would make its way down the mountain to the ranch far below, with its wide valley and herds of grazing bovines.

Hunter helped Clarissa down from her mount and gave her a tender embrace. Hunter then turned toward Kate.

"Thank you son, but I can manage," said Kate. Her long hair was braided into a single strand. She pulled off her wide-brimmed hat, letting it hang down her back. She hugged Hunter. "We brought some supplies for summer camp."

Hunter kissed Kate on the cheek. "I'll take care of the horses and unload the packs," he said as he took the reins of both equines.

"Just let me get my backpack. I brought some things for dinner," said Kate. They spent the day tidying up the place and hiking. There had been no sign of the ursis that lived in this valley. Late in the afternoon, the three sat on the porch with the hounds.

The shadows were beginning to grow long. "I will get dinner started. It will be dark soon," said Kate.

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Hunter settled the horses in with the goats for the night in the barn. He fed everyone and put out fresh hay. As he walked across the yard, fresh snow began to fall as a late winter storm swept down from the mountains.

He walked into the cabin, which had a warm fire crackling away in the fireplace. Castor and Pollux settled down in front of the fire to rest. The smell of cooking filled the room.

“What’s for dinner?” asked Hunter.

“Stew,” replied his mother. “Clarissa made biscuits. She makes the best biscuits,” Clarissa smiled as she set a plate on the table.

“You can cook? I have never seen you lift a pot or pan in my life.” said Hunter.

“I’ve learned a thing or two since I have been on Crested,” replied Clarissa.

Kate set a hot pot of Crested beast stew down in the center of the table, and Clarissa placed a basket of biscuits wrapped in a towel down. “Who is going to say grace?” asked Kate while looking directly at Hunter.

Hunter was taken back to when he was a boy at family dinners, where anyone in the room might be called upon to say a blessing over the food. He had always kept his words few and to the point. Tonight was no exception. “May this food and those gathered be blessed by The Eternal.”

Kate chuckled at her son’s succinct prayer. Hunter then began to dish up Clarissa’s plate as well as Kate’s. He served himself last, not forgetting to place some beast bits in the dogs’ bowls. The bowl was filled with chunks of beast, potatoes, and colorful root vegetables. Thick gravy covered everything in meaty goodness.

“How was your market?” Hunter asked as he scooped up spoonfuls of the hot, hearty stew.

“Our first spring market was very good this year. Clarissa sold out of all the clothes she made. Her hooded ponchos were a big hit at the market.”

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Clarissa blushed a little. “I made them myself. I helped your mom shear the angora fur and then wove it into yarn. She taught me how to weave and knit. I spent most of the winter knitting.”

“She took to it like a duck to water. The design she came up with is wonderful. I think there are already some orders.”

“Sounds like the designer in you found new inspiration.”

“I did! Crested has given me so many new ideas.”

Kate had retrieved a cast-iron pot from the wood stove that bubbled with a berry crumble. The top was a crusty golden brown. She served everyone the hot berry crumble with ice cream that had been chilled in the cold mountain stream outside. She drizzled the crumble's red sauce over the ice cream. It made for a nice, warm end to the evening. The sun had set, and a fire crackled in the fireplace in the middle of the room. Outside, the stars danced in the night sky. The mountains loomed darkly above them.

“Oh, that reminds me. While we were in the city, someone delivered this,” said Kate. She threw a message signal to him. Hunter caught the thick, small, round coin in his hand. He held it up to inspect the seal inscribed on its surface. “I wonder what he wants?” Hunter considered going to a more private place to receive the message, but then reconsidered. After all, he was too comfortable after a full meal and sitting by the fire.

He held the coin-sized signal in his open hand. The signal activated and performed a quick scan of the room to verify the presence of the intended recipient. A small piece of gold foil popped out of the message signal. It landed on the table's surface and proceeded to unfold into a seven-sided shape with the Lombardia crest embossed at its center. A holo appeared, no taller than the length of his hand.

A smartly dressed man appeared, wearing an expensive suit. Gold jewelry tastefully adorned his hands. He was slim and muscular. His hair was graying. He smiled the way a politician smiles at you when he wants something. “My friend Hunter, I have a pressing matter that needs your unique skills. You should come see me soon on Jardor. Please present

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this ticket to a Lombardia representative to arrange your transport. Say hello to your mother for me,” The holo faded as the last of the short message played.

“Why would Lord Lombardia be sending you a golden ticket?” asked Clarissa.

“A golden ticket?” asked Hunter.

“Yes, they were all the rage last year on Jardor. It is a flexible foil that is inscribed with electronics. They often are much more than just a ticket. Lord Lombardia is a very mysterious person to be giving you one of these,” said Clarissa as she tapped the ticket.

Hunter turned to Clarissa, “You know him?”

“Of course, I know him. In the fashion business, it pays to know the rich and famous,” said Clarissa with a smile. “I want to know how he knows Kate.” Clarissa and Hunter’s attention turned to the old matriarch.

“When your father was in the Assembly representing Crested, we met on several social occasions. When Lord Lombardia really wanted something, he would invite us over to play cards. The man loves games. He even loves to scheme with his own family. I would never trust him, but I never thought he was nefarious,” stated Kate. “Well, kids, this old bird is off to bed. Good night.”

Cool, crisp air had settled into the valley overnight. Hunter had woken with the dawn. The light was just spreading down into the valley as he slipped on some pants and a shirt to get more firewood that was stacked on the porch. Hunter stirred the embers of the dying fire. He carefully placed new kindling and logs that quickly caught fire. Soon, the warm glow of the reborn fire filled the one-room log cabin.

Hunter went over to the stove to light it. Within minutes, the fire was burning, and the burners were warm enough to heat some water. He set the kettle on the stove to heat. His attention turned to grinding some beans for a little morning brew. He was planning to make breakfast with the fresh eggs his mother had brought up from the ranch. Soon, the kettle

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was steaming with hot water as it boiled. He poured the steaming water into the brew press. After a few minutes, the brew had stained the water to a rich mahogany color. There was nothing like freshly made brew in the high country.

He poured a cup and walked out onto the covered front porch. He sat down on one of the well-worn chairs, sipping from his cup that steamed in the morning breeze. A wind blew through the trees, stirring them to a new day. Looking out of the porch, with its amazing views of the forest and the mountains surrounding the cabin, brought contentment to Hunter's soul. Pinks and oranges crept across the sky. Gradually, the dark shapes of the towering pine trees turned green. Birds flitted from branch to branch. Little monks scurried around the forest floor collecting nuts that the winds had blown out of the trees.

Just then, the barn door opened and out rode Kate on her favorite equine. Hunter got up from his chair and walked into the yard. "Trying to sneak out of here?"

"Yes, I am," replied Kate. "You don't need an old lady hanging around. I like Clarissa. She is a good woman. You two should spend a little time together. Breathe in the fresh air and enjoy the mountains. I have a feeling that all of our lives are about to get more complicated. Well, I'm off. I plan to harvest some herbs this morning and make butter with them. There are things to do," Kate bent down and kissed Hunter on the cheek. Hunter returned the gesture.

"Thanks, Mom," said Hunter.

"For what?"

"For everything," he replied.

Kate laughed, "All in a life's work. You were always the one child I didn't have to worry about. You turned out well," Kate said as she patted his cheek.

APPENDICES

THE PALADIN'S CODE

Love The Eternal with all your being.

Love others as much as you love The Eternal.

All life is precious, treat it as such.

Make every day a hallowed one.

Tell the truth always.

Don't take what is not yours.

Honor those whom The Eternal has brought into your life.

CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Silvia “Of the Forest” • 76 sc (standard cycles)

Planet of origin - unknown

One of the last remaining Paladins. A woman who loves books and was the Librarian of the Paladin Library. She finds herself in charge of a group of young people.

Elizabeth Alexandra “Eternal is my oath” • 16 sc

Planet of origin - Ophthar

Elizabeth is the fourth of eight siblings from a large farming family. She is kind and compassionate, and she has aspirations to become a vet and work with animals.

Amira Basma “smiling princess,” (Mia) “mine” • 17 sc

Planet of origin - Jardor

Mia comes from a very wealthy family. Her parents died in a terrible tragedy when she was young. Her uncle took over and is the Premier.

Timothy Celest “To honor The Eternal” • 14 sc

Planet of origin - Agabar

He is a technical and scientific wizard. He loves knowledge, which he got from his parents, who are both scientific nerds. His awkward looks are rapidly changing into a handsome, self-assured young man.

Conner Aldar “To be heard” • 22 sc

Planet of origin - Canopus

Conner was Mia’s security guard. He is the oldest of the summer students. Conner is courageous and very skilled in self-defense.

Ari Thare “The Eternals Lion, (Scrap) “Beloved”, • 17 sc

Planet of origin - Veridian

Ari is a young man with dreams of becoming a Paladin. His past is a mystery. He was orphaned at a young age. He was taken in by the Paladins.

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LAD “Library Attendant Digital”

Planet of origin - Veridian

The AI of the Paladin library is a personal friend of Silvia. He holds the secrets that will destroy the Paladins, but also save them in the end.

The Paladins

Paul Guthrie (Hunter) • A bounty hunter whose specialty is finding things.

Mother Superior Morr • Mother Superior of The Paladin Convent.

Joe (Joseph Moretti) • The handyman for the Park of the Empire.

Dr. Yulania (Magnolia) • A Paladin healer.

Samuel • A Paladin book seller.

The Enemy

Salusasecunda (sălūsāsēcūdă) • An ancient evil that wishes to reconquer the galaxy.

Dr. Keith • An evil scientist who is now the bot servant of Salusasecunda.

Riss (Rīss) • The primary military leader of the Skree.

The Skree • A race that is descended from Therapods. They served Salusasecunda in the Galactic Civil War.

Augustus Steel • Mia’s uncle. Up and-coming galactic politician.

General Sevrin • General in the Protector Navy. Secretly head of the State Security Bureau (SSB)

Mizz Primm • Representative Steel’s assistant.

Inno (Īnnō) • Evil inventor.

Tippu Tip • The slaver trader of Delos.

The Mercs

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Raffa Grav • Merc who died attacking the Paladins.

Ivor Grav • War leader of the Mercs. Son of Raffa Grav

Brage Grav • Son of Raffa Grav. Good mechanic, reluctant leader.

Finna Grav • Wife of Raffa Grav and mother of Brage and Ivor.

Sten • A Merc farmer.

Matteus • Older man who is the village vet.

Others

Robbie • Once the Paladin med bot, now a faithful companion of Ari.

Clarissa Haught • A very successful galactic fashion designer.

Lillian Haught • Clarissa's mother. The matron of an aristocratic family on Mitani.

Marguerite Dilmah (Maggie) • A mysterious intel trader.

Diane DezRally • A friend and partner of Maggie in the intel trade.

Castor & Pollux • Hunter's tracking beasts.

Seeker • The name of Hunter's ship.

Victor Lombardia • CEO of Lombardia Enterprises. Lord of the Lombardia family.

Cayden Lombardia • Grandchild of Victor Lombardia. A little boy with a mischievous side and a sharp mind.

Celest Lombardia • Grandchild of Victor Lombardia. A little girl who is strong-willed with a sweet disposition.

Benjamin Edes • Steward to Lord Lombardia.

Cerravid • Galactic artist.

Mateo Matamoris • Husband of Maria Matamoris and a young father. Aide to Mizz Primm.

Maria Matamoris • Mateo's wife.

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Ailith (Ālīth) • “Noble warrior” The Lava Dragon. Oracle of The Eternal. Protector of The Monastery.

Jixx • An Ardinian who is the owner of the Stardust.

Granny Good • An old trader who has been around the galaxy more than once. She specializes in difficult-to-acquire items.

Old Reliable the name of Granny’s ship.

Kathrine Guthrie (Kate) • Mother of Paul Guthrie.

Senator Mark Guthrie • Father of Paul Guthrie.

Clara • Lord Lombardia’s healer.

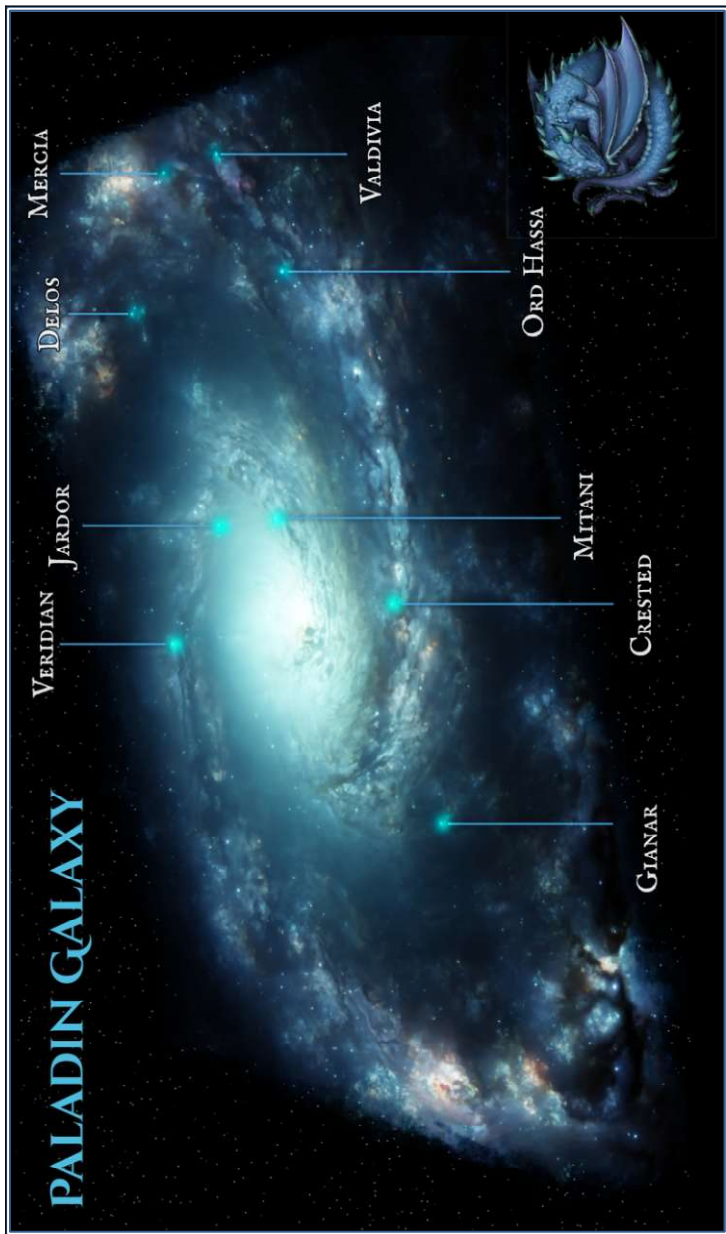
Hazel • The twins’ nanny.

Orin • Ship builder.

Wil • Ship builder.

CC Pacaro • Space pilot and freedom fighter.

MAP



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Join Silvia and the young Paladins as they flee from the dark forces that are hunting them. After the destruction of the Monastery, they have left Veridian on a quest to recover the lost Paladin Library. In need of a ship, they seek help from friends.

Steel, obsessed with control, continues his quest for ultimate power. He ruthlessly establishes the SSB to hunt the Paladins. Freedom fighters begin the struggle against a rising tide of tyranny. The Eternal is there to protect and guide our heroes. Join them from the streets of Jardor to the wilds of Valdivia.

Will the Paladins find the Library Crystals?

Will Silvia and the Paladins keep their freedom?

Come along as our heroes make their way through a web of spies and assassins on their quests.



Bradley Heer is the author of *The Paladin Code*, the first in a series of books. He grew up among the wheat fields of Kansas and now resides among the mountains of Colorado. Come join him in the adventure of a lifetime. Follow him on Locals, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

