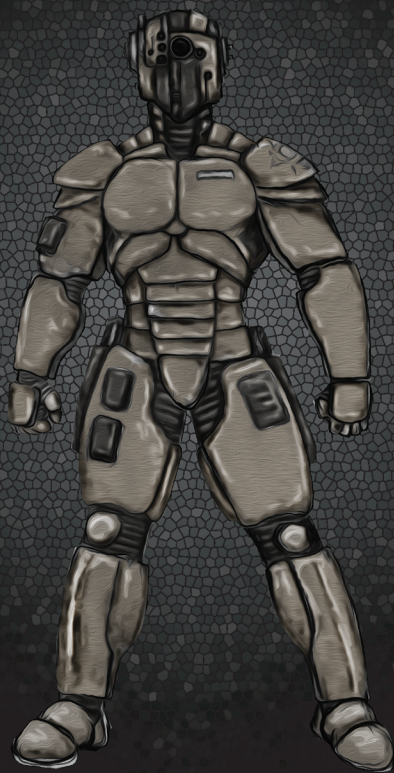


A STORY OF THE AWAKENING

# IMPOSTER

a Hrothgar Tebrey Story



**Paul B. Spence**

*Author of The Madness Engine*

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## **A Hrothgar Tebrey Story**

**Paul B. Spence**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The imposter employs force instead of argument,  
imposes silence where he cannot convince, and  
propagates his character by the sword.

Junius

Commander Hrothgar Tebrey jogged past the crews prepping the strike craft and drones for battle, small craft used to swarm capitol ships and bases, degrading defensive fire so larger weapons could get through. They could be decisive in a space battle, but Tebrey didn't envy them; the crews didn't have very good chances of living through a battle. These ships had been checked a hundred times in the two-week journey through hyperspace from Steinway, but the fighter not checked at the last minute would be the one that malfunctioned, and that meant three dead crewmen if it happened in space.

Tebrey felt like the maintenance crews. He'd gone over the upcoming mission many times with his people, but he knew something would go wrong. Something always did. He had an untried team with experimental weapons and armor, not the most ideal way to wage a war. Not to mention an untried commander. He wasn't used to having to take care of other people or give them orders. He didn't like the experience. He often wished for the days when he and his companion could just do a mission without interference.

His team was standing in loose parade formation near airlock five to the shuttle bay.

"Everyone ready, Sergeant?" Tebrey asked unnecessarily, but it was expected.

Master Sergeant Pt'kar turned her oddly-shaped helmet toward Tebrey and nodded. The Rhyrhan was huge, massive even for a member of her high-gravity race, a towering three meters. "Ready, sir," she growled.

Tebrey envied her a little. Despite her bulk, she was the only one of them who managed to be graceful in full battle armor. Rhyrhans were like that, though.

The sergeant handed him his pistols. One didn't carry weapons onto the bridge of a starship except in dire situations. Not even the commander of an elite Special Forces unit.

"Thank you, Sergeant." Tebrey slipped the pair of quantum pistols he'd worn since the battle at Steinway into the holsters built into his armor. No one in their right mind used quantum weapons; the hyperspace shockwave caused a bleed-through on a psychic level that no one had ever quite explained. That bleed-through caused mental shock, nervous disorders, and even aneurisms to just about anyone with a few meters of the beam path. That included the wielder.

Using two at a time was considered suicide, but they didn't bother Tebrey that much. They had served him well against Thetas in the past. Not even one of *them* could survive the quantum annihilation of the very space-time it occupied. The pistols were becoming a part of the legend that was growing around Tebrey.

He hated it, of course, both the legend and the effect of the damn pistols, though he had to admit that the pistols seemed to bother him less each time he used them. He hoped that didn't mean anything bad.

"We've got six minutes, people," Tebrey said. "Let's get aboard."

Despite his rank, Tebrey had never really commanded troops before. Special Forces were always outside the chain of command in the Earth Federation, where he had spent the majority of his time in the military. The team that Admiral Shadovsky had kindly bestowed upon him was a new experience.

Tebrey didn't like new experiences. They were usually unpleasant and painful.

Θ

Tebrey felt a bit queasy as he watched the Sentient Concord Fleet reduce the defenses around Gorgothinland. It was all too easy for him to imagine himself on one of those ships. Until recently, he had been a part of the Earth Federation Fleet; now he was helping to destroy it. The Xi Bootis system had been used as a staging ground for the recent attacks upon the Concord. That had to stop. A strong message had to be sent to anyone who attacked the Concord.

His suit displayed the ongoing battle, even as his shuttle raced through the clouds of glowing debris toward the orbital habitat that was *his* mission objective. Gorgothinland seemed peaceful from orbit, but Tebrey knew there would be chaos on the surface. Military forces would be desperately trying to herd masses of frightened civilians into bomb shelters that they knew wouldn't do them any good against the kind of attack the Concord could bring to bear. Of course, the Concord had no intention of bombarding the planet, since it was of little strategic importance itself, but the Federation had been attacking civilian populations on Concord worlds, and they expected the same treatment.

Tens of thousands of people would be killed in the panic, trampled to death in the mindless race toward any perceived safety. Tebrey was sickened to be a part of it, but the Federation had to be stopped. The alien Theta entities harbored by the Federation had to be destroyed. Everything else was inconsequential -- except to those innocents who died in the next few hours, of course. To them, it would very consequential.

"We're nearing the habitat docking facility, Commander," the shuttle pilot said, interrupting Tebrey's morbid thoughts.

"Acknowledged, pilot. Any sign of armed resistance?"

"Not from out here, sir. They haven't activated the docking mechanisms, but I didn't expect them to wheel out the welcome wagon."

"Keep me apprised," Tebrey replied. He unclamped himself from his harness and stood, looking back at his team. "Okay, people. This is it."

Clamps clanked against armor and weapons as his team stood, stretched, and prepared themselves for battle. Tebrey nodded to his sergeant as she double-checked each weapon and armored suit. He was mildly amused when she checked his, but that was her job. Upon her confirmation, he signaled the pilot their readiness.

"We're sealed up tight and ready to go. Just land us near a main hatch, and we'll take it from there."

"Yes, sir."

There was a brief hiss, and then a light blinked on in Tebrey's helmet display, showing that he was now in vacuum. He felt a slight lurch as the shuttle landed, and then the back hatch lowered silently. His team dove out in twos, seeking cover from any threat.

The shuttle bay was mostly empty, with only a few aging passenger shuttles docked. No maintenance personnel were around, which suggested that habitat security knew Tebrey's team was there. Not that it would do them much good. They wouldn't have any real weapons on a civilian habitat. Nothing that could hurt powered armor, anyway.

Θ

A tungsten bullet ricocheted off of Tebrey's helmet, making it ring loudly despite the shock-absorbing lining. A moment later, the echoing howl of a plasma cannon was louder than the screams of the security team behind the make-shift barricade as they were incinerated in the incandescent blast, along with the barricade itself. The electromagnetic pulse from the weapon distorted Tebrey's sensors with static.

"Right," Tebrey said with a nod to the corporal with the cannon. "The word of the day is *containment*, people. Split up and find this damn Theta, but do not engage until you have backup. I don't want anyone going it alone against one of these things. You all know what they can do. We do this right, and we don't lose anyone, understood?"

"Are we sure it's even on the habitat, sir?"

"I'm sure," Tebrey said grimly. "I can feel it."

Two of the newer members of his team exchanged nervous glances at that. There were a lot of rumors going around about Tebrey. Not all of them were favorable. Not all of them were wrong, either.

It was taking longer than Tebrey liked to get past the security personnel into the habitat itself. Most of his forces were still sweeping the docking facility. Part of him longed for the time when an enemy was a simple human or Homndruu soldier. Fighting the Theta was a tactical nightmare. Any one of the people they met could be the entity they were hunting.

There had been a time when the enemy had come looking for him, too. It had been easier, but the wiser part of his brain warned him to be careful what he wished for.

Θ

The vertiginous, upward curving horizon of the habitat's interior made Tebrey feel slightly sick. The forest hanging kilometers over his head didn't help, either. Deep space, he could handle. It seemed strange to him that he could freefall from orbit and feel fine, but here he kept feeling like he was going to fall down a well. This inverted-world nonsense was too much. The ten-kilometer-long habitat was a relic from the days of the Empire, hundreds of years old. It spun for pseudo-gravity, and the spin produced a definite sideways listing sensation that was difficult to get used to. The targeters built into his team's armor compensated automatically, but it still *felt* wrong.

The occasional star-bright pulse of his team's plasma cannon lit the interior, and the noise carried for kilometers, sounding much like a thunderclap. The fighting was erratic now, though. Most of the security forces were dead, or had surrendered and been disarmed. The smart ones had surrendered, anyway.

There was still no sign of the Theta they were hunting.

Other than the unfocused feeling of wrongness he had, Tebrey couldn't even be sure that the damn thing was still on the habitat. He hadn't seen any sign that it was here. The security personnel had managed to wipe their computers before Tebrey's team had taken the main office. He didn't even know if there had been any unexplained deaths on the habitat.

It was frustrating.



His com chirped. "Commander Tebrey? This is Lieutenant Freeman, on the *Vigilant*. The captain has asked me to tell you to step it up. A Federation battle group just jumped in. Our corvettes are no match for that kind of firepower; neither are we. We need to pull out."

"How long till we need to break orbit, to stay out of weapons range?"

"Twenty minutes, Commander."

"What?" Tebrey exclaimed. "I'm not even sure if I can get my people back to the ship in that time! We're spread out to hell and back in here."

"Commander, this is Captain Maxwell. I doubt even Federation ships will fire at extreme range, since they might hit the habitat, but I could be wrong. You know better than most what they will do and blame on someone else. I can give you about forty minutes, but that's it. We're going to be risking taking hits as it is."

"Acknowledged, Captain. I'll do what I can to shave that time down. Keep the door open for us."

"Will do, Commander."

"Sergeant, get everyone back to the shuttle, Tebrey growled into the com. "We're pulling out." He punched the bulkhead, denting the weak metal in his anger. The enemy were getting organized and were far too smart. They were avoiding confrontation. This was the second Theta his team had lost in as many months.

His team was also on review for Admiral Macklin. The admiral was trying to decide if a dedicated Theta hunting team was worth the expense, given the Concord's general shortage of resources. It wasn't looking good for Tebrey or for Admiral Shadovsky.

"Sir? We are giving up the hunt?" Pt'kar asked. The Rhyrhan sergeant hated to leave an enemy alive at their backs; she sounded as frustrated as Tebrey was.

"No choice, Sergeant. We've got a Federation battle group coming down on top of us, ETA less than twenty."

"Understood, sir."

Tebrey took one last look across the cavernous space and turned, trotting down the corridor toward the docks.

He didn't notice the shadowy figure that followed like a dark stain.

Θ

Corporal Kopono's visual scanner kept glitching.

"Come on, Corporal. You think the captain is going to wait for us forever?" growled Sergeant Pt'kar. "Snap it up!"

"Yes, sir! I'm on my way. I'm just having a problem with my suit sensors." He tapped his helmet again, but the sensor kept giving him double images. He sighed and took the helmet off. It was discolored on the side. He had taken a hit from a plasma rifle. He'd gotten lucky on that one. Or unlucky, depending on how he looked at it. The security guard with the plasma rifle had been the only one on the whole habitat with anything more powerful than a caseless rifle. It figured Kopono would be the one to run into him.

He heard a noise behind him and spun, his thermal induction rifle ready. There was nothing there. The corridor was empty. "Sergeant?" he called softly.

"No, Corporal," a voice whispered into his ear. Then the pain began as dark fire entered his mouth and eyes.

The worst part wasn't the pain, even as his bones burst from within. It was that he couldn't scream. At least he didn't live long. Of course, to him it felt like an eternity in hell.

Θ

"Move your monkey ass, Corporal! What the hell took you so long?" Sergeant Pt'kar said from the shuttle's assault ramp. The engines were powering up with a basso rumble that shook the teeth.

"Sorry, Sergeant. I had a little problem to attend to," the entity impersonating Kopono replied as it climbed into the shuttle and looked around. The other members of the team were clamped into their seats, weapons stowed.

"You never cease to amaze me with your incompetence, Corporal. What'd you do, stop to kiss one of the locals? How the hell you've survived this long is beyond me. Get to an acceleration couch. We're getting out of here ASAP."

"Yes, sir," it replied in a voice not unlike the late Corporal Kopono's. "Is Commander Tebrey aboard?" it asked as it fumbled with the unfamiliar seat harness.

"You think we're going to leave without him?" replied Pt'kar as she shouldered past.

"No," it whispered, "I didn't think you would."

Tebrey began feeling extremely uneasy when the shuttle was still halfway to the *Vigilant*. After the third time he checked his weapons, his sergeant started to worry.

"Something bothering you, Commander?" asked Pt'kar. She was getting good at reading his moods, and she knew Tebrey wasn't prone to undue paranoia.

"Everyone made it back in time?" Tebrey said. The skin between his shoulder blades kept crawling, as if he was being watched. He'd expected the feeling to diminish as the shuttle left the orbital habitat, not get stronger.

"Of course, sir. Everyone accounted for. I personally saw to it. Why?"

"Something doesn't feel right," he replied.

The sergeant didn't say anything; she knew the commander well enough to respect his hunches. She quietly checked her weapons and unclipped the restraints from her seat.

"ETA to *Vigilant*, one minute," the pilot announced.

Tebrey called up the shuttle schematics with the locations of the crew and his personnel. Everyone was present, just as the sergeant had said. Not that he had doubted her. The shuttle sensors didn't detect anyone else aboard, either, and they would have if a Theta had snuck aboard. *Assuming it isn't one of the people here*, he thought uneasily.

Following the impulse, he queried the data-links of his team, most of whom looked up as he did. The enemy could mimic the shapes of his people, even use their equipment, but they couldn't duplicate the implants.

One implant was missing.

"Sergeant!" Tebrey shouted as his head snapped around to look back through the shuttle to the rear, but it was too late to stop what was coming.

The thing that had been impersonating Kopono sensed Tebrey's attention and flowed out of the armor, reforming into something that even Tebrey couldn't bring himself to look at directly. The entity kept rippling through hideous demonic forms, and dark fire flowed over the soldiers closest to it. Their torment was like a hammer blow to Tebrey's mind.

Tebrey drew his quantum pistols, but Sergeant Pt'kar grabbed his arm. "You can't fire those in here, sir. You'll hit the engines."

"Damn it!" Tebrey screamed in frustration. He dropped the useless pistols and charged. Blue-white flames lit the inlay in his armor. He would beat the thing to death with his fists if he had to.

The Theta drew back its entropic field from the screaming marines. The dark fire had burned through their armor and eaten their skin away like acid, leaving each a raw, bleeding, mewling person more than half-crazed by the pain. Tebrey knew from personal experience that *that* pain couldn't be blocked, not by neural shuts or drugs. The Theta wanted them to suffer. It *needed* them to suffer; it drew strength from their pain.

A single, terrible bolt of darkness struck Tebrey and flung him the length of the shuttle to smash into the cockpit door. Even as he struggled to stand, he could see that the Theta had used its dark fire to carve its way into the shuttle's engine compartment. It tore at the conduits there, and then the Theta was gone, apportioned away. Coolant bled into the compartment. The damage to the engine had been perfectly selected to disrupt the containment on the shuttle's fusion engines. An alarm began blaring just before Tebrey was blinded by a flash as bright as a star.

The assault shuttle exploded as it entered the docking bay of the *Vigilant*.

## About the Author

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Paul B. Spence is a practicing archaeologist who hopes to one day get it right. He currently lives in New Mexico, where all the cool kids hang out, with too many cats.

Like most authors, he had an eclectic career path. He's worked as a retail gofer, a food service monkey, brute laborer, a rennie, a writer for the RPG industry, and many other rewarding jobs that didn't pay enough to feed him or his cats.

# **Asura Press books by Paul B. Spence**

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The Awakening Series

The Remnant

The Fallen

The Madness Engine