

MILANKOVIC

A STORY OF THE AWAKENING

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A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.

Sir Winston Churchill, *Saying*

Yeltsin Starport was busy that morning.

The starport, the central hub for most of the traffic to and from orbit around Mars, and the rest of the Solar system, always bustled with activity. At any time of the day, commuters rushed through to their waiting shuttles. Families on day trips, school groups, and business professionals made up the bulk of that traffic. That morning it was the standard mix, with a sprinkling of Fleet service personal.

Milankovic was the largest city on Mars, and a popular place with naval personnel for shore leave in the Solar System. The Earth Federation Fleet had a shipyard in orbit, and the planet was a convenient hub for traffic in and out of the system. The low density of Mars, and its proximity to the inner edge of a hyperspace jump limit, made the planet the obvious place to visit first. Merchants took advantage of the No Duty zone of the starport to sell wares without paying taxes.

It wasn't uncommon for locals to wander the arcades shopping, or even for a few beggars to ply their trade in the starport. No one actually went hungry on Mars, but having enough to eat and a house over your head doesn't always mean you're going to be happy. Unemployment was high on Mars, despite the commerce and military presence. Many people took to begging to earn a little extra cash. So no paid any heed to the poorly dressed woman lurking in the shadows.

Crime was uncommon, at least within the starport proper. Outside the port was another matter. Many a stranger was lured into an ambush by promises of sexual favors, drugs, or a good deal on Martian real estate. So when the woman in a laborer's coverall began vandalizing a wall with graffiti, it got noticed. Many people didn't report it at first, because they thought she was some local artist plying her trade. It still would have been illegal, but no liked to interfere with art. When it became clear that the woman was painting words, most people lost interest. There was always someone who had a problem with the government, or had a religious ideology they wanted to promote.

Starport security showed little enthusiasm in their response.

Graffiti was a misdemeanor, at worst. The local magistrate would probably just slap the offender in the wrist and make her clean up the graffiti. It took security eleven minutes to respond to complaints that morning -- about average to any non-emergency.

"Ma'am, we're going to have to ask you to stop."

The woman shook off the hand on her shoulder and finished painting the large slogan across the wall in sloppy red letters. She threw down the spray applicator and turned away, toward the crowded concourse. Five security personnel barred her way.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you are under arrest for civil disobedience and littering. Please kneel and place your hands on your head."

The woman smiled, looked right at the camera, and triggered the explosives wrapped around her under the coverall.

Θ

Detective Evelyn Parker shook her head to clear away the images downloaded through her datalink. The recording stopped at the explosion, of course, since the blast knocked out the cameras. The woman in the coverall had already been identified, but her motives were still unclear. Parker suspected it had to do with the graffiti, but the camera hadn't been in a position to record what the woman had sprayed on the wall, and no one had survived who'd seen what she painted. At least no one who was willing to come forward.

Parker stepped carefully through the wreckage of the blast. She wished she could have gotten in there to look for evidence earlier, but the repair of the dome had priority. The blast had torn through the station that morning, killing or injuring over a thousand people, many of them Fleet personnel, many of them just the normal morning commuters. Forensics teams had removed the bodies hours earlier, just after the hole in the dome was sealed, but the dried blood made the carnage painfully clear. They hadn't recovered the bodies from outside yet. Even now, it was hard for Parker look at the evidence through the clear wall of the dome. Over a hundred people had been blown out of the dome to die screaming in the thin, frigid atmosphere of Mars. Of all the ways to die, it was not a

death she would have chosen. It took too long to die from decompression on Mars. Death in space only took only a few minutes, at worst; Mars had enough atmospheric pressure to increase a person's suffering for up to fifteen minutes, if they were unfortunate enough to be tough.

Her mind shied away from those thoughts, shuddering. She had to concentrate. It was up to Parker to determine exactly what had happened and try to figure out how it could be stopped from happening again in the future.

It had been obvious from the beginning of the investigation that the explosion wasn't an accident, even before the security logs had been recovered. Less than three hours after the blast, no less than eleven different terrorist groups had claimed responsibility for the horrific attack. The group she personally thought responsible had been quiet. That alone was damning. If it had been up to her, she would have rounded up all of the known terrorists on the planet and chucked *them* out the nearest airlock. She understood the policy of not bothering with the small operators while waiting for the big bosses, but she didn't have to agree with it or like it.

The forensics team had found bits of the incendiary explosive device, exceptionally crudely made, even for the work of terrorists. *Crude, but effective*, Parker thought irritably as she studied the blackened walls near the center of the blast. It was obvious on the recording that the terrorist had wanted to get to the more crowded areas of the starport before setting off her bomb. Whoever was responsible had wanted to make a really big impression. That suggested to Parker that they hadn't wanted the graffiti to be discovered until after the attack. Too bad it had been destroyed in the blast.

The wall the woman had been painting on was blackened with burned organic residue and partially destroyed by the blast. Parker kept wandering back there. Something about the texture of the soot bothered her. After examining it more closely, she realized that the ash and soot must have stuck in the fresh paint and been fused into it by the heat.

Parker stepped away from the wall and used her mind comp to

filter the image. It took a few minutes to sort through the various possibilities, but the blast had eradicated a few of the letters. The last word was obviously *lives* despite the missing letters, but it took her a few minutes of free association to figure out what the first word had been.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered softly. She'd been wrong about whom she thought was responsible, after all.

There was a new player in town. *Or an old one*, she thought bitterly.

Painted upon the wall under the soot were the words *Drennan Lives!*

Θ

"I think you're overreacting, Parker," Captain Marcus said. "You can't be sure that's what was painted there. There are no recordings. The lab said your interpretation might be correct. Notice the *might* part."

"With all due respect, sir," Evelyn Parker said with exasperation, "considering that these bastards just blew up a whole starport to kill one man – who was a corporate psion, I might add – I think I'm right to be overreacting a bit."

"Don't go ascribing motives to terrorists when you don't have any evidence. You don't know why the woman acted the way she did. It should also be noted that your evidence for determining the target is circumstantial. We don't really know that the graffiti and the bomb are related, or that they were targeting the individual you think they were."

"Sir! You'd have to be blind not to make the connection!"

"*Enough*, detective!" Marcus said, slapping his desk for emphasis. "Find me some actual evidence, and I'll listen to your report. Until then, dismissed!"

Detective Evelyn Parker turned on her heel and pointedly did not slam the door as she left her superior's office. She stalked angrily down the line of desks to hers and sat down, staring at the blank terminal in front of her.

"Things go badly, Parker?"

She looked up and smiled sourly at the man there. "About what you'd expect, Borodin. He reamed me for not having enough evidence."

"It is a bit flimsy."

"Oh, come on," she said, getting to her feet. "You saw the analysis! What else could it be?"

An annoying voice intruded on their conversation. "Hey, Parker! Find your boogeyman yet?"

"Fuck you, Filipe!" Only Steve Borodin's hand on her arm kept her from rushing over and punching the man. She'd never gotten along with Filipe Flemkov, and she wasn't in the mood for his shit.

"It's not worth it, Evelyn," Steve said, his voice quiet and urgent.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp and walked out of the room. She had work to do, and the taunting laughter of the other officers wasn't going to let her think clearly. Somewhere out in the city, she knew, the fanatics who had planned the starport attack were planning another atrocity.

She couldn't allow that to happen.

Fifty years before, Nicolas Drennan has been just another cult leader. His type were common in the impoverished areas of any planet. For some reason, it was always the people who had the least credits who tended to give them all away to these nutjobs. Religion had always been a powerful force to control the uneducated. That was why learning, and especially science, were so hated by the religious freaks.

Drennan had been raised in the Church of the Radical Orthodox Baptist, a small splinter group that didn't have snakes but would have handled them if they did. Parker wasn't sure what a snake was, but it had to be bad. The Church of ROB had a fanatical leader and couldn't be called anything but a cult. Police had raided the cult on grounds of child abuse, and Robert Harrick, the cult leader, had set off explosives and killed just about everyone involved.

Drennan had survived, scared by third-degree burns. He had refused medical treatment and barely survived. It was only a few months before he started preaching the WORD about what had

really happened, and what GOD had told him at the time. If Mars hadn't been so impoverished, his cult could have never gained any ground, because he would have been assigned to a medical facility for reconditioning.

As it was, his new message was that the Church of ROB had been raided because the government used psions to read people's minds, and they couldn't read the mind of a true believer. It was a load of crap; the church had been raided because a *very* young girl had made it out to the police and told them about gang rapes that were a common occurrence in the compound. The police didn't even have any psions, then or now.; their services were too expensive.

The cult had spread like wildfire, though. No one liked to think that they were having their thoughts read. It might have all come to nothing, however, if someone hadn't shot Drennan one day during a rousing speech at a public forum. Only sixty people had attended. The police were lurking in plainclothes, but no orders had been given to arrest anyone. They were just there to prevent something from happening. Someone claiming to be from the Psion Liberation Movement – there never was such an organization – shot Drennan ten times in the chest at point-blank range.

The police caught the shooter, but he and the police escort were torn apart by a mob before they made it to the police station. The police response triggered the riots of '06, and eventually the Federation military had to step in to quell what had become an active Martian rebellion. A lot of innocent people had died.

Acts of terror against the military were common during the rebellion: improvised explosive devices, murder of military personnel on leave, eventually even capture and torture of anyone suspected of being a psion. Which could be just about anyone. The end result was that Drennanism became illegal to practice or to preach. It was one of the few banned religions in the Federation.

A few years after that, the first of the Drennanist Bibles appeared. Since then, Drennanism had spread to most of the planets in the Earth Federation. It never had a strong following anywhere, but it lingered on. It was a little more common on the Frontier worlds where freedom was almost sacred.

Fifty years later, it was a bogymen story told to rookie cops. No one ever expected to actually see a resurgence of the damn cult. Detective Parker couldn't ignore what her gut told her, though. She was sure that the words on the wall of the starport meant the Drennanists were back, and that could only mean more trouble.

Θ

"What do we have?" Parker asked as she arrived. It had been six weeks since the bombing at the starport, and still no leads. She'd leapt at this assignment, given its location.

"Parker," Borodin acknowledged. "Looks like a double murder/robbery, Fleet personnel."

"Ah, shit. They got somebody coming down?"

"Yeah, Captain says we're to stay clear until they okay it."

"They would. What a mess." Parker knelt at the edge of the holographic police barrier. The murder had taken place in an infrequently used service corridor near the starport. If she had to guess, she'd say the two dead men were lovers. There was something about the way bodies had fallen that suggested one of them had tried to shield the other from getting shot. Whatever gun had been used, it had made a real mess. Blood dripped from every surface. Parker could see clearly where the shooter had stood and the bloody footprints down the corridor.

"Detective Parker?"

She stood and met the eyes of the woman the Fleet had sent down. "That's me."

"I'm Lt. Samantha Day. I'm here as liaison in your investigation."

"Is it still *my* investigation?"

"Of course."

"Great, maybe you can start by telling me about the men involved here."

Lt. Day pointed to the men. "That's Lt. Brian Glinski, and the other is Lt. Commander Matsu Yamaha both serving aboard the FSS *Jabulani Razi*."

"Were they lovers?"

"Detective, you understand that officers are discouraged from fraternizing when there is a difference in rank. It can cause problems."

"Uh-huh," Parker acknowledged. "So were they lovers?"

Lt. Day sighed. "We believe so, yes."

"Either of them married?"

"No. Why?"

"Just ruling out a jealous spouse."

Parker waved the forensics techs in. "What were their duties?"

"I'm afraid that is sensitive information."

Parker met her eyes steadily. "I'm sorry – why exactly are you here?"

"You have to understand that there are some things that I can't talk about, Detective."

"I'm going to go out on a limb here; tell me if I get warm. They work for Fleet Intelligence, and one or both of them is a psion."

"How did...? Why would you think that, detective?"

"Because I've been investigating murders of psions."

"What kind of mur—?"

They were interrupted by cussing from the techs. One of them had cut his hand badly. After he was rushed off to the medical center, the lead tech beckoned Parker over.

"What was that all about?"

"Sam damn near lost half his fingers. Look here." He motioned her over to the bodies. "Be careful, but look at this." He used a metal probe to prize a thin wire from a neck wound. Parker felt as if she was going to be sick.

"What's that?"

"Hotwire."

"What?"

"Monomolecular wire," he explained. "Weighted at both ends. Whatever gun was used must fire it like a bolo. I've never seen anything like it."

"Lt. Day? What about you? Any insight?"

The lieutenant leaned closer and shook her head. "I can't say that I have."

Parker couldn't have been mistaken about her expression; Lt. Day was lying about the weapon. Why, she didn't know.

"Look," Parker said quietly. "I've got a dozen reports sitting in my terminal back at the station. There has been a string of murders of psions across the city in the last few weeks. You must know about it; two of them were military."

"I've read reports about two suicides in the last year, but nothing odd about that. Psions aren't always all that stable, you know."

Parker growled in exasperation. "Apparent suicides," she said. "Those two had both been working near the starport right before they died. Near here, actually. That can't be coincidence."

Lt. Day shrugged. "This looks like a random crime, to me. Possibly drug-related. Contact me if you find any leads." With that, she walked away.

"What do I have to do?" Parker muttered.

"Hey, Detective!"

"What?" she snapped.

"Check this out."

The technician pointed to a place on the wall.

"What about it?"

"No blood," he said. "Weird, huh? Almost like something was stuck to the wall and then removed."

"Yeah, weird." The clean patch was just about large enough for an improvised bomb.

Θ

The series of glass and steel domes that eventually became the city of Milankovic had begun as mining camps in the early days of the Mars colony. Those mines drove deep into the Martian crust to get to the thick layers of water ice trapped there. In time, most of the ice in the frozen subterranean sea was removed and shipped to the growing cities at Chryse and Copernicus.

The mines themselves had been shut down for centuries, but the shafts remained. Shaft 97 currently held Detective Evelyn Parker's attention. It had taken frustrating weeks of following leads to dead

ends before she had stumbled upon a small clue that led her here. One of the workers at the starport had been an Air and Power employee before he transferred. When Parker investigated him, it led her to discover that he had run illegal air and power lines down to one of the old shafts in the under-city.

That had been enough to get her captain's attention. Stealing air was still a capital offense on Mars, even in 2956. He'd finally authorized the raid Parker wanted. It wasn't for the reason she'd wanted, but it was good enough for her. A little further investigation had linked the woman from the starport bombing to the man who ran the power and air lines. Whoever was down there had been labeled terrorists.

That was why Parker was freezing her ass off in a leaky pressure suit, waiting for the riot squad to arrive. They would go in first and take out any armed hostiles. Nobody was saying it, but they were afraid the terrorists would blow themselves up rather than surrender to police custody. Granted, not many of the police officers would shed any tears if that happened, but the police needed to take at least a few of the terrorists alive so they could find out if any of them had planted more bombs.

A hover car skimmed in and disgorged a squad of armored riot police directly in front of the entrance to the shaft. One of the officers ran forward and slapped a shaped charge over the door. The explosion sounded sharp in the thin air, but Parker felt it through her feet.

A second riot squad ran up as the first one dropped into the shaft. They were carrying a portable airlock, which they fitted over the opening and quickly sealed in place. Parker signaled her people and, as the second riot team disappeared into the lock, she ran forward. She wanted to be there when they made the arrests.

The muffled sound of automatic weapons fire got louder as she came out of the airlock into the shaft. The air was still thin on this side, but it would not be immediately fatal to anyone with a holed suit.

"Let's go, people!" Parker shouted over her com.

The shaft sloped down at a sharp angle and merged with the first

sub-level, their destination. As she came out of the shaft, she saw many bodies, not all of them terrorists. Steve was checking each one as he came to it and calling for the medical teams who were standing above waiting.

A burst of weapons fire made Parker duck behind a pile of rubble. The sudden roar of a plasma rifle was followed by horrific screams, and her stomach knotted up. It was a sound no one never forgot, once they'd heard it. None of the riot police had been armed with that kind of weapon. That meant the terrorists were better equipped than the police had suspected. There also seemed to be a lot more tunnels than had been on the old maps.

"Who the hell are these guys?" Steve asked from just behind her.

Parker shrugged. "Maybe they're mixed up with the drug cartels or something. How the hell should I know?"

"We don't have enough people to clear these warrens," said Steve.

"I know!" she answered. "Damn it to hell, I know."

"Parker?"

"Everyone fall back!" she shouted. "Grab anyone wounded you can get to, and fall back!"

"What are you planning?"

"We can't handle this. We have to call in the military. Now move!"

Θ

Detective Evelyn Parker was still haunted by the nightmares.

She'd gone into the tunnels with the military anti-terrorist forces. She had seen firsthand the fanatical fury of the Drennanists, and they *were* Drennanists. No one doubted that now. They'd found the bibles and slogans everywhere. The terrorists had committed suicide, en-mass, when her forces had closed in on them. Not that the police had been able to convince the press of that. The media had run with the idea of all those poor people looking for religious freedom who had been persecuted by the government.

It sickened her.

There was a cover-up, but it wasn't about the deaths. Oh, no. Dead little children in drifts and piles were great for the evening news. But the fact that there were two Federation senators in there? No. That wasn't ever going to be covered. The senators hadn't been captives, either.

There was something going on that Parker didn't understand, and that bugged her. She didn't like mysteries. It was her job to investigate what was happening, but no seemed interested. She'd been placed on administrative leave when she wouldn't let it drop – officially to give her time to recuperate from the traumatic experience, but she knew that was bullshit. They wanted her to shut up. She wasn't sure how far they would go, either. Walking home the other night, she'd been followed. Parker had been afraid that, as vocal as she had been, someone wanted to silence her.

So she was leaving.

She had a cousin who lived in the Sentient Concord. Parker was going to stay with her and pray that she'd be able to come back someday. Parker loved Mars, but she couldn't stand the politics she had found herself mixed up in. She didn't like the intrigue and the lies. She didn't like being told that truth and justice simply weren't politically appropriate.

Parker had been getting bone treatments for the last two weeks. By the time she was ready to leave, her body would be able stand the heavier gravity of the standard human worlds. She was sure that with her experience, she'd be able to get a job doing something. Ex-cops always seemed to end up in private security; maybe she could do that.

Even if she couldn't work as a detective, at least she wouldn't be part of a cover-up.

About the Author

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

The Awakening Series

The Remnant

The Fallen

The Madness Engine