



## Prologue

“I implore you not to do it.” The man clasped his hands before him as he pleaded with his friend. “It isn’t—”

“It’s entirely my fault. I should have kept it. I might have saved her,” his friend rambled. He was out of his wits, lost to all sense of reason. “It’s the only way. She must be preserved,” he murmured.

“She’s dying. You must let her go. Your grief is consuming you, and what you seek cannot be found,” the first man warned. “She didn’t want—”

“Don’t say it!” the second man cut him off. “She didn’t know what she wanted. She was sick.” Fear and anger shook his body as he spoke.

“It’s not natural.”

“But it’s possible, and it’s the only hope I have.”

“No, there is a greater hope, if only you would listen to me.”

“Enough of your foolishness, Samuel! I want to be alone with my wife.”

“Just think of her and what she would want.”

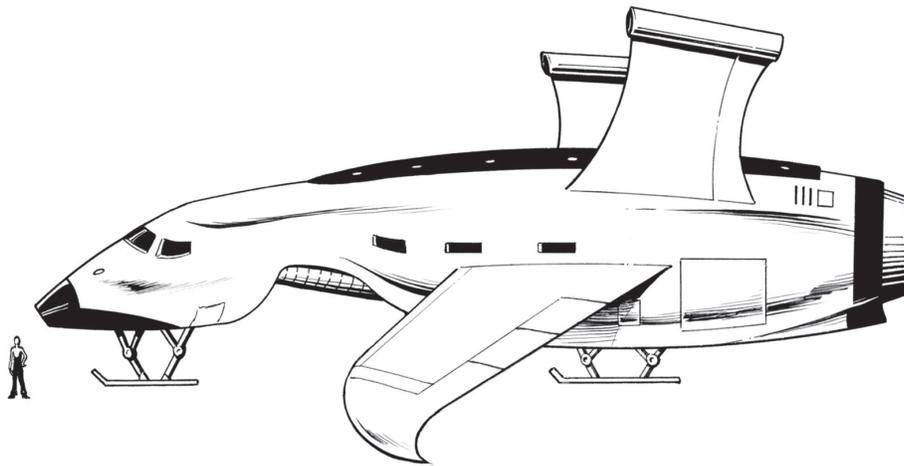
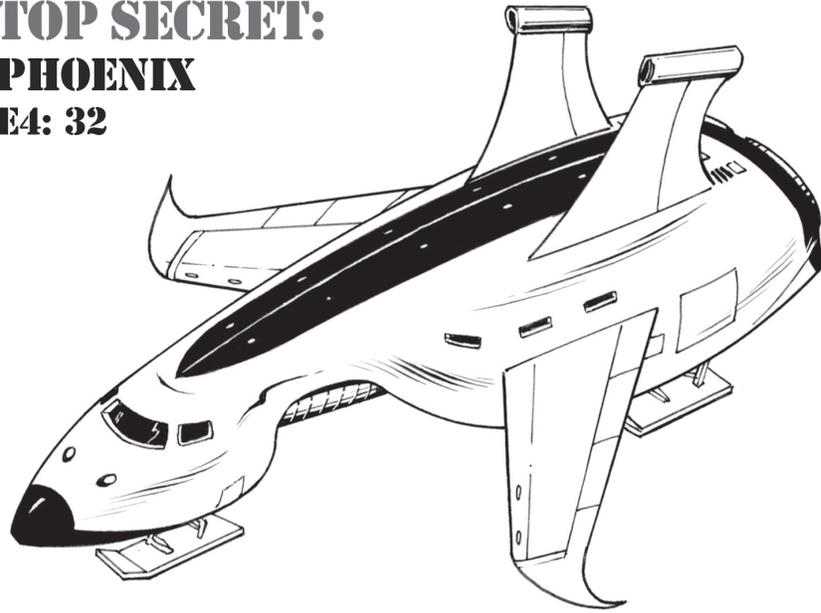
The grieving man placed his face in his hands and began to sob. Samuel stepped forward to comfort him. Had he been able to get through? He placed a hand on his friend’s back.

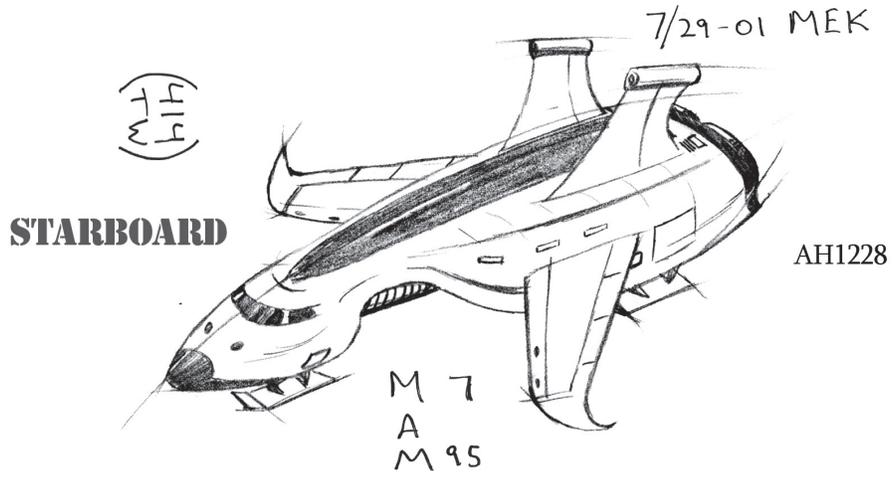
“No, I want you to leave! I’ve made my decision!” the man yelled and stood to his full height. “Leave me!”

Samuel turned to leave. If only his friend would listen. What he’d discovered would not produce the results he wanted. Samuel understood the fullness of the text, but his grieving friend would not listen. He’d asked how Samuel knew, and Samuel replied, “Faith in the Truth.”

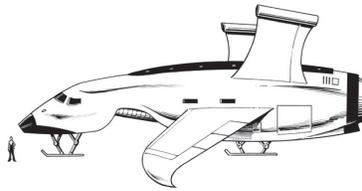
Faith was not something his friend understood. He needed solid evidence; he needed something tangible, something *real*.

**TOP SECRET:  
PHOENIX  
E4: 32**





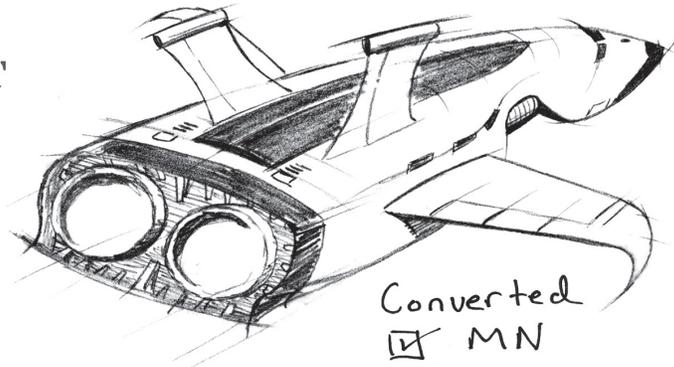
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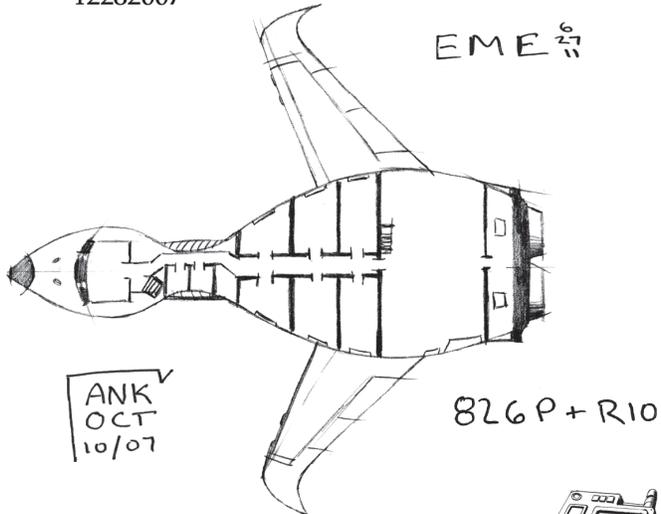
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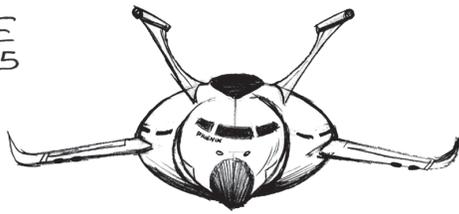
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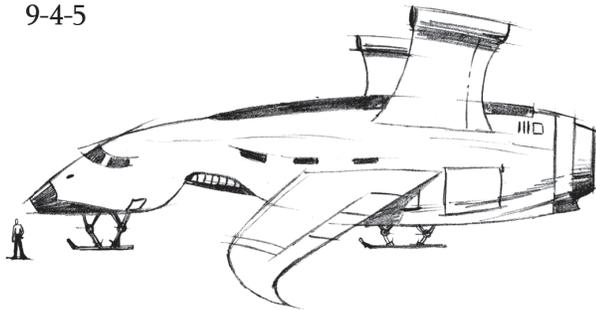


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12.23.1959.3.4.1959

**TOP SECRET:  
THE PHOENIX  
E4: 32**

Commissioned October 25th, 1580, to the federal diplomatic exchange bureau.

Transfer of vessel approved on September 4th, 1590, to ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~  
~~XXXXXX~~

P.O.,

Implemented tracking Sync.  
Networked to BEAM use  
Sequence 12-28-07 to activate.

-S.K.

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## Shock

Oliver stood alone beneath the endless night sky, pondering what lay ahead. In a few minutes his family would leave on an expedition to begin an archeological dig. Normally this meant they'd be neck deep in ruins and ancient artifacts. But his parents were hiding something, and Oliver didn't know why. They weren't usually this secretive.

Three soft beeps sounded from a device on his wrist. For the seventh time in as many minutes, Oliver glanced at his mTalk. It was already midnight. Not surprisingly, his parents were behind schedule. He sighed, realizing he'd have to finish packing by himself. His family was scheduled to launch at 12:30, and there was still a lot to do.

Oliver hurried back into the cargo bay and started stacking the many crates of supplies. One by one he set them in place and strapped them down. As he inspected his work, he wiped the sweat from his face on his sleeve and noticed his bicep bulge beneath the fabric. He'd just turned seventeen and had spent the last year under the physical training regiment of the Academy. He wondered whether he could have completed this task by himself a year ago. He subconsciously rubbed his fingers over the Academy Squadron badge stitched

on the sleeve of his t-shirt. A feeling of belonging and pride came over him.

Something clattered in the hall of the upper deck. Oliver scowled. Mason and Austin were probably fighting. At eleven years old, they were adept at finding opportunities for mischief. Their sister, Tiffany, was supposed to keep an eye on them, but she'd probably fallen asleep reading. Why was he the only responsible one? he wondered, irritated.

Oliver's boots clanked against the metal stairs as he climbed to the balcony overlooking the cargo bay. As he looked through the raised cargo door, the wind blew a variety of autumn leaves into the open bay. The breeze gave him an eerie feeling and he shivered. Something felt wrong. Where were his parents?

Walking down the corridor, Oliver stopped and looked into the research lab. Sure enough Tiffany was asleep on a couch. Her hand grasped their mom's Archeos e-journal, its screen still glowing. Oliver understood his parents' need to document every minute detail of their archeology digs in the journal, but he didn't understand his sister's obsession with reading through the myriad of notes—boring descriptions of glass shards, scraps of metal, and soil samples. Oliver glared at his sister and gave voice to a sigh, hoping to wake her, but it didn't work. She had one job: watch the twins. Oliver felt the warmth in his cheeks; his temper was rising. He'd been making strides in controlling it recently, but when it came to his siblings, he had to work extra hard at keeping it in check.

Oliver crept toward the twins' cabin. He was sure they'd be jumping on their bunks or throwing things at each other. He couldn't wait to nail them and make them clean the galley or lavatories for misbehaving. Surprisingly, their cabin was silent as he approached. The boys were fast asleep, Mason on the bottom bunk and Austin on the top, one leg hanging limply over the side. With a disgusted glance at the messy cabin, Oliver pulled the door shut. He had grown accustomed to the rigor-

ous order kept at the Academy. Oliver glanced at his mTalk. A quarter past midnight! What was keeping his parents?

He stomped back to the cargo bay in frustration. A lot had changed since he'd been gone. His parents were acting differently. Were they mad at him for going to the Academy? He really didn't have a choice since all males had to serve at some point. They should be proud of him for being admitted early at sixteen, a truly rare privilege. And how long had they been hiding things from him? he wondered. The more he thought, the more bizarre his parents' behavior seemed. They'd picked him up from the Academy in an unmarked, expensive silver ship. While it wasn't unusual for Oliver's family to inhabit a ship for expeditions, it was strange that they hadn't mentioned the *Phoenix* earlier. And who had beefed up their budget so they could afford it? He didn't even know where they were going on their current expedition. That was very odd. And there was no sign that anyone from Archeos, the society his parents worked for, would be joining them on this trip.

Oliver flexed his muscles, reminding himself of the physical strides he had made over the past year. He stepped outside and tapped on his mTalk to call his dad. Mr. Wikk's picture appeared on the screen while the mTalk tried to reach him. The call was rejected and the screen went blank. He couldn't believe it. Not only were they late, but now they were ignoring him. Oliver felt his temper rising again. He'd have to fly back to the house and see what was holding them up. They were never going to leave on time.

His black sky scooter hovered outside the *Phoenix*, waiting to take Oliver wherever he needed to go. He swung a leg over, and with a twist on the throttle, the craft quietly darted forward. Ten minutes later Oliver could see his home, a collection of seven connected domes. The quiet night ride had calmed him, even though he was still anxious to get going.

Suddenly, Oliver heard a strange sound. What in the world? Letting off the throttle, he killed the engine. It was

men shouting. Voices he didn't recognize. What was happening? He pulled the sky scooter off the main trail and slid off the seat. Oliver cautiously crept up the trail toward his house. There was a large black transport ship hovering over his front yard. Ropes hung from the sides. There was more shouting. Someone was issuing orders to search the house and grounds.

The backyard was empty, so Oliver was able to race to the garage unobserved. Once inside, he locked the door behind him and approached the next door that led into the kitchen. With a slow turn of the handle, Oliver pushed the door open a crack just large enough to see through. His dad and mom were there, but they weren't alone.

A stranger stood in front of his parents. His face was shadowed by a black pilot cap, but Oliver could see the faint line of a scar on the man's cheek. He wore a black uniform, covered by a long black trench coat. Three silver stripes decorated the upper part of his coat sleeves—that meant he was a captain. Directly above them was a patch with a silver skull and the word *Übel*. *Übel*? Oliver had never heard of them. What was going on? His parents seemed confused too, or maybe shocked. They'd definitely been caught off guard at this man's arrival. And the men shouting? Something was wrong. This guy wasn't a guest; he was an intruder.

"What brings you here at this late hour, Captain Vedrik?" Elliot Wikk asked. Oliver's dad held his hand behind him, and his mom grasped it. Even in the midst of this frightening intrusion, their love was evident. They drew strength from each other.

"You know why I'm here." Captain Vedrik's voice was low and raspy, like a snake's hiss before it strikes. He approached Oliver's parents and looked around the kitchen. A satisfied smile slipped across his lips. "You weren't expecting us until tomorrow."

Mr. Wikk nodded. "We hoped it would be a few days."

"It would have been easier if you'd accepted our offer," Vedrik said with a scowl. "But I suppose we're past that now."

He rolled his shoulders and exhaled. “Where are your children?” Mr. Wikk straightened. Standing protectively in front of Oliver’s mom, he remained silent.

Vedrik smirked and narrowed his eyes. “We know that you picked up Oliver from the Academy, and Tiffany and the twins from Bewaldeter.” Oliver’s chest tightened when Vedrik said his name. He didn’t like the idea of this man knowing so much about his family. What else did he know? Oliver knew he had to stop him. Maybe he could knock him out and help his parents escape, but he had to find the right moment, a moment of surprise.

Vedrik shouted over his shoulder. “Search the house! There should be four children somewhere around here.” Oliver scowled. He was not a child.

Footsteps echoed down the hall as the house was searched. This was his chance. He was ready. Oliver grasped the door handle, but almost as instantly he stopped, and his grip eased. He remembered what he’d learned about balance of forces at the Academy. He was clearly outnumbered and would likely be captured if he attempted a rescue. Taking a deep calming breath, Oliver waited and watched. His heart drummed rapidly.

Mr. Wikk shifted backward. He was purposely blocking something from Vedrik’s view. Of course, it was the book! Oliver’s parents had shown the book to him when he returned. It was the one thing they had shared with him. Covered in crimson leather, the book was the prize find of their last dig. Mr. Wikk hadn’t let it leave his side. Now it sat exposed on the kitchen table like a beacon calling to be seen.

Vedrik moved toward the garage like a fox on the hunt. Mr. Wikk looked toward the door and made eye contact with Oliver. His expression tightened with fear. Fear for his son, not for himself.

Mr. Wikk stepped forward abruptly. Vedrik spun around. “Don’t try anything stupid. The compound is surrounded. There is no escape,” the captain hissed.

Oliver felt his heart drop to his stomach. What could he possibly do? He had to act soon, or even he would be captured.

Vedrik sighed and leaned against the kitchen counter. “My superiors are quite interested in your work, you know. For some reason they feel you are essential to our destiny.” He smiled haughtily. “You should have accepted their generous offer and saved me the trip to this scrap of a planet.”

Oliver’s mom, Laura Wikk, spoke up boldly, “We can’t be bribed.”

Vedrik’s eyebrows narrowed, and an unsettling darkness crept across his face. “It wasn’t a bribe. You should have considered it your salary.” He held out a hand and tightened the strap of his glove. “People can always be bought.” As quickly as the darkness came, it disappeared. The captain shrugged. “There is no choice now.”

“There was never a choice,” Mr. Wikk said.

“True, I suppose, but a willing partner is always better than an unwilling one. Regardless, I’ve been assigned to escort you on this expedition.” Vedrik’s chin rose proudly. “Together we will discover the truth.”

A soldier walked into the kitchen and waited for the captain to acknowledge him. The man shuddered under Vedrik’s annoyed glare. “What is it?”

Clearing his throat, the soldier lowered his head. “Sir, all the bedrooms are empty.”

Vedrik slammed his fist on the counter. The darkness had reappeared. “Where are the children?”

“They aren’t here,” Mr. Wikk admitted.

The captain looked like a wild animal choosing its prey. His eyes bored into Mrs. Wikk. “Where are they?”

Mrs. Wikk responded with confidence and strength. “It’s true. They’re not here.”

Vedrik angrily turned to the soldier. “Search the woods behind the house! These people never lie, it’s against some

code they follow.” The soldier went into the living room and issued new orders.

Oliver took a deep breath. He had to act now or the woods would be swarming with Übel soldiers. He looked around the garage for a weapon but found nothing. They had taken everything to the *Phoenix*. Oliver heard Vedrik’s serpentine voice again.

“We know that your recent discovery has revealed the whereabouts of Ursprung.”

“You’re mistaken,” replied Mrs. Wikk

“As our report stated,” Mr. Wikk clarified, “the discovery at Dabnis Castle leads no farther than the last known location of the Gläubigers.”

Vedrik began to pace. “You speak truthfully, but there is more to the story.” He turned his back on Oliver’s parents. The captain carelessly opened a cabinet and then slammed it shut, continuing his seemingly unfocused yet persistent search. Oliver remained frozen; only an inch of wood separated him and the captain, who was but five steps away.

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Wikk, trying to hold Vedrik’s focus.

“Well,” turning back toward Mr. Wikk, “it was previously believed that the Gläubigers had nothing to do with Ursprung. But we know differently now, don’t we?” Captain Vedrik laughed menacingly. “You underestimate my resources.”

Vedrik moved to the table and took the leather-bound book in his gloved hand. He held it out and cackled. “And what have we here? I saw the book the moment I walked in, but watching your efforts to block it has been amusing! As if you could hide it from me.” A sarcastically sympathetic smile crossed his lips. “This book, this priceless book, is how I know the Gläubigers are linked. The existence of this book was revealed to me just four days ago.” Vedrik looked at Oliver’s parents, who were stunned. It was clear they had not expected this. “And now I find it lying unprotected on your kitchen table.”

Oliver felt anger boiling up inside him, but not at Vedrik this time. Had Oliver's dad shared with him the danger they were in, he could have helped protect the book. Instead, it was clear to him that his parents had been careless.

Mr. and Mrs. Wikk recovered their composure. Their family's safety was all that mattered.

Mr. Wikk inhaled. "Well, now that you have what you need, kindly leave."

Vedrik smiled deviously as he wagged his gloved finger. "No, I don't think so. You see, we still need you!" The finger now pressed against Mr. Wikk's chest. "As you know, it's believed that in an earlier time the Federation prohibited research into Ursprung, and with a single key stroke all electronic records that mentioned our origin were deleted."

So this Übel group wasn't part of the Federal forces; they were something else—rogues, mercenaries, thieves, something dark.

Vedrik stepped away from Mr. Wikk and shook the book with his hand. "Discovering ancient artifacts like this book is the only way we can re-create the information that was lost."

Oliver understood. His parents were renowned archeologists who specialized in the field of origins. These villains needed their expertise.

Mr. Wikk shook his head. "It could take hundreds if not thousands of years to explore all the abandoned settlements scattered throughout the Federation. You'd need hundreds of teams working for you."

Vedrik set the book on the counter. "We don't need to explore every settlement." And raising his eyebrows, he continued, "We already know where the fabled path began. It started at Dabnis Castle. The second waypoint is at the coordinates you discovered in the underground chamber. The very same place you were planning on leaving for tonight."

Oliver clenched his fists. This man knew more of his parents' plans than he did. He was furious. How could they keep this from him?

“As archeology experts, you are essential to our mission,” Vedrik continued. “Your expertise will be needed many times during this expedition.”

“We didn’t accept the money, and our decision hasn’t changed,” Mr. Wikk clarified.

Mrs. Wikk nodded her head. “Money has never been a motivation for our work.”

“How noble,” he sneered.

Mrs. Wikk stared into Vedrik’s cold, black eyes. “We search for truth, and its discovery is our reward.”

Vedrik stared with boredom at Oliver’s mom and then ran his finger across the book’s cover. “My superiors believe, as do I, that Ursprung holds many answers. Answers that validate legends that became myths just a few centuries ago and were historical facts only a millennium before that. You see, my society’s desires are not much different from yours.”

Oliver could see that his parents weren’t buying Vedrik’s motives, and neither did he. Übel was after more than just the truth, but what?

Vedrik continued his proclamation. “There is no greater mystery to be solved than where we humans came from—our origin. The rewards garnered from any truths that you’ve discovered thus far cannot compare to what Ursprung can unlock.” The darkness crept back across Vedrik’s face, and his fist rose in anger. “And you know that!” shouted Vedrik, consumed with rage. Then a clever smile crossed his face, washing away the anger and darkness. “Perhaps I should share something with you,” Vedrik said.

Walking across the kitchen, Vedrik turned to face Oliver’s parents. “Many years ago one of my superiors came across an artifact from a long-abandoned city. Do you know what was written on that artifact?”

Mr. and Mrs. Wikk just waited silently, paralyzed with anticipation as they cautiously observed the disturbed man before them.

Vedrik looked toward the ceiling. “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish.” He spoke as if the words were tattooed on his innermost soul. “Do you understand those words?” But the captain didn’t give them a chance to answer. “The secret to living forever is within our grasp. The secret to eternal youth.”

The handle on the other door to the garage rattled as someone, likely a soldier, attempted to come inside. Oliver turned to see and shifted awkwardly on his left foot. It twisted slightly and his shoulder nudged the door to the kitchen. He looked back to the captain instantly, but it was too late. Vedrik abruptly turned toward the garage door.

A streak of fear bolted through Oliver. His stomach seemed to turn over, and his mind went numb. Captain Vedrik’s cold black eyes were all he could see, and they were locked on him.