

Faith & Empire

The Holy Terran Empire

Book One

By

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FAITH & EMPIRE

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Thank You.

For

Georgette

PRAYER AND FASTING

“Diende, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”

I crossed myself at the words of absolution. “Amen,” I said and lifted my head to peer through the latticed screen of the confessional. “Thank you, Father.”

“God be with you, Marine,” the priest responded.

I exited the confessional, leaving its door open for the next penitent in line. I then found myself an open spot on the aisle end of a nearby pew and knelt to offer up my penance. When the prayers were said, I rose from the kneeler and sat back to prepare myself for the Mass and for the coming battle.

The chapel of Saint Pius V was aboard the Imperial Star Ship *Lepanto*, a Paladin-class battleship parked outside the Muvurunian star

system. Her mission: uproot the pirate horde that made the system their stronghold. In a few short hours, if the pirates didn't heed our demand to surrender unconditionally, the *Lepanto* would lead her battle group in a punitive invasion of the system.

If so, it would be my first time in battle.

And of course, I was nervous. In fact, I confessed to being outright afraid.

"The flesh is always weak," Father Ochiro reminded me gently. "No matter how hardened it is by training or how steeled by discipline the spirit, the flesh is always the weak link in our fallen, mortal state. So, do not berate yourself for being afraid. What you feel is only natural. It's certainly not a sin. Remember, the knowledge of His coming Passion so wracked our Lord's flesh with fear that He sweat blood."

"Yes, Father."

"Offer up your fear to our Lord," the priest added. "Join it to His suffering on the cross. Pray for an increase of faith in our Lord's mercy and rely on the training the Empire has invested in you. If you can do that, you will do well in God's eyes."

"I will do my best, Father."

"I know you will, son. Imperial Marines can do no less."

A half hour later, the Mass began and I prayed as the priest recommended. As it most often did, the liturgy swept me up, drawing me out of myself, climaxing in the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. My unease left me as the Holy Host dissolved against my palate. At last, I was able to settle comfortably into a deep sense of peace during the denouement of closing prayers. When the priest sent us off at the end of the Mass, I filed out quietly and contentedly with the rest of my freshly shriven brothers of Fifth Battalion.

Six abreast, we made our way through the *Lepanto* to one of the ship's hangar decks for a pre-mission briefing. We were in our dress uniforms, red-trimmed gray brigandines with matching zouave pants stuffed into black, long boots shined to a mirror finish. Gold-buttoned red gaiters dressed the boots. Our waists were girded with red silk sashes whose ends dangled half way down our thighs from the ceremonial knots tied at our left hips. Our heads were topped with berets, gray with red piping and stalk.

Beside me, Izzy Hooke, my oldest friend in the corps patted his belly as it made muffled gurgling noises. "Hang in there, beastie," he said. "It won't be too much longer."

"Are you hungry already?" I asked him.

“Always,” was his response. “I’ve told you, fasting don’t agree with me.”

I chuckled as did a few others around us. Izzy was part Kunthian, a big man, over two meters tall, with a prodigious appetite which chafed against the Imperial Marines’ practice of fasting before battle. Myself, I could go a couple of days without feeling a genuine pang of hunger, but doing without breakfast and lunch was enough to rile up Izzy’s stomach.

“I’m going to have me a couple of ribeyes as soon as I get back from this butt-kicking field trip,” Izzy said. “And three or four potatoes. Wash it all down with a quart of that Malaga Red Ale we loaded up on Aragona.”

A few rows ahead of us, our Company Chaplain, Nicholai Prata turned his head to address Izzy, “As soon as you get back? That wouldn’t be the sin of presumption we’re hearing from you, would it, Marine?”

“No Father,” Izzy answered. “It’s the virtue of faith you’re eavesdropping on.”

The chaplain smiled and turned back around.

“How is it that a Christian, born and bred, finds fasting so difficult?” Our platoon’s First Sergeant, Ross Hayes asked from the row behind us.

“Were you brought up in some exotic rite that doesn’t do Lent?”

“It’s nothing like that, sarge,” Izzy said.

“My priest and I, we had us an accord, that’s all; so, I never had to fast, during Lent or on Ember Days.”

“Oh?” Chaplain Prata turned back to face Izzy.

“Yeah, he allowed me to substitute wearing a hair shirt for fasting,” Izzy explained. “And Father Moses also insisted that I sleep on the floor during Lent. Even on Sundays. There was extra time at prayer, of course, and extra alms work which meant I had to volunteer my free time to church maintenance and grounds keeping and whatever else Father Moses needed done around the parish.”

“Sounds like your priest made out pretty good for himself with that accord,” First Sergeant Hayes said.

“Father Moses did use me like a rented mule during fast days,” Izzy said with a laugh and a shrug. “But I didn’t mind. Not so long as I got my four squares a day.”

“Four?”

“I’m part Kunthian, you know.”

“Only an eighth,” Hayes objected.

“What can I tell you sarge,” Izzy said with a shrug. “That eighth is all appetite.”

We all laughed, Izzy included.

Similar conversations were happening up and down our column. The moments of levity were welcomed distractions from the serious matters ahead of us.

We'd been in deep space, well beyond the Imperial border, hunting pirates for the last seven months. These particular rogues we sought were as highly organized as they were ruthless. They had outposts on a score of worlds and they ran roughshod over twice that many more planets.

They operated in a large, roughly wedge-shaped swath of open territory, the broad end of which was lodged between the borders of the Federation of Free Planets, the Union of Democratic Worlds and our Empire.

The entire sector was once ruled by the Dominion of Man, history's first galactic empire. More than a thousand years ago the Dominion lost a long and costly war with the Holy League Worlds. After their defeat, the Dominion's interplanetary civilization imploded. The superpower crumbled into over a hundred independent planets.

Surviving officers, many of them made up of the genetically-enhanced Orion super soldiers, as well as pedagogues and messianic ideologues of every stripe rushed in with armies, militias and

mob at their back to fill the power vacuum left by the demise of the once all-powerful Dominion.

Three centuries of infighting ensued. Interplanetary war, global civil wars, revolutions and genocidal campaigns collapsed world after world of the former Dominion of Man. Most were reduced to nearly neolithic barbarism by the end of the three hundred and score years of the most savage warfare in human history.

The Holy League was too weakened by its crusade against the Dominion to mitigate the murderous madness that swept across the region. The League's attention was instead turned inward; its energies and resources spent recovering, rebuilding, consolidating forces, shuffling powers and hierarchies and sadly, some vicious infighting, until ultimately forging itself into the Holy Terran Empire I served as an Imperial Marine.

Many of the Dominion's ravaged planets had clawed their way back to some semblance of civilization since those savage centuries. Eleven of the old Dominion worlds were converted and absorbed into the Holy Terran Empire. Twenty-two others banded together into the Union of Democratic Worlds. Twenty-six joined to create the Federation of Free Planets. And the Dominion's

surviving legion of Orion Super Soldiers carved their namesake Hegemony out of thirty-four worlds.

Another forty-three planets remained independent, scattered across that farthest stretch of free space on the edge of the civilized galaxy. None of these unaligned worlds had a space-faring navy. This had allowed piracy to exist uncontested in the area ever since the fall of the Dominion of Man.

For centuries, individual and loose bands of these rogues contented themselves with picking clean the bones of the dead Dominion. Four decades ago they banded under one flag, declared themselves, The Free Alliance and claimed sovereignty over all the remaining unaligned worlds.

The neighboring galactic powers refused to acknowledge their legitimacy. The Union, the Federation and the Empire all refused to pay the tariffs and taxes the Free Alliance demanded of all who wished to continue trading with their new vassal worlds.

A recent change in Alliance leadership decided to take what their neighbors would not give. The pirates began confiscating the cargoes, ships and crews which ventured into Alliance space. Cargoes were sold off, captured ships were absorbed into the Alliance navy and their crews were ransomed off, all in lieu of past payments.

When the neighboring powers ceased doing business in Alliance space, the pirates directed their parasitical plundering beyond their borders. In a short time, the Alliance became a thorn in the sides of the Empire, Union and the Federation.

Several skirmishes between pirate forces and some of the various worlds near their borders were fought over the years, none effecting the pirates' behavior. To the contrary, the fighting recently brought the Union to the negotiation table.

Everyone expected the Union would soon recognize the Alliance as a legitimate political entity. The Federation hadn't thus far capitulated but neither had their populations been riled up enough by pirate abuses to summon up the political will to root them out.

Emboldened by these weak responses, the pirates continued making forays into their enemies' territories, including Imperial space, attacking trade caravans and pilgrim caravels.

Unfortunately for the would-be Free Alliance, the Empire was not as forbearing as either the Union or the Federation. Our emperor was not hampered by democratic considerations as were the leaders of the latter powers. After being forced to ransom the crews of three tankers and two caravels

in a single year, Emperor Andreas VI declared the situation to be intolerable.

The Imperial Navy, *The Emperor's Own*, as we are called, took it from there.

Three Paladin battle groups were formed to eradicate the pirate menace once and for all. The battle groups were complemented by contributions of ships and men from the Imperial Principdom most harassed by the pirates. Two of the battle groups, led by the Paladins *Shimabara* and *La Valette*, set about purging the sector of the pirate outposts and toppling the regimes of their Governor Generals. All the while, the *Lepanto* battle group traced the lines of panicked communications and the trajectories of the enemy's fleeing ships to the pirates' secret stronghold in the Muvuru system, a heretofore unknown seven planet system near the far end of the Perseus Arm.

Immediately upon arriving at Muvuru, *Lepanto's* Commodore, Josias Alba, hailed the horde and demanded their unconditional surrender. The response came back, "*Lepanto*, you are trespassing in Free Alliance space. You will withdraw immediately. Failure to comply will be taken as an act of imperial aggression, and as an act of war."

“We do not recognize the territorial claims of pirates,” Commodore Alba told them. “You have three days to surrender unconditionally to the Mercy of God and the authority of His Most Benevolent Emperor, Andreas VI.”

Silence was the loud response to the commodore’s second and subsequent calls to surrender.

Several probes were sent into the system over the past three days. The pirates destroyed them all. Before their destruction, the probes showed us glimpses of a ragtag fleet of over four hundred ships arrayed against the *Lepanto* and her escorts. Additionally, our short-lived probes noted three heavily fortified bases spread throughout the system.

Dislodging the enemy would not be easy.

I glanced furtively about me at my fellow marines and wondered if I was alone in wishing the pirate horde would see reason and submit quietly.

2

MISSION BRIEFING

We filed into the hanger deck where thousands of chairs were set up in concentric half-rings around a raised dais. The first few rows, but for two in the center marked reserved, were filled with Angel Fighter pilots in their bright blue flight suits. Our regiment's other four battalions occupied the seats behind them. We filed into the outermost seats.

A couple of minutes after we were seated, Colonel Llewellyn L'Amour entered from a separate entrance on the ship's starboard. He wore a white brigandine, red sash and black zouave trousers tucked into black, knee-high boots. His gaiters were white with red buttons. He had large, thickly-veined hands and a bald, egg-shaped head beneath his white and red beret. The colonel had a black beard, cut in the short, spade-shape favored by his order of knights. His dark green eyes regarded us coolly from above a large hooked nose as he made his way to a raised dais at center stage.

At the colonel's heels followed two men in red brigandines, gold sashes and black, straight-legged pants tucked into red, long boots. Gold capes hung from their shoulders to the back of their calves. Swords hung from their sides in gold-fluted and gemmed sheaths. Their sword belts were wide,

black and buckled by golden, double-headed griffins. Their heads were uncovered.

One of them was a young man, no older, I guessed, than my own twenty-two years. He was fair of skin, blue-eyed with a full head of blond hair that reached to his shoulders. He was handsome in the extreme, possessed of the softly-chiseled good looks that could've made him a holoflix star, with or without acting ability.

The second man trailing our colonel was considerably older, sixty or seventy years old. He was just as fair but also taller, leaner and wore what was left of his gray hair close-cropped, seeming like a thin layer of ash across a bony skull.

Our company's Captain, Dayo Obey, black and lean of face and limb, snapped to rigid attention and bellowed, "Lords on deck!"

The regiment rose to attention together with the more than three hundred pilots. We clicked our heels and our right hands snapped to our shoulders in the Imperial salute, thumb, fore and index fingers raised and spread in representation of the Trinity, ring and pinky fingers curled together against the palm symbolizing the human and divine natures of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

More than five thousand voices cried out as one, "Faith and Empire!"

Colonel and companions returned the salute before L'Amour added, "At ease, gentlemen. Take your seats."

Our raised hands balled into fists and we beat them once against the center of our chests. We then dropped our hands and sat.

When we were settled in, Colonel L'Amour continued. "This is Lord Zoltan, First Born of Prince Sandor Kelemen of Crimea Secundus."

The young man bowed his head and clicked his heels in greeting.

"And his aide-de-camp, Lord Earl, Kosta Kolchick."

The elder repeated the greeting in turn.

"Our lords will be sitting in with us. They're here to represent the Princedom of Austros which, as you all know, has, with noble generosity, volunteered to buttress our ranks with their justly celebrated First Regiment of Space Marines, the '*Sons of Thunder*,' as well as with *Martel's Marauders*, Second Armored Company, the Destroyers, *Emperor Karl* and *King Sobieski*, the carrier *Czar Peter Magnus* as well as a dozen Flying Hussars of the Royal House, Kelemen.

"We are honored and most pleased to have these brave, brother Christian warriors of Austros in our company. They are watching our briefing

aboard their various ships. So, a warm welcome to you all and allow me, once again, to express our beloved Emperor's gratitude for joining our ranks. The Princedom of Austros is dear to his Imperial Majesty's heart and he counts House Kelemen among his most fierce and faithful of friends. You are ever in his prayers."

Colonel L'Amour paused to bow to Lords Zoltan and Kolchick before continuing, "As for myself, the Imperial Marines of 3d Regiment and on behalf of Commodore Alba and all the officers and crews of the *Lepanto* and her escorts, we welcome our lords and Austros' finest into our ranks.

"Be assured dear brothers in Christ, it will be our great honor to fight alongside you if it be our good God's will that our mission lead us into battle. Is that not so, gentlemen?"

Third Regiment and the assembled Angel fighter pilots sprung to attention again and responded with an enthusiastic and quite loud, "I-O!"

The men on stage smiled. Lords Zoltan and Kosta bowed deeply in gratitude.

Colonel L'Amour gestured to the pair of empty seats in the front row. "My lords, if you would."

Once Zoltan and Kosta took their seats, we took ours.

Colonel L'Amour aimed a thin, two-inch long remote at the bulbous, volley ball-sized holographic projector floating ten meters in the air above us. A holographic representation of the Muvurunian system appeared between the dais and our seats.

Muvuru was a yellow star, similar to Sol in both size and age. Seven planets orbited Muvuru, none of which were habitable. Muvuru one, two and seven were presently on the far side of the system. The other four were spread across the hemisphere before us. A broad asteroid belt separated the inner two planets from the outer five. Icons representing the *Lepanto* and her battle group were clustered just outside the sphere of orbits.

“We are farther beyond the Empire’s borders than any Imperial ship has ever gone,” Colonel L'Amour began. “Up until three weeks ago, Muvuru was just a name overheard on pirate chatter. Imperial Intelligence guessed it was their secret base, the lair from which they struck out and retreated to, but until *La Valette* and the *Shimabara* began purging the sector of its pirate infestation, **I.I.** had no idea where to find Muvuru.

“Since our arrival, we have determined that, as well as serving as the pirates’ Alliance home base, Muvuru is also a heretofore unknown system of the old Dominion of Man. More than that, it appears to be a remarkably well preserved system.

“From what our probes and long range scans have been able to determine, this system was being mined for various ores and gases when the Dominion collapsed. It must have been abandoned about that time and then simply forgotten until it was rediscovered by the pirates who presently hold it. We’ve detected several facilities throughout the system, processors and refineries mostly, some automated and others dormant.

“There are also three large, deep-dug personnel bases where our pirates are presently holed up. The first two are found on the moons of the gas giants, Muvuru 5 and Muvuru 6. The third and largest base is on the planet Muvuru 3.”

The planet and moons were highlighted in the hologram by glowing auras.

“Now, as much as we would prefer to just bombard the bases from orbit, reduce them to dust and be on our merry way, we can’t,” Colonel L’Amour said. “Unfortunately, this system is an historic find. Muvuru could turn out to be an archaeological treasure trove and...”

“We’re not going to bomb them from a safe distance so that archeologists and historians can have something to scribble about?”

The question was put forth by Hervis Bucci, a pale, red-headed corporal in our company. The major smiled indulgently at him, but it was Captain Obey that responded. “One of those scribblers happens to be our Emperor, corporal.”

“Oh yeah?” Corporal Bucci asked with what struck me as feigned surprise. The corporal was one of the biggest recipients of my prayers in the company, for I so disliked the man.

“His Highness is quite the historian,” Colonel L’Amour said. “And the Emperor takes a particular interest in old Dominion history, in fact.”

“I did not know that,” the corporal said with an exaggerated nodding of his head. Some laughed at his comic performance.

“Yet besides the historic nature of these sites,” Colonel L’Amour continued. “There may also be hostages among this brood of vipers.”

“Ah, damsels in distress and other innocents to rescue,” Corporal Bucci said. “That I can get behind!”

“So glad to have you back with us, corporal,” Colonel L’Amour said to a round of chuckles I thought Bucci took inordinate pleasure in.

With some effort I turned my mind from some inviting and uncharitable thoughts about the corporal's interjections.

Colonel L'Amour went on. "As I was saying, four caravels out of Caraquador were captured by these pirates ten months ago. Their crews and passengers may be squirrelled away on one or all three bases."

"If they haven't already been sold to an Orion slave market," Lord Kosta Kolchick offered.

"Certainly a possibility, my lord," Colonel L'Amour conceded with a grave nod of his head. "But we'll err on the side of hope, where we can."

"You must forgive my Lord Kolchic," Lord Zoltan said. "He always insists on pointing out the worst-case scenarios."

The elder lord raised an eyebrow in a side glance to his junior royal. It was a look of mild askance at perhaps having heard the complaint too many times.

Our colonel chuckled softly before responding, "No need for an apology, my lords. It is right that we are reminded of all the possibilities before us and, not to mention, the exact nature of the enemy."

Both lords gave L'Amour ever so slight nods of their royal heads.

The colonel acknowledged them with a smile and continued. "Thus, while there exists hope of finding hostages, ours is as much a search and rescue mission as it is a punitive one."

The colonel clicked the remote and the icons representing our fleet began moving, splitting into three groups as they penetrated the system.

"The fleet will split into four attack groups," L'Amour continued. "Attack group Alpha and Beta led respectively by the Frigates, *Misilmeri* and *Cerami* will tackle the moons of gas giants Muvuru 5 and 6. Four Lance Interceptors, six Spontoons, and a Flight of Angels will provide orbital support to each battle group.

"Alpha group's objective is to capture the base on Muvuru 6, moon 4 of 6," The colonel paused to summon the image of a red and black striped orb. "*The Santa Isabella*, the *Santos Pelayo* and *Bernal Diaz* will drop our 2nd Battalion for the surface raid. Austros' 3rd Battalion will join them courtesy of the Hussars, *Almos*, *Turul* and *Victor Orban*.

Colonel Llewellyn L'Amour spent several minutes detailing the surface conditions of the moon, the known defenses of the base and outlining the general plan of attack. When he was done, the colonel clicked his remote and brought up the image

of the gas giant Muvuru 5 and its satellites, focusing eventually on the third of its seven moons, a gray and green-mottled orb.

“Attack Group Beta’s assault on Muvuru 5, moon 3 of 7 will be shared by our own 4th Battalion and Austros’ 2nd Battalion,” L’Amour continued. “The *Santos Ferdinand*, *Guifre* and *Cervantes* will drop the 4th and the Hussars *Prince Henry*, *Prince Kazimierz* and the *King Wladyslaw* will deliver the 2nd to the fight.”

The colonel took a few minutes to detail the conditions and resistance group Beta was likely to encounter and the strategies they would employ against them.

“As we penetrate deeper into the system,” the colonel continued. “The remainder of the fleet will split into groups Gamma and Delta. Gamma will consist of the *Lepanto*, the frigates *Montgisard* and *Roncevalle*, the halberds, *Richard Lionheart* and *Raymond du Puy*, the destroyers, *Emperor Karl* and *King Sobieski* and the hussars, *Romanov* and *Habsburg*.

“Gamma group will engage the enemy fleet. While they do so, Delta group, led by the frigate *King Alfred*, will lead the assault on Muvuru-3.”

A click of the remote brought forth an image of third planet and ballooned it until it took up the

space formerly filled by entire system. It was an orb brindled in blue and russet loosely latticed bands, mottled with pock marks of gray craters, scarred by ridges of tall and jagged mountains and capped by two small patches of polar ice.

L'Amour started up again. "This ball of ice is where the Dominion miners built the system's main base and where our pirates are most heavily concentrated and defended. We're going to assault it with the remaining six battalions because it is bound to be the hardest nut to crack."

I sat forward to pay close attention, knowing that my battalion, the 5th, would be in on this assault.

3

THE HARD NUT

"The planet's atmosphere is composed of seventy-six percent hydrogen, fifteen percent helium and the rest is mostly methane which, the last three days of observations have shown us, can erupt in fiery geysers from beneath the planet's mantle at random," L'Amour began his description of Muvuru-3.

“Sounds highly unstable,” Chaplain Prata said.

“It is, Padre,” the colonel agreed. “The planet has a metastable liquid metal core of ultra-pressurized hydrogen. And planetary mantle instability and deterioration is being exacerbated by the mining operations. More on that in a minute.

“Gravity is eighty-eight percent of Earth’s standard, so mobility should not be a problem. Lastly, we’ll be touching down during the planet’s deep winter. Surface temperature averages sit at a chilly minus 50 degrees Celsius.”

The holographic orb ballooned again, enlarging to display a large swath of rugged terrain of dun and dull yellow faintly marbled with streaks of rust-red. A shoehorn-shaped protrusion of rock wedged between a large, deep crater and towering mountains was centered on the image.

“Our target is here,” the colonel continued, highlighting the shoehorn. “Eleven degrees south of the equatorial line, dug a kilometer and a half deep into this mesa. We’ve detected three entrances, one at the top, another at the base of the mesa’s north side and one on its east side about half way up at the end of this narrow land bridge. We will assault the base from each direction. Thus, Attack Group Delta will be subdivided into three forces.

“The Halberds, *Santos Godfrey de Bouillon*, *Don Juan*, *Gonzalo Fernandez* and *King Louis* will drop our 3rd Battalion and two squads of mechs in this valley just six clicks north of the mesa. The *Hermann von Salza* and the *King Konrad* will add Austros’ 5th Battalion. Together, this northern force will be designated, *Iron Arm*. And it will lay low in this valley, safely out of the enemy’s line of sight, until called forth by the *King Alfred*.

“The call will come as soon as the eastern force, designated *Hammer Strike*, climbs out of this sunken plain. *Hammer Strike* will consist of our 5th Battalion, two squads of mechs, Austros’ 4th Battalion and Martel’s Marauder’s Tank Corps. The *Santos Cortes*, *Andrea Doria*, *Colombo* and *Torquemada* will drop our boys, and the *King Andrew* and *Czar Nicholas* will bring theirs.

“Dropping directly onto the sunken plain would expose the ships to overwhelming fire from the mesa’s ground to orbit batteries. You will instead drop to the surface here, seventy-one kilometers south and fly as low as possible through these hills to the sunken plain. This course will greatly reduce your exposure to enemy fire.

“First Battalions, Austros and Imperial will be designated, force *Thunderclap*, and together, we will assault the mesa top once the *King Alfred* has

silenced the enemy's surface-to-orbit guns. I will lead them down aboard *El Cid* with 1st Platoon. The *Saints Charlemagne* and *Magnus* will deliver the rest of the battalion. The *Empress Catherine* and the *Vladimir Putin* will drop Austros' 1st Battalion."

Colonel L'Amour clicked the remote. The hologram ballooned again, displaying a close-up of the mesa, sitting, it seemed at the center of a web of fissures.

"This base sits in the center of a vast network of tunnels that stretch more than halfway around the planet," the colonel continued. "Notice anything peculiar about these tunnels?"

I knew next to nothing about mining, but the web of squiggly lines radiating out from the underground base looked a lot more organic than I would have imagined they should for those produced by mining operations.

"Those tunnels were dug by ore wyrms," Barrel-chested Lieutenant, Breck Sheed said from a few rows ahead of me. I noticed several heads scattered throughout the deck nodding in agreement. Most of us however looked around with clueless expressions.

"That's right," Colonel L'Amour said, giving the remote another click. A hologram of a writhing ore wyrm replaced that of Muvuru-3. We

studied the image of the large, sharp-tooth mawed and scale-studded monstrosity in silence for a few seconds. “Ore wyrms, for those of you who don’t know, are genetically designed to bore through planet mantles, eating the earth and rock and, well... to be blunt, they then crap out the ores.”

Chuckles rustled through the assembled marines and fighter pilots as the imaginations of those of us who had never heard of ore wyrms concocted their various images.

“Now that’s a neat talent,” someone said from the back of the room.

“I know a gene tweaker on Rega who might be able to give you that enhancement, if you like eating dirt, that is,” Corporal Bucci offered and we shared a laugh, myself included.

“Just how big are these wyrms, colonel?” Izzy asked.

“Adults average a circumference of seven to ten meters and a length of anywhere between twenty to forty meters. They weigh a ton or two, depending on their size.”

Izzy responded with a “Yikes! These things can’t be legal.”

Colonel L’Amour responded, “They are legal, but their use is restricted to uninhabitable

planets, has been so since the signing of the Gemini Accord.”

“Colonel, if one of these ore wyrms swallows Shoji, here,” Our platoon’s First Sergeant Hayes asked with an elbow nudge to the marine on his left. “Are you saying the only thing left of my corporal will be his tooth?”

Corporal Yukio Shoji sported a gold plated incisor on his upper rack so we all had us a good laugh, the corporal and colonel included.

“And nothing but the tooth,” L’Amour answered at last. “These wyrms are as dumb as the rocks they eat, but they’re dangerous. Besides their granite-grinding choppers, they secrete a highly corrosive enzyme that aids them in boring through planet mantles. Ore wyrms are silicon based organisms. Very tough hide. Additionally, their hides are studded with jagged, diamond-crusted scales that will cut you to ribbons if you’re foolish enough to get yourself ground under them. Armor will not protect you, not for very long anyway. Power armor will endure it more readily but not indefinitely.

“Additionally, bead fire will be practically useless unless you can convince the wyrms to keep their maws open long enough for you to empty a couple of drums down their throats.”

“And pulse weapons?” someone behind me asked.

“They will hurt and even kill them with enough concentrated fire,” L’Amour answered. “Power swords will hack them up nicely, but not without splattering their enzymes all over the place. Considering the confines of the tunnels, you might want to resist the urge to emulate Saint George unless you absolutely have no other choice. Plasma will kill them quickest and cleanest of all, so lead with your Burners if you have to enter the tunnels. But they are not the enemy, so steer clear of them if you can.”

“What’s the likelihood of our coming across one?” Lord Zoltan asked.

“We have no way of knowing that right now,” L’Amour responded. “In truth, my lord, we don’t know if there are any wyrms still left on the planet. It’s been at least a thousand years since they were first introduced into the planet’s mantle. On any world of civilized space, they would’ve been engineered sterile and died out centuries ago. The Dominion, however, wasn’t party to the Gemini Accord, so their wyrms might have been engineered to breed.”

“In which case there could be thousands of them down there,” Lieutenant Breck Sheed offered.

“We’ve equipped the recon-rovers with ground-penetrating radar just to be sure,” L’Amour said with a nod. “The proliferation of wyrms boring unchecked through a predator-free environment could explain the instability of the planet’s surface. We’ll have a better idea when we get down there, but the initial geologic scans suggest the planet’s mantle has only a few centuries left before it experiences a catastrophic collapse.

“If they’ve been digging through the mantle for centuries, think of all the treasure they must have... um, deposited,” Corporal Bucci mused out loud.

“Such a treasure would go a long way to explaining how the pirates got their hands on so many recruits and so much military hardware in so little time,” L’Amour said.

“You’d think that stumbling across so much wealth would tempt the pirates to go honest,” Corporal Shoji said.

“You would,” Chaplain Prata responded, “Except that evil, as we know, is a God-sized hole in the soul. It’s an infinite abyss. There’s not enough wealth, power or pleasure that can ever fill it.”

“That’s right, padre. And the pirate with the ugliest hole in him is one, Lugo Grogorum,”

Colonel L'Amour said with another click of the remote.

A hologram of the dark, large and mutton-chopped head of the pirate replaced that of the ore wyrm.

L'Amour continued as we studied the image and read the stats bullet-pointed beside him. "Lugo is the eldest son of the Orion Hegemony's royal house, Grogorum. He disappeared from everyone's radar for forty years until just about a month ago. Based on the communications we have been intercepting, Imperial Intelligence has high confidence that Lugo spent three decades working his way up the ranks of the pirate horde and the last seven to ten years leading them.

"The voice which responded to Commodore Alba's order to surrender was a match for Lugo Grogorum, so we believe he's out there somewhere."

Someone in the rear of the hall voiced my own question. "How did Orion royalty get mixed up with these pirates?"

"Succession in Hegemony royal houses is determined by mortal combat between sons of the Queen Concubine," Colonel L'Amour answered. "Lugo apparently didn't think much of his chances of defeating his younger brother, so he upped and

fled, abdicating his claim to the barony two weeks before Ulyrik reached the age where he could challenge his elder brother to their Blood Rite of Succession.”

“The coward can’t be too much of a threat, running away from his little brother like that,” one of the pilots offered from the front of the room and we had us a laugh at the pirate leader’s expense.

“Ulyrik is something of an Orion among Orions, a possible future contender for the Hegemony crown,” Captain Obey said. “He is much feared throughout their empire.”

“The other houses keep a wary eye on him, or so I. I. believes,” Colonel L’Amour concurred. “Be that as it may, let us not underestimate Lugo. His sibling never backed him against a wall as we are about to do. Additionally, when he fled the Hegemony, Lugo took his personal guard of a hundred Mandrillion with him.”

The overhead projector created an image of the six-limbed, simian-human hybrid. The specimen presented to us had fur of a dark olive with red highlights, especially on the mane that haloed its head. Piercing amber-colored eyes and the white and red painted face gave it a fierce aspect. The holo didn’t show it, but I knew the creature’s snout hid a set of curved fangs.

“However, long before we can get to Lugo, his monkey-men or the ore wyrms,” L’Amour continued. “We’re going to have our hands full dealing with the very deadly hardware our probes managed to spot before they were so rudely destroyed. So, listen up and listen close if you want to up the odds of returning in one piece...”

4

THE BATTLE BEGINS

“Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for battle, my fingers for war,” Chaplain Prata recited the Imperial battle prayer which began with the opening verses of the 143rd Psalm, prayed by Christian soldiers down the ages. His raspy tenor came through my helmet’s comm link crisp and clear. *“My refuge and my fortress, my stronghold, my deliverer, my shield, in whom I trust, who subdues peoples under me.”*

Our briefing ended nearly two hours ago. The mission clock counted down to zero soon after. The invasion was a go!

I was aboard the *Santo Torquemada*, down on my right knee with the rest of 5th Battalion’s C

Company. We were suited up and lined up by squads, twelve abreast, sixteen deep. Our plasteel plate armor was gray with red fluting, our breastplates stamped with the Imperial Marines' emblem of gold, sword-shaped cross and red omega. Our hauberks were black.

A squad of the Knights of Saint James Matamoros knelt in the row ahead of us. They were in their bulky power armor, white with red highlights. Their breastplates were stamped with their order's namesake cross.

Behind us knelt a squad of Hospitallers, minus Chaplain Prata who was up front, leading us in prayer. These warrior-priests also wore plate and chain, all black but for the simple, white cross that emblazoned their breast plates.

Behind the Hospitallers were two squads of squires, in red and white checkered plasteel plate. The crysteel hauberks they wore beneath the plate were red.

A dozen hulking, five-meter tall, silver and gold mechanized knights stood in trios behind our columns. Their breastplates were also emblazoned with the red Saint James Cross. The knights who operated the mechs were on the deck in pressurized gambesons and helmets, kneeling beneath their "walking tanks."

A formidable fighting force as could be found anywhere in the galaxy, our voices rose as one as we all joined Chaplain Prata in praying verses derived from ancient Byzantine and Russian liturgies, *“O Lord, judge those who offend Thee. Smite those who set themselves against Thee. Come to our aid with arms and shields.”*

Knights, squires and marines then fell silent as Chaplain Prata and his fellow Hospitallers continued, *“Make Thy faithful soldiers glad in Thy strength, O Lord. May Thy cross, invincible weapon of peace, assist us in battle and grant us victory over the enemies of our True Faith and our glorious Empire.”*

One man in each marine squad had an aether generator strapped to his back which powered a formidable Mark IV Plasma Rifle. Izzy was our squad’s *Burner*. The rest of us wielded all-purpose **HAW 3Ks**. The bulky **Heavy Assault Weapons** weren’t pretty to look at, but their power and versatility had won them standard issue status in the corps.

The 3K designation was derived from its three thousand bead drum, but the weapon also housed a twelve-grenade cartridge and it had a variable pulse fire capacity which could do anything from stunning opponents to burning fist-sized holes

through them. Pulse pistols were holstered at our hips.

The Hospitallers and Knights of Saint James carried power swords instead of pistols for sidearms.

The towering mechanized knights were armed with oversized **HAW 12Ks** which had a maximum effective range of 1,200 meters compared to the 500 meter range of the man-sized **HAWs**. The mechs carried power swords with blades as tall as men at their sides. These battle hulks could also fire twenty-four megawatt lasers from apertures molded into their armor behind and above their wrists. Additionally, each mech sported a six rocket rack across their backs.

The entire assembly joined for the closing lines of the antiphonal war prayer, *“Grant victory to Your people for Your glory, O Lord, for You are our strength and protection and we sing praises to Your glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.”*

Padre Prata concluded by blessing us. We crossed ourselves and rose to our feet. The Chaplin made his way quickly to his spot in the ranks. Behind us, the mechs’ breastplates split open. The knights who drove them quickly scrambled up their machines and into their cockpits. A squad of squires

followed them up and helped the knights strap into their neuroservo harnesses.

Captain Dayo Obey stepped forward out of the column of knights and turned to face us. His velvet bass filled our helmets. “Alright my brothers in Christ, once Gamma group engages with the enemy fleet, we will proceed to the surface. God be with us.”

“Amen,” we responded.

We passed a few minutes in silent and private prayer.

My mind however, was anything but quiet.

Battles were already underway on and around the moons of Muvuru 5 and 6. The last report from battle groups Alpha and Beta announced that both moon bases were already under siege. It was hoped that both bases would soon be breached and subdued.

The battle for Muvuru 3 was only just beginning.

After ten minutes, our helmets’ face plates lit up with views of the battle space ahead of us. The short view showed us the Paladin *Lepanto* on point, plunging toward the heart of the enemy like a five thousand meter-long, cross-guarded sword. The frigates *Montgisard* and *Roncevalles* were similarly shaped but only a third the size of the Paladin. They

followed and flanked the *Lepanto*'s port and starboard.

The Princedom of Austros' destroyers, *Emperor Karl* and *King Sobieski*, shaped like flying Vs, flanked the Paladin top and bottom. The Halberds and Hussars followed in a square formation, the latter shaped like winged pyramids and the former like heater shields.

The feed was coming from the CIC of the Imperial Frigate, *King Alfred*, flying at the rear of the fleet, A hundred thousand kilometers behind the Paladin and her escorts. The *King Alfred* was surrounded by a dozen Lance Interceptors, twice as many Spontoon Gunships as well as the *Santo Torquemada* and the rest of the ships which comprised Assault Group Delta.

The chatter between our various ships bridge crews was a barely audible background susurrus in our helms.

One voice suddenly rose above them all, "Launch probes." It was *Lepanto*'s Commodore, Josias Alba.

"Seekers one, two and three away," the response came from one of his junior officers.

The probes were mere dots of light streaking towards Muvuru-3 in a wide arc that would take

them to the planet's far side. They would alert us to anything that might be hiding there.

The 'long' view was a tactical display of the enemy flotilla. Our ship scans confirmed what our previous probes had only glimpsed. The pirate fleet consisted of six hundred and thirty- one ships bought, salvaged and scavenged from scores of planets.

The flotilla was a motley collection of second hand cruisers, frigates, destroyers and corvettes as well as caravels, freighters and tankers retrofitted for battle. On our helm screens they appeared no bigger than the stars in the night sky, slow-swirling into a defensive posture. The enemy fleet was assuming a cone formation, hoping to swallow our ships and bombard our fewer vessels from every side with everything they had.

The rogues' hope was a fool's hope. Imperial Paladins were among the most heavily armed, armored and powerfully shielded ships to ever plow the plenum of deep space. While not as heavily armed, the frigates and destroyers were equally armored and shielded. Unperturbed by the pirates' strategy, the *Lepanto* and escorts continued forward, course unchanged.

At just under one hundred million kilometers, the enemy fired a volley of torpedoes.

A voice from the Paladin's CIC announced, "Combat computer counts three hundred and fifty-seven kinetic missiles inbound. Eighty-five million kilometers out and closing at seventy-seven percent of C."

Commodore Alba's voice responded. "Fleet, slow to three-quarter C."

"Slowing to three-quarter C."

"Initiate firing solution alpha."

"Initiating firing solution alpha."

The order was echoed across our fleet and the Paladin and frigates began slow, clockwise rolls as they continued forward. The Austros destroyers and Imperial frigates closed to within two thousand meters of the *Lepanto*. The Halberds and Hussars advanced forward.

Light from the system's distant star, Muvuru glinted off the gold and pearl white hulls of the Emperor's ships and the gold and black hulls of the Austros Princedom destroyers. It was a glorious sight, particularly when they suddenly returned fire.

The Paladin loosed one hundred torpedoes. They sprung like loose casings from apertures ringing the center of the *Lepanto*'s octagonal hull. Each frigate fired off thirty in similar fashion. The destroyers contributed fifty torpedoes each to the

salvo, spitting them in pairs out of each plane of their tetrahedron hulls.

The pirates answered immediately with a second salvo.

“Second wave of kinetic torpedoes incoming, commodore. Computer counts three hundred and eighty-one at seventy-eight million kilometers and closing at point eighty-eight C. First wave has closed to twenty-five million kilometers.”

Commodore Alba gently ordered. “Ready all batteries.”

Blast doors along their hulls split open and gun batteries slid outward from the ships’ interiors. Each battery consisted of three individually gimbaled turrets, a Nova plasma cannon, a 120 megawatt Hellfire laser and a Pulsar proton particle beam. The *Lepanto* bristled with eighty batteries, twenty spread across four lengths of her octagonal hull. Each frigate produced eight batteries along each of three lengths of their hexagonal hulls. The destroyers had ten such batteries, five dorsal and five ventral. Each Halberd and Hussar sprouted a trio of batteries, two ventral and one dorsal.

“Set point defense perimeter at 3 million kilometers.”

The order was repeated and the combat computer aboard the *Lepanto* coordinated with its

counterparts across our small fleet to choreograph the firing of every laser and particle beam at the yet unseen incoming missiles. Almost immediately, the enemy's torpedoes began exploding in the distance. In less than thirty seconds, the pirates' first wave of torpedoes were all destroyed, the last handful while still a half a million kilometers out.

The pirates fired two more volleys of torpedoes.

They sure enjoy wasting ordnance, I thought, listening to the *Lepanto's* tactical officer announce the launch of the new salvos.

Commodore Alba then ordered, "Gamma Force, slow to one-half C."

"Slowing to one-half C."

"Delta Force proceed to your objective," Commodore Alba continued. "God go with you."

The *King Alfred's* Captain Devereaux responded, "Roger that, *Lepanto* and Godspeed to you.

"Attention all ships of Force Delta, we are changing course to one-one-five point two-nine on my mark."

The command was echoed throughout the ships of Delta Group.

"Mark."

The *King Alfred* and company began nosing towards the planet.

A flash of static signaled the switch of feeds from the *King Alfred* to the *Lepanto*.

After a beat we heard Commodore Alba order, "Initiate firing solution Beta."

Our fleet loosed another three hundred kinetics at the enemy.

"Second wave of enemy missiles at five point seven million kilometers and closing. Point defense engaging."

Just then our first salvo of torpedoes reached the enemy. For several seconds, we watched the pirate flotilla defend itself with a spray of their own point defense fire. The details were then suddenly lost as our own point defense systems began taking out the enemy's second wave of missiles. In a little more than a minute, the bright flashing ceased. An expanding cloud of faintly glowing scrap metal was all that was left of the hundreds of missiles in the pirates' second wave.

Beyond the debris field, our enemy had not fared as well against Imperial torpedoes. Our battle computers noted that six of their ships had been destroyed and thirteen others damaged, one bad enough to be seen drifting away from the cone formation.

“Commodore, the enemy has just loosed a fifth salvo,” the tactical officer announced. “It’s mostly kinetics. Two hundred and fifty two of them plus a hundred and five plasma warheads. They’re fifty-seven million kilometers out and closing at point eighty-eight C. Third and fourth wave approaching five million kilometers. Point defense engaging.”

“Initiate firing solution Gamma...”

The Imperial point defense fire continued to handily destroy all incoming fire. Our second wave of missiles destroyed another twenty-eight ships and crippled half that many more.

The *Lepanto*’s tactical officer droned on over our comms, “Commodore, computer analysis of the exchange of fire thus far suggests the pirates don’t have a central computer coordinating either their attacks or defenses.”

“Noted. Ready the rail guns.”

“Rail Guns on line and at the ready, Commodore.” The response came back, first from his own tactical officer, and then from the tactical officers aboard the escort ships.

“Initiate firing solution Delta.”

“Aye-aye, Commodore.”

Another volley of Imperial torpedoes were loosed on the enemy. The Paladin, frigates and

destroyers accompanied the salvo with a slow, steady and continuous pulse of rail gun fire between them. The *Lepanto* had four such guns that ran a third the length of four sides of her octagonal hull. The frigates had three rail guns each. The Austros destroyers had one apiece. From the prow of each ship, oil-barrel-sized shells of depleted uranium streaked across the distance between fleets at near light speed.

The rail gun shells punched holes through the enemy's cone formation even as our second and then our third wave of missiles fell upon them with a vengeance. The pirate's firewall became more porous with every ship they lost to our salvos.

Once the fleets closed within twenty-five million kilometers, the exchange of fire became nearly continuous. As the distance shrank further, handfuls of enemy missiles began to slip through our ship's defensive fire and explode against our force shields. The kinetics struck with small effect, but the plasma warheads began to drain our force shields.

The pirates firewall proved even more penetrable. Our torpedoes and rail gun shells fell upon them to catastrophic effect. A third of their fleet was either destroyed or inoperable, blown into

molten shrapnel or adrift without power and venting atmosphere.

“The fleets are at twelve million kilometers and closing. Enemy formation is breaking up.”

“Firing solution Epsilon, initiate.”

Unable to withstand the withering fire of Imperial rail guns, the pirates wisely abandoned their plan to envelope the *Lepanto* and her escorts. Their only defense against the devastating fire of the rail guns was to get out of the weapons’ lines of sight. They quickly spread their flotilla out as thinly as possible.

In response, the Paladin and her escorts began pulling apart, splaying their trajectories to keep as many of the enemy’s ships in those lines of fire as long as possible.

Commodore Alba’s bass voice sounded in our helmets again, “Slow to one-tenth C.”

“Slowing to one-tenth C.”

“Angels, you are a go for launch,”

Commodore Alba continued. “God be with you and your lads, Captain Benziger.”

“And God be with you, Commodore,”

Captain Benziger replied. “Alright Angels, wings up and away!”

Angel Fighters launched out of the *pommels* of the Imperial Paladin and Frigates. They shot out

of the *Lepanto*, six at a time and three at a time out of the frigates. Once out, they rolled through short arcs that orientated them towards the enemy fleet and then fired their engines. The *Montgisard* and *Roncevalle* loosed six wings of six fighters, a full Flight of Angels each. The *Lepanto* let fly three Flights.

The pirate ships continued firing off volley after volley of torpedoes, the majority of them plasma warheads. They spread themselves far enough apart to spare themselves the ravaging fusillades of rail guns but our continuous salvo of missiles whittled down their number at a rate they should have found alarming.

“New incoming missiles are nukes,” *Lepanto*’s tactical officer warned the fleet. “Repeat. Incoming missiles are nukes. One hundred and seventy-six nuclear warheads inbound!”

“We’ll clear as many as we can for you, *Lepanto*,” Captain Benziger said.

Our Angels managed to dispatch forty-three of the nukes with a torrent of laser fire before the fighters and missiles streaked past each other. Point defense fire took out another one hundred and twenty-two. The eleven nukes that slipped through flared brightly as they exploded in star-hot fireballs against our ships’ combined shields.

I winced and held my breath until the cloud of blinding white light dissipated and revealed that all our ships were still there. The data scroll informed me that the Halberds and Hussars were now shieldless as was the *Emperor Karl*. The others were drained to less than forty percent.

The exchange of missile and point defense fire became a kaleidoscopic light show. It was nearly impossible to follow the details even with the data points scrolling across the bottom of the images. A few facts were clear enough. There were no more nukes being lobbed our way. All incoming fire consisted of plasma warheads. And the pirates were in a fighting retreat.

Every wave of enemy fire contained fewer missiles as their number of ships was steadily decimated. This led to fewer and fewer strikes against our ships. Unfortunately, few as they were, the plasma strikes were taking a dangerous toll on the smaller ships. The Halberds and Hussars were forced to the rear.

As I tried to determine just how much more they might be able to take, the *Romanov* exploded.

My breath caught in my throat.

The battle raged on violently and without letup, but inside the hold of the *Santo Torquemada*, the silent seconds passed, oppressive with the

weight of our loss until Chaplain Prata's prayer filled our helmets. *"God of all spirits, God of all flesh who have given life to all worlds and trampled death under your blessed feet, grant to the souls of your deceased servants rest in a place of light..."*

Prata's fellow Hospitallers joined in with, *"A verdant place, from where suffering, pain and cries are far removed. In blessed repose, grant, O' Lord, eternal rest to your departed servants."*

We joined the warrior/monks for the closing chant, *"Eternal memory, eternal memory, blessed repose and eternal memory."*

I crossed myself and turned my attention back to the screen. I noted the pirates were down to less than a third of their original number and being routed.

Our Angels closed in on them as they fell back and continued to scatter. The pirate flotilla targeted the Imperial fighters with a combination of laser, plasma and torpedo fire. The 180 Angels returned fire with a torpedo each and then yawed into sharp arcs away from the enemy. The jets of plasma fired by the pirates dissipated harmlessly behind the Angels but not before two of our fighters were destroyed by concentrations of laser fire and torpedo strikes.

‘Eternal memory, eternal memory, blessed repose and eternal memory...’

The Angels had chosen to concentrate their missiles on twenty of the enemy’s biggest ships. The pirates’ point defense systems took out about a third of the Imperial torpedoes. The others managed to destroy thirteen of their targets.

Our Angels then banked twice into a pair of turns that pointed them back towards the pirates. The second approach was calculated to bring them into contact with the enemy just before the Paladin and company would have the flotilla within range of their batteries.

As our fleet approached that five million kilometers mark, the *King Alfred’s* tactical officer announced, “Captain, our Seeker probes are detecting multiple launchings of ships from the planet’s far side.”

“How many?”

“Dozens, scores...”

“What kind of ships, Lieutenant?”

“It’s a mix of mostly one-man fighters, sir... Hegemony Hornets, League Darts and Union Stingers, but the probes are also identifying a handful of Federation Double Eagles as well as some ad hoc hybrids. They just keep launching. Two hundred and twelve and counting...”

“Looks like you’ve got yourselves a welcoming committee, Delta group,” Commodore Alba announced.

“And who ever said pirates were unmannered brutes,” Captain Devereaux responded. “Lieutenant, launch our fighters.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“I’m sending our Angels to assist, *King Alfred*. Captain Benziger...”

“We’re on it, Commodore,” Benziger called back. “Let’s burn aether, boys!”

Like a school of silverfish altering course in unison, the Angels rolled off course, banked sharply and pitched planetward to intercept their counterparts.

“Much obliged *Lepanto*,” Devereaux said. “I didn’t think to bring anything to this soiree but a firing solution or three.”

“Give them hell, *King Alfred*,” Commodore Alba said even as his own ships breached the enemy swarm.

At five million kilometers, the fleets supplemented their exchange of torpedoes with laser and particle beam fire. At one million kilometers, plasma cannons were engaged on both sides. Our Paladin led the way, a spinning sword firing broadsides in every direction, punching holes

through the thinning cloud of enemy ships. Her escorts busied themselves cleaning up what survived the Paladin's fire. The horde of enemy ships began to disintegrate even faster. Some disappeared in splashes of bright flames and others began to turn tail and run.

"Three hundred and forty-one fighters and counting," *King Alfred's* tactical officer updated the fleet. "They've taken out Seeker 2. Switching feed to Seeker 1."

"Delta Force," Captain Devereaux spoke next. "Ready all batteries."

A short burst of chatter filled our helms as orders were relayed and acknowledged.

"Seeker one destroyed... switching to... never mind... Seeker three is gone too..."

Captain Devereaux continued, "Lieutenant, cycle up our rail guns."

"Aye, Captain."

"Slave all escort batteries to our combat computer for point defense."

"Slaving all batteries..."

"Slow to point zero-one of C."

"Slowing to point zero-one C..." the tactical officer echoed. "Enemy fighters should be coming over the horizon in 1.21 kiloseconds."

“Preceded, undoubtedly, by a salvo of torpedoes,” Captain Devereaux said. “Let’s have a batch of our own waiting for them when they come round the bend.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Initiate firing solution Alpha.”

A new front had opened up in the battle for Muvuru 3 and our boots had not yet touched ground. If there is a more helpless feeling than waiting in the hold of a drop ship while battles rage all around you, I had yet to experience it. It was unsettling, and the feeling only deepened when the *Saint Richard Lionheart* suddenly exploded.

5

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

“...*Blessed repose and eternal memory.*”

I kept an eye on the tactical display even as my fellow marines and I prayed for the souls lost on the *Lionheart*.

The *Lepanto* had lost a dozen of her batteries. Her shields were reduced to forty-four percent. The *Emperor Karl* was stripped of all her ventral batteries. The *King Sobieski* lost one on each

side as well as suffering a hull breach at her prow. Both destroyers were running without force shields. The *Montgisard* lost a score of her guns and was fighting fires on three of her decks. The *Roncevalle* lost an engine and was forced to slow considerably as she listed heavily to starboard. The *Raymond du Puy* and the *Habsburg* were ordered to fall back in her defense. The Halberd and Hussar lost half their guns between them and their shields were depleted.

The pirates however were in full retreat even as they unloaded all their ordnance. Their remaining seventy-nine ships were fleeing towards the asteroid belt. The *Lepanto* and the destroyers were in pursuit.

The view of the *Lepanto*'s chase disappeared in a flash of static. It was replaced by the view of our approach to Muvuru-3.

Captain Devereaux spoke up once more. "Alright everyone, enemy missiles should be rounding the horizon in ten seconds."

Enemy torpedoes climbed over the curvature of Muvuru-3 like a cloud of stars. Almost as soon as they appeared, the missiles began exploding as they flew into the torrent of our point defense fire.

Not a single one was able to punch through our fire wall.

Seconds later the enemy fighters appeared, loosening another barrage of torpedoes before our

own missiles fell upon them. A dozen enemy ships were destroyed instantly. Twice that number were damaged enough to either fall from orbit or retreat planetward.

The *King Alfred's* tactical officer announced, "Computer counts six hundred and eleven fighters remaining."

"Firing solution Beta, initiate," Captain Devereaux ordered, unleashing another swarm of Imperial torpedos. They were accompanied by a dozen jets of plasma and a trio of rail gun shells.

Our point defense eliminated the second wave of enemy missiles as handily as it disposed of the first. The pirates fired a third volley and lobbed it our way with a rain of laser bolts and jets of plasma.

Fourty-eight of their fighters were lost to our return fire and we began to take damage.

Everyone of our ships suffered a lashing from combinations of laser and plasma. Additionally, thirty-one missiles slipped through our defensive fire. They exploded mostly against the *King Alfred* and the carrier *Czar Peter Magnus*. Our own *Santo Torquemada* was rocked by a couple of torpedo strikes.

The next instant, the pirate fighters released a fourth batch of torpedoes as they streaked past our

battle group. Three score enemy missiles found their targets, striking mostly our big ships, the frigate and the carrier. The *Santo Torquemada* was hit another three times. A Lance and two Spontoons were lost to the barrage. In turn, our batteries obliterated forty-four of the fighters as they passed.

The *King Alfred* and *Czar Peter Magnus* loosed another one hundred torpedoes between them. Their missiles took out another thirty enemy fighters as they banked into another attack run.

At last, our Angels joined the battle. Their volley of missiles arrived and nearly four dozen pirate ships exploded into shards.

Moments later, the Angels were trading fire with their rival fighters. The two swarms of ships flew through each other trading torpedoes, laser bolts and jets of plasma. I winced watching collisions take out several fighters on each side. Others were destroyed by intense concentrations of point-blank range fire.

The details were all but lost, blurred by the explosions of torpedoes, the bursts and blasts of plasma and laser bolts burning against shields and hulls. Our fleet's combat computer's running tally scrolling across the bottom of our faceplates assured us that the pirates were suffering the majority of the losses.

Once past each other, the swarms banked into turns, the Angels splitting into two groups. The *Lepanto*'s Angels were quick to turn back towards the enemy. The *King Alfred*'s fighters banked into a much wider arc, leaving them further away from the pirates. The longer route back would allow them the time to hit the enemy horde with fully recharged plasma cannons. With the rival fighter groups separated, the *King Alfred* turned her guns on the pirate horde, destroying another score of the enemy's ships.

The *Lepanto*'s Angels chose to forego their cannons for a more immediate, second strike. They charged the enemy swarm in a tight, three fighter-wide, column formation. The column of Imperial fighters undulated in its approach, the rising and falling of each trio of Angels perfectly coordinated by their combat computers to allow each ship to fire their lasers in a continuous stream.

One pirate fighter after another was destroyed by such concentrated fire. All the while, fire from our frigate and carrier batteries continued to take out additional enemy fighters as the Angels charged the pirate swarm.

The *Lepanto*'s Angels tightened their formation as they approached. From straight, wingtip-to-wingtip lines, our fighters clustered into

triangles, each trio of Angels flying close enough to overlap shields, amplifying their power. In an impressive display of precision flying, the combat computer would drop the lead triangle of Angels from point position after absorbing four or five torpedo strikes, slide them to the rear where they could recharge their shields and advance the next trio of fighters to fly point defense for the entire column.

We watched the column cycle through seven sets of trios, safely absorbing dozens of torpedo strikes, before it finally lanced the enemy swarm.

Only one Angel was lost to collision as most of the pirates, having grown suddenly skittish, gave them a wide berth. Once through the swarm, the Angels split into their remaining wing groups and did as much damage as they could from the outside. The pirates lost fifteen fighters in the exchange. We lost four, or rather, three and a half counting the pilot that was able to eject from his Angel before it plummeted to the planet like a falling star.

We sent prayers his way when we heard his mayday call.

The *King Alfred* dispatched a Spontoon to the rescue.

The pirate horde was quickly losing discipline. Their attacks on the *King Alfred* and her

escorts ceased as all of their attention was concentrated on defending themselves against our Angels. They were beginning to disperse when another fusillade of missiles from the second wave of Angels fell upon them. Eleven were destroyed by the barrage. Another two-dozen burst into shrapnel when the *King Alfred's* Angels hit them like a wall, plasma cannons firing at close range.

The pirate fighters lost all cohesion. They turned tail and retreated towards Muvuru-3, spreading out as they did. The Angels pursued them. The two swarms broke up into small clusters and pairs of fighters, wildly flitting about the upper atmosphere in scores of dog fights.

This was the sort of fighter combat that pitted pilot against pilot, forcing them to rely on their wits, reflexes and training rather than their computers. The Imperial fighters had the better hand here as well. They slowly but steadily whittled down the enemy's numbers, driving them further and further from us.

"Lieutenant, let's get more eyes to the far side of the planet," Captain Devereaux ordered.

His tactical officer returned with, "Aye, Captain. Echoes one, two and three away."

The probes flew from us to cross over Muvuru-3's northern pole. We then slipped into

orbit well out of range of the plateau's surface-to-orbit defenses.

After a minute of watching the enemy swarm continue to crumble as their fighters fled in every direction, Captain Devereaux announced, "Alright *Czar Peter*, you are cleared to drop tanks. Ground assault is a go!"

The carrier *Czar Peter Magnus* was a thousand-meter-long cylinder with flattened top and bottom and flared ends. A pair of fins, which housed her engines, protruded from the center of the shaft, one on the starboard side, the other from the port. Two sets of doors along the carrier's ventral hull split open and ten orbital boats, no more than cages mounted atop electromagnetic refractor platforms, dropped from the ship's interior.

The *El Cid*, *Magnus* and the *Charlemagne* stayed in orbit with the *Empress Catherine* and *Vladimir Putin* assisting the Princedom's carrier with point defence. The rest of us accompanied the one hundred and twenty Kuvasz-class tanks on their fifteen minute descent through the Muvuru-3's thin atmosphere.

Once planetside, the tanks rolled out of their cages and Martel's Marauders began the seventy-one kilometer advance on the pirate base. Their escort Halberds, Spontoons and Hussars advanced

with them, hugging the surface, just a few meters above the two tank columns.

We traveled along a pre-arranged course chosen to keep us, as much as it was possible, out of the enemy's lines of sight. The approach was less than perfect. There were three stretches of our course, each multi kilometers-long, which exposed us to enemy fire.

During those intervals we punched up power to our forward shields and took what evasive maneuvers we could, while the tanks beneath us sped along as fast as they were able.

The Halberds, Spontoons and Hussars could've streaked through those segments quickly and possibly avoided being hit, but we stayed with our slower moving tanks, providing what point defense fire we could against the rain of missiles and hypersonic slugs of molten-tungsten.

Far ahead of us, Lances drew what fire they could away from us.

As we approached our landing zone, the *King Alfred* pulled into synchronous orbit over the mesa and opened up with her ventral batteries. The Imperial frigate's bombardment began a steady drain of the enemy's formidable shields as well as played havoc with their targeting computers.

Despite the fighter and interceptor assist and the aid from orbit we still lost eight tanks and two Spontoons on our approach. Each Spontoon represented five men lost; the tanks, nine.

We also nearly lost one of the Hussars with more than two companies of Austros troopers aboard. Our own Halberd took three direct, ship-shaking and nerve-jarring hits but, God be praised, our shields held and we reached our landing zone with a few percentage points of power for our shields to regenerate from.

We touched down on a sunken field of frozen, brick-red mud, iridescent with metallic fluorides. The ramp dropped and, squad by squad, we double-timed it off the *Santo Torquemada*. The rest of 5th Battalion debarked the *Santos Cortez*, *Colombo* and *Andrea Doria*.

The mechs followed us out, their heavy footfalls causing the ground to tremble slightly. Behind the mechs, eight recon-rovers - treaded robots about the size of a child's desk - rolled down the ramps, spread out before us and immediately started forward. Only the trio of small dish antennae on their tops were visible in the thick, thigh-high and pale-yellow fog which crawled in slow-curling swirls over the surface.

Long, stringy and gossamer clouds of the same gas marbled the dark, burnt umber sky. A mountain range of fluorite crystal loomed to our west, its jagged, frozen peaks of pale emerald glinting in the twilight. They towered over a xanthous landscape of mounds and dunes interspersed with mounds of basalt and tall outcroppings of obsidian and various fluorites.

Half a klick to our north, the battalion of Austros troopers debarked from their Hussars. The crew of the wounded Hussar came out as well to inspect the damage to her starboard wing. I focused on the scene and ordered my armor computer to ratchet up my visor's magnification.

The wing did not look good.

The tanks idled between our two battalions.

"It's swiss cheese down there but negative on wyrm activity in our immediate area," 1st platoon's Corporal Daniel Simmons relayed the findings of the rovers' scans to the company.

"You hear that Shoji," Sergeant Hayes announced over the comms. "It's still safe for you to smile."

We all had us a small laugh.

"Can you define immediate area, corporal," Izzy asked.

“A half-kilometer deep in a three-kilometer radius,” Corporal Simmons answered. “But you would know that private Hooke, if you had bothered to open your own link to the rover feed.”

You could almost see Izzy blushing under his helmet. “Yes, of course. Sorry, sir. I’m opening my link now.”

“Don’t be too hard on him, Simmons,” Corporal Bucci said. “The private was undoubtedly busy rifling through the orbital pics, searching for a diner or maybe a Snarkee’s Snack Shack. Weren’t you, private?”

Laughter filled the comms, my own included. I couldn’t make out if Izzy had joined in, but I was sure Izzy was at least grinning sheepishly. I hammered his pauldron sympathetically while I quickly opened the very same link I had similarly forgotten about in my curiosity over the wounded Hussar.

I called up the maps the rovers’ scanners produced of the planet’s crust in our immediate area. I first studied the top-down rendering and then the isometric view. Despite the absence of wyrms, the images were still unsettling. The ground beneath our boots was a knotty tangle of twisted tunnels, some of which neared the surface but most of which disappeared beneath the reach of our rovers’ scans.

I considered it a small miracle the tanks and the mechs didn't cause it all to collapse under us.

"Did you find us a restaurant, private Hooke?" Sergeant Hayes asked.

"I'm afraid not, Sarge."

"I guess we'll have to raid the pirates' pantries."

Izzy *hmmmed* and said, "That never occurred to me..."

"That's why they gave him the extra stripes," Corporal Shoji said.

"Let's quit the chatter, boys," Captain Obey ordered gently. "Squad up and let's form two firing lines. Knights and Companies A and B to the front. Lieutenant Flynn, you've got the rest."

"Roger that."

"Squires to the rear."

"Aye, captain."

We formed our lines quickly. Izzy and I were in Squad 3, 4th Platoon, Company C. A half klick away, the Austros Battalion arranged themselves in a similar manner.

"Send up the frisbees," Captain Obey continued.

Each of our Company leaders flung a dinner plate-sized disk into the air. The disks continued to rise in the air instead of falling to the ground as the

toys they were named after would have done. They climbed to a thousand meters and hovered in place a few hundred meters in front of our lines. They would lead us, serving as eyes-in-the-skies.

“Force Hammerstrike, let’s move out,” Captain Obey ordered, hooking his arm over his head in a *follow me* gesture.

When all the necessary boots were marching and treads rolling, the Halberds, Spontoons and the one, undamaged Hussar lifted immediately to provide air support. The *Santo Colombo* followed well in the rear, ready to play field hospital.

Combined, our crysteel hauberk and plasteel plating weighed a little over 30 kilograms. Muvuru-3’s lighter gravity considerably lessened the exertion necessary to trot about in full armor.

After double timing it over a couple of kilometers, we climbed out of the sunken plain. The fog was thinner up top and it reached only to our ankles. The dunes around the sunken plain were few and small. They grew in number and size ahead of us, some rising in graceful sweeps to over three hundred meters.

Beyond the dunes, the top of our target mesa was just visible over the horizon of rolling mounds. The sky above it was coruscant with the flares and

flashes of battle. The air trembled slightly with the thunderous concussions of those distant explosions.

Many of us paused at the sight and sounds of the distant battle.

Captain Obey prodded us forward, “Let’s keep it moving. Iron Arm is already on the move. We don’t want them beating us these viper’s den, do we? And be careful not to crest these dunes, lest you come into line of sight of enemy weapons.”

We snaked our way silently through the hills for fifteen minutes before Captain Obey announced suddenly, “Drones incoming. Find yourselves cover!”

6

GROUND ASSAULT

As if to drive the captain’s point home, our Halberds and Hussars loosed a cannonade of bright, white-hot plasma overhead. The Spontoons lurched forward to meet the incoming threat. On the ground, the Kuvasz tanks raised their turrets and laser guns to the sky and loosed sprays of fiery bolts of light and supersonic slugs of searing metal. Our mechs

holstered their **HAWs** and raised their arms skyward.

We grunts scrambled for cover.

“Squad 3 on me!” Corporal Yukio Shoji shouted and a pulse of light on my helmet’s interior faceplate directed my attention his way. The corporal led us to a man-tall, roughly mushroom-shaped outcropping of blue-black rock.

Just before ducking beneath the stone mushroom’s cap, I watched the *Torquemada* fire off a volley of rockets towards the approaching drones. She then moved forward with the Hussar and her sister Halberds, their laser and particle beams firing without ceasing.

We huddled around the stem while the exchange of fire above and around us made the surrounding terrain flash like it was under a giant strobe light. The muffled explosions of missiles, rockets and destroyed drones filled the air like a low, slow-rolling rumble of thunder.

The explosions quickly drew closer.

We tightened our huddle.

“Let’s concentrate shields up top, boys,” Corporal Shoji ordered and we all passed the command on to our individual armor computers.

Seconds later it began raining laser fire. The vapor around us ignited in orange-red flashes

wherever the bolts passed. Explosions blasted the air and shook the ground beneath us as a shower of missiles followed the laser-strafting.

One rocket struck thirty meters from our position, landing in front of our platoon's first squad. The explosion destroyed the half-dome tump of basalt they were hiding under and hurled them for several yards.

A nearby mech was hit by four rockets in rapid succession. The mech's shields absorbed three hits, pushing it back a few steps with each blast, but the shields were spent when the fourth rocket struck. Its explosion sheared off the mech's right leg and caused it to topple backwards.

The mech however, kept firing from its downed position.

Wrecked drones fell from the sky everywhere.

Just as suddenly as it started, laser bolts, drones and rockets ceased falling around us. Instead the air thrummed with the aether drives of our Spontoons as they flew overhead, giving chase to the few retreating drones. We cheered every time the gunships' streams of molten tungsten found their targets.

Captain Obey relayed the "all clear" and we began reporting in by squads. A Company suffered

only a broken leg. B Company suffered three wounded and two deaths. C Company was fortunate to come out unscathed. Our 1st Squad was shaken up by the near miss but unhurt. D Company took a direct rocket hit and two other indirects. They reported seven wounded but, thanks be to God, no deaths. E Company suffered a death and six wounded from a direct hit.

The Squires reported two wounded among them. The Hospitallers and Knights of Saint James reported in hale and hearty. Only one mech was rendered inoperative. Casualties among Austros contingent added up to nine dead (the crew of yet another destroyed tank) and five wounded troopers.

Captain Obey called for the *Santo Colombo* to collect the dead and wounded. He ordered one squad of Squires to stay with the injured and fallen until they were loaded onto the Halberd. "Catch up as soon as you're able," he told them and then ordered the rest of us to continue forward.

Ten minutes later we were on our bellies, Imperial and Princedom troops gathered together, taking cover behind the tanks which hid behind the last of the dunes. Our mechs, too tall to stand near us without being spotted by the enemy's guns, waited five hundred meters to our rear. We were all

watching the feed from our frisbees and recon rovers as they advanced ahead of us.

To our north were the first foothills which rolled in rising waves towards the distant mountains. To our south, a shallow, smoking lake of methane stretched to the horizon. Ahead of us, immediately beyond the last dunes, the terrain flattened out for four kilometers before rising sharply to form a seventeen-kilometer-long and six-hundred-meter-tall cliff face. It was the eastern wall of the great crater spread beneath the mesa.

Shield arrays studded the length of the crater wall, generating formidable energy and kinetic force fields that had yet to collapse from the orbital bombardment. Across the top rim, several dozen pirates were interspersed among ten surface-to-orbit missile and plasma batteries. The missile batteries were quiet, seemingly out of ordnance to fire at our frigate. The five plasma batteries kept up a continuous pulse of fire. Ten other defensive positions, dug deep into rock wall two hundred meters below the crater's rim, appeared like slits from our distance. In their shadowy recesses, coil guns waited patiently for our advance.

At the foot of the cliff stood forty mechs. They were the Federation's long-retired Cyclops II model. Their generators produced fairly strong

shields but they had no arm-mounted lasers. Instead, the cyclops' forearms each sported a pair of short-range rockets. Additionally, they could fire a particle beam from their single eye. They carried over-sized bead rifles with drums that held fifteen-thousand rounds.

Unless they had traded up, the power swords the cyclops wielded would be weaker than those carried by their Imperial counterparts. In short, the enemy mechs superior numbers were not necessarily a match for our eleven, present-day Crusader Vs.

Gathered around the cyclops, sixty gun-mounted land skimmers hovered in clusters of six. Our rovers identified the mounted guns as a mix of plasma and laser cannon, heavy bead guns and even a few ancient style, yet terribly lethal, 50 caliber guns.

Some twelve hundred troops were spread out behind the mechs and skimmers. About half of them wore armor comparable to ours, some with just a plasteel breastplate strapped on over their EVAs. The cut of the plates suggested they were mostly Federation and Union surplus armor, but here and there one spotted the spikes of an Orion carapace. The rest of the pirates wore no more than

standard pressurized EVA suits. Only about a third of the total had personal energy shields.

Our objective was to fight our way across the four-kilometer-wide killing field. We were to make our way to its northwest corner where the hills and crater rim merged into a land bridge which rose to a third of the way up the plateau. The entrance to the base was at its far end. Once there, we were to breach the airlocks and enter the enemy base.

Colonel L'Amour, leading 1st Battalion and assisted by Lord Zoltan and his Austros troopers would soon begin their descent to the mesa. Lieutenant Breck Sheed was leading Force Iron Arm through a minefield while under fire in his assault against the northern airlocks. Together, we aimed to take the installation level by level, joining up at its central command deck.

Our rovers reported that the enemy's energy shields were finally beginning to buckle and so torpedoes, courtesy of the *King Alfred* began hammering at the plateau along with plasma, laser and particle beam strikes.

Captain Dayo Obey called out across all comms, "That's our signal, Hammerstrike. Let's up and go!"

The tanks lurched into motion as we got to our feet. We followed them out as they wound their way through the last set of dunes. Halberds, Hussars and Spontoons rose from the surrounding dunes and formed a line of air cover a thousand meters above us as we spread out. With their long strides, our mechs closed the distance between us in short order.

Our tanks' main guns fired as one. The explosive shells decimated the enemy's front line. A second fusillade hit the pirates with even greater destructive force. By the third salvo, our tanks began taking fire from the coil guns embedded into the cliff face.

The Kusavs continued forward, spreading out as they did, their main guns now targeting the force-shielded cliff wall with a relentless barrage. One, then two and then three at a time, the tanks began erupting into flame and flying, red-hot metal, as the enemy guns found them. Our air cover rushed forward; their dorsal batteries fixed their own continuous fire on the cliff face while their ventral guns harassed the enemy's ground forces.

Another two of Martell's Marauders were destroyed before the cliff face guns turned their attention to our Spontoons and Halberds.

The enemy began its advance under fire. Their mechs and skimmers spread out and the

troops behind them followed suit. Behind them all, the invisible shields which covered the crater and mesa in a protective bubble shimmered in chromatic bursts, straining under a continuous barrage of strikes.

The skimmers raked our lines with their varied weapons as three more tanks exploded. An Imperial marine and two Princedom troopers fell. We huddled tighter behind our armored lines as we double timed it forward. Behind us, the mechs loosed a barrage of rockets. They streaked across the open plain between us and the enemy and in a series of bright flashes, thinned the pack of skimmers by a dozen. The surviving skimmers took evasive actions, generally careening away from their aggressive advance.

Captain Obey's voice filled my helmet, "Alright marines, ready grenade launchers. Set for maximum range. Firing angle, twenty-five degrees. Ready round one!"

I pumped a grenade into the chamber and thumbed the detonation distance lever all the way up to maximum. I then raised the barrel of my **HAW3K**. My visor flashed green when I hit the ideal angle.

"Fire!"

I pulled the trigger, launching a grenade into a high arc and then immediately pumped a second one into the chamber.

Two of the Martell's Marauders' Kuvasz tanks exploded eight rows ahead of me, allowing me no time to assess what damage our barrage of grenades inflicted on the advancing enemy. I ducked instead, down to my haunches and dropped my head beneath crossed arms as several blast-butchered marines and troopers flew amidst the tank debris.

"Fire!"

I rose to my feet, lifted the weapon, pulled the trigger and pumped a new grenade into its chamber.

Two rows ahead of me, another pair of tanks exploded. The blast knocked me on my back as more debris and body parts went flying. A chunk of tank, the size of a chest of drawers, beheaded a nearby mech. It toppled backward, falling on one of our knights. Two of the knight's power-armored brothers leaped to his aid and began to drag him out from under the mech's shoulder.

"Fire!"

I scrambled to my feet and loosed my grenade seconds after everyone else. I pumped a new one into its chamber immediately.

“Let’s reform two lines on either side of the Marauders,” Captain Obey ordered. “Austros 3rd Battalion, you’ve got the left flank. Imperial 5th Battalion, we’re taking the right flank. Let’s move it, soldiers!”

We ran out from behind the tanks as three more of them were destroyed.

A score of skimmers were waiting for us. All their various guns blazed for a moment. A half dozen marines, hit by jets of plasma fell around me. I was hit with three laser bolts, each taking a small bite out of my shield strength. I thumbed off my distance setter and fired my grenade at the offending skimmer. It exploded on contact.

The same moment, ten other skimmers erupted into shrapnel as the rest of 5th Battalion struck back. The survivors turned and fled. They didn’t get more than fifty meters before a batch of mech rockets dispatched them.

Captain Benzinger’s voice suddenly sounded in our helmets. “I hope no one down there missed us too much.”

A flight of Angels, regrouped after having destroyed their pirate counterparts, streaked over our heads and toward the crater wall. Cheers erupted from the ground forces as the first flight loosed a volley of missiles at the advancing enemy.

Even as the clouds of dust and shrapnel kicked up by the missile strikes settled, a second flight of Angels flew over the enemy, lower and slower and rained laser bolts down on them.

Three enemy mechs and a half-dozen skimmers were destroyed along with scores of pirate troopers. Each flight of Angels then fired their plasma cannons at the crater wall before their formations were forced to break up, splaying in dozens of directions as they came under return fire.

The cliff-face coil guns took out three Angels as they banked into wide turns. I said a prayer for them and took a small measure of consolation from watching their wreckage fall on the pirate's ground forces, toppling one of their mechs and crushing a handful of their troopers.

All the while, Imperials and pirates on the ground continued to advance on each other, trading fire all the while. My HUD display picked out targets for me. Considering the distance, I fired pulse bolts at them. Most times my shots were deflected by their shields. They would then scatter and I'd lose them in the throng. Occasionally, the pirate was not so well provided, and they went down from a single hit.

A new voice from the *King Alfred* command crew filled our helms. "Captain, we've got

incoming! Probe echo-1 has detected the launch of ten warheads on Muvuru-3's moon... no, twenty warheads... And... They're nukes, captain! Thirty warheads, all hot and inbound... Forty warheads..."

Captain Devereaux's voice was remarkably measured and calm. "Let's return the favor and nuke that launch site. All Angels to the moon. If there's anything left after our nuke hits, take it down."

"Fifty warheads incoming..."

"Tier three crew will abandon ship immediately," Captain Devereaux continued. "*Czar Peter Magnus*, you are advised to break orbit and withdraw forthwith."

"We'll stay with you *King Alfred*," was the response from the Pricedom's carrier.

"There's no need for that, Captain Tarr," Captain Devereaux insisted. "We'll still have use of your batteries as you break orbit. Get your ship out of here."

"Very well, Captain Devereaux. God be with you."

"And with you, Captain Tarr."

"*King Alfred*," It was Colonel L'Amour breaking in. "You are also advised to break orbit immediately. Get some distance between you and those warheads, Dave."

“No can do, Colonel,” Captain Devereaux responded. “We’ve got to take down the mesa defenses if your men on the ground are going to have any chance of taking the base.”

“Sixty warheads...”

“Then we’re staying with you and slaving our point defence systems to the *King Alfred’s*,” Colonel L’Amour said. “*Torquemada* and *Cortes*, climb to orbit and join us in point defense.”

“Negative *El Cid*,” Captain Devereaux said emphatically. “You have marines to deliver to the mesa top. You are advised to stay on mission, Colonel. *Torquemada* and *Cortes*, we would not, however, disdain your company up here. Sorry Llew.”

“Seventy warheads...”

“I want all remaining torpedoes targeting those warheads. Let’ take out as many as we can while they’re still on the farside of the planet.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Llew! Why are you still in orbit? Get the hell out of here!”

“Very well, Dave,” Colonel L’Amour agreed through a sigh. “God be with you, Captain.”

“And with you, Colonel.”

“Eighty warheads...”

“Initiate point defense as soon as those nukes enter line of sight,” Captain Devereaux’s voice began to fade in our helms. “Cannoneers, you will continue bombardment of the mesa...”

“One hundred and twenty nukes incoming...”

The feed from the *King Alfred* was cut suddenly. It was just as well. There was nothing we could do for them from the ground but pray.

The enemy ground troops had closed to just under a kilometer.

My attention was wrenched skyward when another horde of drones rose out from behind the crater wall and sped our way. Our air escort of Hussar and Spontoons began firing on the drones immediately. Lacking anything resembling cover, we kept moving.

As the Kuvasz’s turrets continued to spit molten slugs at the shielded cliff face, their laser guns tilted to spray the sky above us. The fusillade toppled drone after drone from the air. Our mechs took out scores of others. The few remaining drones strafed our lines once as they passed. I was one of the many hit. I shot a quick glance at my shield strength readout. The green bar hovered right beneath eighty percent.

When I looked out again, rockets began exploding around us. A couple hit the line squarely, sending myself and half-a-dozen marines flying backward. I landed hard and loosed a string of expletives I had not uttered since the first week of bootcamp.

I scrambled to my feet and checked my vitals. Except for a ten point drop in shield strength, I was fine. A quick look around showed me that two of my comrades were still sprawled out, motionless on the regolith. Before I could check their condition, several particle beams swept back and forth across our lines.

The searing shafts of energy took serious bites out of our shield strength when they struck. The attack was coming from ten of the enemy mechs who had fixed their sights on us.

We returned the attention.

Each squad leader tagged a cyclops and his men fixed their aim upon it. We hit them with full charges of our pulse weapons. Each cyclops was struck by several pulse beams which, collectively, drained their shields in seconds. Our burners meanwhile delivered the headshots. The jets of continuous plasma immediately cut off the particle beams and then quickly melted the heads once the shields were dropped.

A coil gun in the cliff face turned on us even as the headless enemy mechs flailed their limbs and fired off their few remaining rockets without benefit of proper targeting. Tungsten slugs exploded in sprays of regolith and molten metal as they slammed into the ground about us.

The continuous barrage from orbiting and our ground forces was, no doubt, playing havoc with the enemy's targeting systems, but even eyeballing it, the coil guns proved to be frightfully deadly.

Our shields and plate armor and even the power armor our knights wore were worthless against a hit from a supersonic slug of molten tungsten. Those among us so struck exploded into clouds of blood, bone and plasteel dust. A half-dozen of my comrades, two knights among them, came to that immediate and grisly end in one volley. A second volley took out ten Austros troopers, three of their tanks and one of our mechs.

"Bring those cyclops down and take cover behind them!" Lieutenant Flynn ordered over the comms.

Still running forward, we aimed at the knee joints of the cyclops. The mechs toppled in short order and we quickly ducked behind the fallen hulks. As soon as I had taken a knee behind a cyclops,

Lieutenant Flynn ordered, “Break cover, spread out and charge the enemy!”

I didn’t understand, but I obeyed. I sprung into a leap that propelled me over the mechs’ twisted legs and hit the ground running. Seconds later, the cyclops, whose cover we had just abandoned, exploded as they were struck by friendly coil gun fire.

I smiled, suddenly realizing that Flynn had just spared us from a deadly volley of the cliff-face guns. By the time coil gunners could re-aim the weapons, the opposing lines would be mixed and any coil fire would be as likely to take out their men as ours.

I continued running forward and targeted a skimmer raking our lines with ballistic fire from a rear and pintle mounted 50 caliber gun. My **HAW3K** loosed a bolt of lightning that hit the skimmer square in the center. The skimmer split into two pieces. The front end spun away, bowling over three pirates before coming to a crashing stop. The rear end didn’t get too far before it exploded.

Ahead of our lines, two sets of mechs closed in on each other. The cyclops managed to disable one of ours on their approach. They blew the Imperial mech’s legs out from under it with a concentration of their rocket strikes. Our Crusader

Vs responded with a salvo of their own, back-mounted rockets. One cyclops was knocked on its back and three others were shattered into chunks of smoldering metal.

They exchanged more rocket fire as they rushed at each other. We lost another mech to several direct hits. The enemy rockets tore a hole in the Crusader Vs' torso, killing the pilot in his cockpit. Even as our mech fell back with a great crash, another three cyclops exploded into fireballs.

And then power swords were drawn and buckler force shields ignited into life around their free gauntlets and the two groups of mechs came together in a clash of blades and shields.

A short spray of bead fire pinging off my breast plate pried my attention away from the battle of titans. My heads-up display highlighted the source of the fire, it was a pirate huddled behind the smoking wreckage of a fallen cyclops some twenty meters away. I fired two grenades at the pirate, blasting him and his cover to pieces.

"The enemy shields are down!" Colonel L'Amour announced excitedly over our helm comms. "You fellows might want to double-time it, unless you want A Company snatching up all the prisoners."

I looked up and saw, Praise God, that it was true!

The *King Alfred's* bombardment continued, instantly collapsing the pirates' defensive dugouts and quickly melting the rimtop weapons to slag.

We let out a cheer and charged forward. The Hospitallers and Knights of Saint James took the lead, rushing through a hail of bead fire and other projectiles before crashing into the line of advancing pirates with wide, fiery and lethal swings of their power blades.

They barreled through the ranks of rogues, spinning one way and then the other, swinging and thrusting and hacking and slashing; cutting a bloody, limb-strewn swath through the enemy throng.

I noticed a skimmer careening to the knights' rear flank. The gunner was lining up his rig-mounted plasma rifle as the skimmer stabilized itself out of the sharp turn. I fired before he could pull the trigger. The back of the skimmer exploded, the gunner was set on fire and hurled into the air. The front end nosed into the ground and flipped over three times before coming to a stop five meters from me.

One of the two figures in the cockpit was hanging lifelessly in his harness. The other was raising a long gun in my direction. I switched my

weapon to bead fire and thoroughly aerated the pirate.

He dropped his rifle and slumped in his harness.

My attention then fixed itself on a pair of Hospitallers who had gotten separated from the main group of knights and warrior monks. They were fighting back to back, pressed on every side. Their armor and buckler shields flickered dimly.

I feared the mob would soon overtake them.

I fired three grenades at the cluster of pirates, spacing them to drop just inside their circle. It worked. The ring of rogues collapsed on one side in an explosion of bodies. The Hospitallers leaped through the opening, if not to relative safety, then at least to a battle space with a little more elbow room.

Another short stream of bead fire pinged off my breast plate. I turned to where my HUD directed to see three pirates charging at me, their weapons blazing. They were lightly armored, breastplates over pressure suits but no energy shields. I dropped to one knee and fired low, sweeping their line with automatic bead fire.

They all went down.

Two of them scrambled to patch up their suits which were venting oxygen and blood. The third plucked a grenade from his belt. I fired at his

helmet. It only took a short burst to puncture through to the skull within. The pirate died. The grenade exploded in his hand, killing his comrades.

I rose and turned back towards the knights looking for another target when I was suddenly hit in the chest with a shockingly explosive force.

The air was knocked out of me, sparing me the indignity of screaming in terror as I imagined, for an instant, that I was hit by a coil gun slug. I wasn't of course. I wouldn't have lived long enough for the fear to take thought if I had.

Whatever it was that struck me was powerful enough to lift me off the ground and propel me back a couple of meters. I landed on my heels and staggered back a few more meters, nearly toppling over. My HUD warned that my shield was reduced to thirty-one percent by the blast. The HUD also identified the threat. It was another pirate, armored in spiked Orion carapace and wielding a wide-barreled long gun.

He pumped, what I realized with sudden alarm, was another shield-bursting shell into firing position. I swung my weapon around as he pulled the trigger. The second blow knocked me off my feet again and down onto my back.

My HUD alerted me to the dire facts that my shield was completely drained and my breast plate

had developed a fourteen centimeter crack over the sternum. One more hit would split the plate and likely kill me by bludgeoning the organs beneath it.

I used my panic's energy to roll to the right the instant I hit the ground. A third shell slammed into the regolith where my head had just been. The shells were designed to explode forward so the ground absorbed the bulk of the blast. The residual energy kicked up a spray of silt and chunks of frozen mud.

Still on my back, my thumb switched my **HAW3K** from grenade to pulse fire. I raised it and fired even as the pirate pumped another shell into firing position. My particle beam hit the pirate's weapon, super heating it instantly. His shell exploded in the barrel, taking both of the pirate's hands and half his forearms with it. I could see him scream behind his faceplate. He crumbled to his knees and tried to stem the flow of blood and oxygen by burying his stumps in the ground.

I aerated his helmet and his head within it. He fell forward over his arms and was still.

I sprung to my feet and, to my surprise, found the enemy in retreat.

Half their number lay scattered, dead and dying, across the field. The survivors were showing us their backs and fleeing to the land bridge. About

a hundred meters to my right I watched Izzy use his torch to steer one land skimmer into another and then burn them and their crews down until there was nothing left but the charred chassis of the skimmers and a bubbling puddle of fiberglass and flesh.

To my left, a pair of squires were helping a knight out of a fallen and headless mech while the rest of the Crusader Vs cut down the few remaining cyclops with great swings of their power swords. Martel's Marauders, the half of them that were still left, chased after the retreating enemy. The last few land skimmers plowed over some of their own troops in their race to the land bridge. Coil gun fire from the lead tanks dispatched them before they reached the defile.

Captain Obey called out. "Let's stay on them."

We joined the Kuvasz tanks in their chase.

I looked around as I ran. There were many of our men, Imperial and Princedom marines scattered among the enemy dead and the detritus of battle. Squires ministered to many of them.

First Sergeant Hayes noticed the swiveling of my head. "Eyes front, Zapatas and keep moving."

"Yes sir," I said.

“Seventy-six dead between the Austros troopers and ours,” Hayes said in response to my unasked question as we jogged along shoulder to shoulder. “One hundred and twenty-one wounded. Our platoon lost three men. Ibli lost an arm. The squires are stabilizing him now. But say a quick prayer for the souls of Palahniuk, Dunning and Doyle.”

“Yes sir,” I said and did so.

I ran a quick status check on myself. My shield was at three percent and regenerating. My breastplate was cracked but still functional. The crysteel hauberk and pressure suit beneath it were still intact. I had no wounds, save one to my pride for having been knocked flat on my back.

I thanked God and concentrated on bringing my breathing and heart rate under control as I fell in with my squad. We were in the lead alongside the knights and two platoons of Austros troopers, closing in on the retreating pirates and the land bridge that would lead us to the air locks.

Two thirds of the way across the plain our lines began to tighten as the rise to the crater’s rim on our right and the foothills on our left squeezed us into a more concentrated formation. I was wondering just how much cozier we were going to get when a pair of bright bursts of light in the sky

blended nearly immediately into a blinding pall.
The newly fallen night and every shadow on the
planet's surface was instantly banished.

The King Alfred!

7

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

We could not help ourselves. To a man, I'm sure, we turned our gazes to the sky. The sudden lull in return fire attested to the fact that even our retreating enemy's eyes were drawn away from the battlefield.

Our visors automatically polarized themselves to block out the harsh brightness. Even at full occluding, stinging light still seeped through. I couldn't see anything at first but white light from horizon to horizon.

After the first heart stopping moments, the light attenuated by degrees, yellowing and dimming and then darkening in the center of the sky. The center widened steadily, creating an expanding and thinning ring of light within which the stars slowly reappeared.

“*King Alfred*, this is *El Cid*, are you there?”
Colonel L’Amour tried to raise them over the commlink. “Dave, this is Llewelyn, can you hear me?”

Static was the loud reply.

So high in orbit, the Imperial Frigate wouldn’t have appeared any larger than a star in the sky, but our practiced eyes would have picked her out of the starscape readily enough. We knew, as well did the colonel, that he was calling out to his friend in vain.

The *King Alfred* was gone.

“*Santo Cortez? Torquemada?* Are you there?”

More static, followed by a faint voice behind the crackling white noise, “I’m afraid we’ve lost them, Colonel L’Amour.”

“Captain Tarr, is that you?”

“Yes, colonel,” the captain of the Austros Princedom carrier *Czar Peter Magnus* responded through the slowly thinning static. “We’re okay. The carrier sustained minor damage but the *King Alfred* and the Halberds... they are gone.”

“Let’s keep moving!” Captain Obey ordered and we all sprung forward.

The enemy began running and firing again.

My armor suddenly lost power. The HUD went down but for a small, blinking red light centered on the bottom of the screen. My shield had not regenerated enough to withstand the electromagnetic pulse produced by the nukes.

The armor computer shut down every suit function but one as soon as it determined that it would not otherwise be able to absorb the waves of gamma radiation bombarding the surface. All power was immediately diverted to force shield generation in an effort to spare the sensitive circuitry that wove my skinsuit, gambeson, chain and plate mail into an integrated whole.

My crysteel visor went clear, providing me with a severely truncated view of the world outside my helmet. It was a view blurred by my every exhalation against the clear faceplate of the pressurized gambeson.

I began to feel clammy with sweat beneath the smart skinsuit I wore beneath the gambeson. The outside cold was beginning to seep through the protective layers.

I stopped running, thinking it best to preserve my, now limited, oxygen supply. It was disorientating being cut off from the HUD feeds and all communication with the Company. I was alone in my armor, my breathing heavy and loud,

wondering if this was how my ancient, steel-plated predecessors felt.

I didn't like the feeling.

I turned around and spotted the *Santo Colombo* landing on the battlefield to attend to the wounded and dead. I should make my way to her, I thought, hating the idea.

I spat out a curse and followed it immediately and rather sheepishly with a prayer of thanks when the small HUD light began blinking in yellow.

Someone grabbed my shoulder just then and spun me around. It was First Sergeant Hayes. He put his helmet against mine. "Are you okay in there?"

The sergeant was yelling to be heard, but his voice came through muted by the two layers of plasteel.

"Yes sir," I yelled back. "Rebooting."

"Full reboot or you fall back to the *Colombo*," Sergeant Hayes shouted. "Understood?"

"Yes sir, yes!"

"Good."

The sergeant butted helmets with me and took off. I spotted Izzy's large frame and, deciding to be an optimist, ran to catch up with my friend. To my great relief, life support came back online as I

took my first few steps. My HUD screen lit up, sputtering back to life with the return of secondary and tertiary systems, one and two at a time.

Sensing my approach, Izzy turned back towards me and said, “I thought we’d lost you back there.”

“No such luck, brother,” I said and noticed that my commlink was not fully operational. My HUD informed me that I was limited to **Line of Sight** communication.

Further scrutiny of the screen revealed the armor’s environmental controls were online but unresponsive. The temperature inside my gambeson was frozen at 32 degrees Celsius. The latter didn’t worry me, because I didn’t foresee any immediate need to adjust the suit’s temperature. It was warmer than I would’ve liked, but the discomfort was not something I would complain about.

However, the former malfunction was a genuine cause for concern. Being limited to **LoS** communication could leave me out of squad or even company-wide orders.

Either problem should have been enough of a reason for me to turn around and head for the *Santo Colombo* as per my sergeant’s exact orders, but, God forgive me, I was angry at the loss of the

King Alfred, the loss of the Halberds and the scores of brother marines and pryncedom troopers.

I stopped, frozen in indecision.

Izzy turned to say, “Try to keep up, bro.”

And so I lunged ahead. I caught up with Izzy in a few long strides. As I passed my friend, coil guns popped up from the hills on our left and spat death at us.

Hypersonic slugs raked our lines. I froze. It was only for a moment. In that moment, four rovers were blown into shrapnel and a half-dozen of my comrades were blasted into bloody clouds.

Izzy tackled me from behind.

We hit the soft ground hard. A stream of deadly fire crossed over our heads as we fell. Another tore up the ground mere meters in front of us.

With my face in the regolith, I quickly read the description of the new threat which our surviving recon rover transmitted to our HUDs. It identified the coil guns as Salamander 5000s. Their centuries old design was produced cheaply throughout the galaxy.

Their ubiquity didn’t make them any less fearsome. Salamander 5000s fired their tungsten slugs at 120 rounds per minute. The rover spotted twenty of these coil guns, mounted two per hill and

spaced wide enough to make a killing field of the last kilometer of the plain between us and the defile.

For a moment I was struck by the absurdity of still having a link to my computer's library of arms through the ages and yet being limited to **LoS** communication.

The guns seemed to turn their attention elsewhere. I looked up and saw our Spontoons exchanging fire with them as they weaved and bobbed between fiery streams of searing fire. The Spontoons engaged the guns from the hill-side of the line, turning the turrets away from us.

This bought our ground troops some breathing room, but I worried about the gunships. Nimble as the five Imperial Spontoons were, they wouldn't be able to dodge twenty guns for long.

Correction, sixteen guns.

El Cid and *Charlemagne* suddenly appeared over the mesa and joined the fight. The Halberds blasted two of the guns with their plasma cannons even as they hit the turrets of two other guns with their particle weapons. The second set of turrets melted under the sustained fire.

Six neighboring coil guns immediately turned on *El Cid* and *Charlemagne*. The Halberds loosed a stream of laser fire, instantly shredding two more enemy guns into molten chunks. In turn, the

Halberds came under heavy fire from the four remaining coil guns. Their ravaging fire produced bright, silver flashes as they broke against the ship's shields.

The *El Cid* fired off two torpedoes as she lurched to her stern and nosed upward. She was trying to get away from the continuous streams of fire and retreat behind the mesa's rim. The Halberd wasn't fast enough. *El Cid's* torpedoes took out one of the guns, but the remaining stream of molten metal fixed upon it quickly depleted the Halberd's shield strength.

When the shields finally failed under the onslaught, the shredding fire chewed deep into her starboard. The engine within the wing exploded, sending the *El Cid* reeling, wing over half-wing. We lost sight of her behind the mesa's edge.

The *Charlemagne* was slammed against the mesa wall by the twin streams of fire that found it. The Halberd was pinned against the mesa until her shield failed and she exploded.

Ahead of us, two gun emplacements exploded from missile strikes. A moment later, the two Lances that fired them streaked overhead like lightning bolts. Four guns stupidly turned to fire after them, but the Lances were beyond their range before the maneuver was completed.

Captain Obey turned to us and ordered,
“Fifth Battalion, we’re charging those guns!
Companies A and B, follow us knights to the first
hill. Lieutenant Flynn, you take Companies C, D
and E to the second hill.”

“Aye, captain.”

“Captain Gideon, your Troopers, will hang
back and fill whatever holes the enemy might punch
in our line. ”

“Understood.”

“Listen up boys!” It was the more excitable
Lieutenant Flynn who I then heard barking through
my helm comm. A soft pulse of light on the
faceplate would normally have directed me towards
his position. My armor didn’t provide me with the
electronic prod. I kept an eye on Izzy’s bulky form,
prepared to take my lead from him.

Lieutenant Flynn continued. “Burners to the
rear until we get in range for you to torch the guns.”

“Alright, my brothers in Christ,” Captain
Obey turned to address us again. I thanked God for
it, otherwise I wouldn’t have heard a thing. “Let’s
go! Go! Go! Faith and Empire!”

Captain Obey turned to face the hills and
bolted forward. I was a beat behind my comrades
when we lurched into a run behind him, bellowing
the Imperial Marines’ war cry, “Faith and Empire!”

We spread out as much as was possible while we ran. Our hill was nineteen hundred meters away. We needed to get within three hundred meters of the coil guns for our burners' plasma rifles to be effective.

We had closed half the distance to our target when ten rectangular holes suddenly opened up on the ground ahead of us, one between each gun-mounted hill. Quadroid battlebots began popping out of the holes in pairs, as if launched off a ramp. The three-meter tall, spherical battlebots each had four limbs and a snub-nosed turret protruding out of the top. They flew through the atmosphere for a few meters before landing on their twin sets of wide treads.

They charged us, firing from every appendage.

Like the Salamander 5000s, the quadroids were of centuries-old design but still used on lesser developed worlds. Their arms ended in bead rifles fed by two internal 50 K drums. The turrets fired lasers.

Their opening fusillade hit many of us with either bead or laser fire. Our armor withstood those strikes well enough. A half-dozen marines were felled when the attack-bots ran them over. They immediately got back on their feet and turned their

attention to the new quadroids bearing down on them. The marines blasted them into blazing chunks with bolts of pulse fire.

Those of us in the rear, hit the ground and let loose a barrage of grenade fire that instantly destroyed the first line of more than two-score quadroids. The second line, twice as numerous, rolled over and around the debris of fellow battlebots, all limbs and turrets firing.

The Austros troopers took it upon themselves to double time it forward and buttress our ranks. With their aid, we reduced the second line of quadroids to mechanical rubble in short order. A third line of more than two hundred battlebots advanced towards us even as more quadroids popped out of their holes.

We were fixing our sights on them when a Spontoon exploded in a fireball above the hills. Another victim of the coil guns.

The mechs and tanks arrived just then and fired over the lines of advancing quadroids, targeting the holes out of which the battlebots were springing. The multiple hits on each doorway stopped the outpouring of robots.

Our combined force of troopers and marines concentrated on the mechanical monsters with a combination of pulse and plasma fire. Together, we

made a scrap heap of the remaining quadroids quickly and without suffering any further casualties.

We rose to our feet and resumed our charge on the guns even as they opened up on us.

The mechs and tanks were in the lead, concentrating their fire on the lead coil guns. Tank fire drained the shield bubbles around each gun emplacement. The mechs' pulse fire undermined the ground beneath the first emplacement, causing it to crumble. The weapon collapsed and rolled down the hill. They repeated the tactic on the next three guns. We followed, massed loosely behind them, taking advantage of their heavy armor and powerful shields.

The fiery arc of another coil gun sprayed our formation. The blistering fire blasted the head off of one mech, sliced a second one in half across its waist, caused three tanks to erupt into flames and splattered the shredded remains of several marines and troopers across the regolith.

A second Spontoon exploded above the hills.

Another three guns were destroyed by a fusillade of combined mech and Kuvasz tank fire. Our line was hit again, costing us another mech and two tanks. Three more enemy guns exploded under fire from our remaining trio of Spontoons.

Suddenly the troops around me pivoted as one towards our right. Not hearing the order for the change in direction, I was caught flat-footed. A Princedom of Austros trooper nearly bowled me over as he pushed passed me. I looked up and quickly figured that we were targeting a new hill. Our initial target was neutralized by the tanks and mechs.

The new gun emplacement was presently trading fire with a Spontoon.

I joined the rush at the new hill even as the Spontoon exploded and the turret began to turn and lower towards us.

At seven hundred meters we began firing our grenades, trying to replicate the mech's success. We didn't have the angle or maybe our grenades weren't powerful enough to sap the emplacement. All we managed to do was kick up a whole lot of dirt.

At five hundred meters, the coil guns returned fire.

Luckily, the first arc of molten metal was a little high. We were able to duck beneath it and continue forward. We advanced another hundred meters or so before we had to dive beneath a second arc. Two of our numbers were not quick enough. They were both beheaded.

We could not count on being as fortunate on the gun's next pass, so we sprang to our feet and once again surged forward. The turret found us as we reached three hundred meters. Two of our marines, burners both and another half-dozen troopers were instantly blasted into bloody bits and motes of plasteel and bone.

Four other burners, Izzy among them, managed to fire their plasma rifles, loosening jets of white flames, two at each emplacement, immediately burning through what shielding they had left and melting the guns behind them.

Again I was a beat behind my comrades when we made a mad dash across the valley to the next hill. The burners fell to the back while the rest of us bunched up to make a living wall for them. Once across, we threw ourselves flat against the foot of the hill. Shimmying up the slopes on our bellies, we crawled under the line of fire until we got burners in striking range to take out the guns.

Once the emplacement was reduced to slag, we repeated the attack across two more death valleys, losing four more brothers-in-arms along the way.

The last guns were silenced by the coordinated efforts of mechs, Kuvasz and Spontoons.

Winning ourselves a brief respite, we reorganized the ranks for our charge up the land bridge. The last of the fleeing pirates were slipping through the airlock doors when we started our charge. I offered up a silent prayer for our fallen as we ran up the steep incline. We started out six-abreast and narrowed our column to four abreast halfway up the steep kilometer and a half long defile.

It was then that we felt the explosions under our boots. In seconds, the narrow, top-end of the land bridge crumbled into a cascade of dirt which swept our feet out from under us.

8

A HELLISH PIT

The collapse of the defile forced the bulk of our assault group back down from the precarious remains of the land bridge. Several, less fortunate marines and troopers toppled backward and plunged to their deaths on the hills sprawled out nearly a kilometer below the defile. Others, like myself, tumbled forward and rolled like boulders down the crater's steep inside slope.

Somewhere during my long fall I bounced off of something or someone. The jarring impact separated me from my **HAW3K** and tossed me in the air for a brief couple of seconds before I continued to roll down the escarpment. After a seeming eternity, the falling came to an abrupt end at the bottom of the crater.

I was fortunate enough to land upright, but I was buried thigh-deep in a mix of powdery dirt and glittering silt. My heart beat at a near frantic rate and my heavy breathing was quite loud within my helmet. I was so flooded with adrenaline that I was only vaguely aware of the dozen different aches I picked up on the way down. A quick scan of my heads-up display told me that the crack in my armor nearly doubled in length and width as well as shot out a fifteen-centimeter fork.

Fortunately, the hauberk and pressurized gambeson beneath the plate mail were still unruptured. A twisted left ankle and a hairline fracture along my T-4 rib was the worst my bio-scan had to report. The smartskin suit beneath the gambeson released a moderate dose of pain suppressor which my bloodstream quickly absorbed.

I cleared the HUD and wiped the caked silt and dirt off my visor's exterior.

“Everyone, report in!” Captain Obey’s voice in my helmet had acquired an uncharacteristic edge of frustration. “Report green if you’re above ground and mobile, red if you’re buried.”

Curious, I thought. My commlink was suddenly fully functional.

I decided that I could be mobile with a little effort and so reported in, “Zapatas, green!” and immediately began to make it so.

I rocked my body side to side, loosening the ground’s grip on me while I tried to free my right leg. It rose by centimeters. I looked around me as I struggled to get free.

The majority of my brothers had landed on their backs or on their faces and they were struggling to get up as I was endeavoring to get out of the dirt. It was not easy. The ultra-fine regolith of the crater swallowed up limbs that pushed against it. Those few moving about to help their comrades were doing so sluggishly, as if through deep snow on a heavy gravity planet.

They were the lucky ones. A couple of meters ahead of me, a marine had landed head first. His frantically kicking legs were the only parts of him visible above the crater’s surface. Beyond the kicking legs, a lone golden-plated forearm burst suddenly from the silt and waved in desperation.

Some ten meters off my left shoulder, another Imperial Marine was upright but buried to his shoulders. He freed one arm as I watched and began to sweep the silt and dirt away from himself. Off to my right, one of our mechs was buried knee-deep and sinking!

My computer identified the kicking legs as belonging to Corporal Shoji and the marine to my left as Izzy. The waving arm was tagged as belonging to Captain Niko Gideon of the Austros Princedom.

I freed my right leg at last, replanted it in front of me and proceeded to pull my left leg out of the sand-like surface. It slid out easier than the right, but my right sank shin-deep into the silt for the effort. I continued forward in that slow, painstaking way for about ten steps until I reached Corporal Shoji.

When I grabbed his first ankle, his leg twitched with a start of surprise but quickly stilled. I grabbed his second ankle and pulled on both. Walking backward was even more difficult than going forward but, with a few minutes of concentrated effort, I managed to pull him out.

“Much obliged, Zapatas,” he said, as I helped him to his feet.

I was going to tell him not to mention it, but the words died on my tongue when the ground beneath us shook suddenly and violently. It felt like an underground explosion followed by a short series of tremors. We froze and stared at each other through our helmet visors.

“What was that?” I asked when the tremors stopped.

“I don’t think I want to know,” Corporal Shoji said. He then pointed past my shoulder. “Quick, let’s get your pal, Isaac out of the dirt.”

“I’ll get Izzy,” I said, pointing, in turn, past the corporal’s shoulder. “You might want to see to Captain Gideon.”

“Will do,” he said.

We parted and plodded our separate ways to our comrades as quickly as we could across the giant sand trap. As I trudged along, I listened in on Captain Obey conferring with Colonel L’Amour on the mesa and Lieutenant Sheed on the ground outside the northern airlocks.

I pieced together that seventy-three of us had fallen into the sand pit, more than half of whom were buried to varying depths. Fourteen men, a mix of Imperial and Princedom Marines had fallen to their deaths. The rest were stranded uselessly at the cliff wall.

“I’ve never been happier to see you, Zeph,” Izzy said as I approached him.

My friend had freed his second arm and was digging himself out slowly with wide sweeping breast strokes. “Take my arms, brother,” I said. “And let’s pray the fasting has shaved a couple of pounds off you.”

We clasped arms right above our wrists. I pulled, accomplishing little more than sinking to my shins.

“Let’s try this from behind,” I said while pulling my legs from the sucking sand.

A new series of tremors shook the ground beneath us. They were gentler than the first set but no less disconcerting.

“Hurry, Zeph,” Izzy said. “I’ve got a no-good feeling about all this shaking.”

I shared his foreboding, but I was afraid to name my fear. More perhaps for myself than for his sake, I decided instead to keep it light. “What’s the matter, Izzy, afraid you won’t make it back for your double rib-eyes?”

“I’m suddenly afraid of ending up on the menu, my brother.”

Quick as I could, I positioned myself behind Izzy, bent at the waist and hooked my elbows under his armpits. I heaved upward with a groan against

the sucking silt. My first effort lifted Izzy's torso out of the dirt, but I sank to the top of my greaves. I pulled my legs out and positioned myself for a second pull.

As I heaved again, the first ore wyrm breached the surface of the pit in an eruption of rock and silt. The accompanying quake knocked me onto my back. Seconds later, a second, a third and then a fourth wyrm burst out of the crater floor.

I let out a rare curse as I watched a fifth wyrm swallow two comrades even as it broke through the surface. A sixth and a seventh wyrm erupted from the regolith, both of them less than fifty meters from Izzy and I. Fortunately, their maws were not aimed in our immediate direction.

"Zeph quick!" Izzy cried out. "Help me dig out my torch!"

I rolled from my back down onto all fours and hurried over to Izzy's side. The coiled cable which attached the plasma rifle to the aether generator strapped to his back disappeared into the silt in two places.

"The cable's come loose," I said and began pulling the coil out. It came free easy enough and I was relieved to see the coupling rings were intact. I quickly reattached the coil to the portable generator and joined Izzy's digging for the rifle.

We picked a wide circle around the spot where we found the cable and began shoveling dirt like a pair of dogs racing to unearth a favored bone. All the while we offered up feverish prayers to Saint Anthony, begging him to lead us quickly to the lost rifle.

The ground continued to shake as more ore wyrms burst through to the surface.

Our two surviving Spontoons bobbed and weaved in the atmosphere above us searching for angles of fire that would not endanger the marines stuck in the crater. It became quickly obvious that laser fire did little but anger the wyrms. The Spontons switched to Gauss guns which they fired in spurts, unfortunately, mostly missing their writhing targets.

When they did score a strike, the slugs bit deep into the monster's squamous hides, chipping off chunks of scales and the sponge-like flesh beneath them. Sustained fire managed to cut one wyrm in half. It's two ends thrashed violently in their death throes.

The crater's floor became a hell's pit of tracers, writhing, ravenous monsters and flying bolts of blue pulse fire from the few upright troopers.

The nearest wyrm had popped out of the crater floor in front of the sinking mech and I kept an eye on it as I dug desperately for the weapon. The ore wyrm charged the knight, slithering quickly across the surface of the crater, its hideous maw opened wide. The mech raised his **HAW 12K** and loosed a long burst of blue-white lightning down the monster's gullet. The wyrm whipped about violently and then reared itself until it was nearly vertical. As quickly as it rose, the wyrm fell, crashing down on the mech.

The mechanized knight collapsed onto his back under the blow. The wyrm reared up again and slammed the knight once more. The impact shattered the **HAW 12K** against the mech's breastplate.

The monster reared up a third time. The knight's knees straightened and he unsheathed his power sword as he rose to meet the wyrm. An arc of electricity trailed the plasma-wreathed blade as it ionized the atmosphere in its upward sweep.

The sword sliced deeply across several of the monster's rough and flinty scales. The deep cut evoked a squeal-laced roar of anguish from the beast. The knight answered by pulling his arm back and then plunging his blade into the wound. The

wyrm lurched itself upright with another roar, raising the knight out of the dirt by his sword.

The wyrm flailed about like a suddenly flushed, untended hose. The creature was trying to dislodge the blade but it only succeeded in hurtling the mech through the air. I watched in horror as two marines were crushed under the mechanized knight when it landed with a crash.

Beyond them, the Spontoons killed another ore wyrm.

The mech twisted in the regolith in an effort to get off his back but only succeeded in nearly burying itself.

I suddenly heard the thrum of electromagnetic refractors. Glancing up, I saw the shadowy outline of a Hussar lowering itself from the mesa top. It was the *Czar Nicholas*. The Hussar fired its ventral plasma cannon, carefully targeting a wyrm that wasn't dangerously close to troopers. The monster exploded into fiery and meaty chunks.

The *Czar Nicholas* then turned its particle beam on another.

The mech made a second failed attempt at rolling off his back.

The *Andrea Doria* dropped beside the *Czar Nicholas* a moment later and, together, the Halberd

and Hussar began dispatching the wyrms two at a time.

I was up to my elbows when my fingers finally closed on the butt of the plasma rifle.

“Thank you, Saint Anthony!”

Izzy crossed himself for the both of us.

I pulled on the weapon as the mech finally rolled off his back and on to his knees. The rifle came out and I quickly attached the cable to it. With a quick twist of the settings flange to wide beam, I fired at the giant monster as it rammed the knight.

The loud-crackling jet of glowing, blue-white plasma found its mark. The wyrm fell into wild convulsions as the searing energy instantly bored through its armored hide and burned the more tender flesh beneath it. It took all my concentration to keep the flame on the target but I managed it, eventually slicing the creature in two. I hit each of the thrashing rough halves of the wyrm with a pair of blasts. They fell still and lay smoldering, their blood boiling the silt around and beneath them.

“Behind you, Zeph!”

I spun around at Izzy’s warning.

Some two hundred meters out an ore wyrm plowed its way through a cluster of fellow marines, swallowing one of them whole and running over another three. I dialed the settings flange to narrow

beam and fired. I hit the wyrm a few feet behind its maw and continued firing. The high energy beam sliced a deep gash along the monster's length before it turned away, severely narrowing its profile with a violent flailing of its length.

I continued firing as the creature began to bore its way back into the crater. It was more than halfway beneath the surface when it suddenly stopped its drilling spin and went limp. I continued firing, burning away most of its tail end.

"I think it's dead, Zeph," Izzy said, putting a hand on my arm. "Looks like they're all dead."

I lowered the plasma rifle and took a look around. The battle against the ore wyrms was indeed over. One of the monsters lay cut into several segments at the foot of a second fallen mech. Another nine or ten lifeless hulks were scattered across the crater floor amidst clusters of marines. Three of the ore wyrms were being sliced open with narrow-beamed plasma fire as I watched.

Once opened, the men about them raced to pull out their brothers who had been swallowed by the creatures. Four were still alive, Chaplain Prata among them, though their armor had nearly melted away under the corrosive effect of the digestive enzymes. Unfortunately, another four had been

fatally chewed up on their way into the wyrms' innards.

Izzy called out to me. "Give me a lift, will ya?"

I dropped the rifle and resumed my effort to pull him out of the silt.

The *Czar Nicholas* and *Andrea Doria* dropped to the crater interior even as Izzy came free. Their electromagnetic refractors suspended the vessels a couple of meters over the surface. The Hussar spun slowly in place, on guard against any more wyrms. The *Andrea Doria* dropped her rear ramp and two squads of squires disembarked and went about collecting the wounded and the remains of our fallen.

The rest of us busied ourselves with digging out those still buried in the crater. I picked up a **HAW-3K** from one of my fallen brothers in the process. During that interval, Colonel L'Amour re-established contact with the entirety of the fleet.

We learned that *El Cid* was too badly damaged to fly but his men had fought their way to the airlock suffering two dozen deaths and three times that many wounded. Lieutenant Sheed and his contingent of Austros troopers lost thirty-seven men between them and suffered eighty-five wounded.

The worst losses were suffered by the *King Alfred*. “Captain Devereaux managed to evacuate twelve hundred and thirty of his men before the *King* was nuked,” L’Amour informed us. “They’re safe. *Czar Peter Magnus* is retrieving the lifeboats.

“The others... they gave their lives for all of us down here.”

The others, I thought with a sad shake of my head. Twenty-five hundred men lost with one fell blow. Another thirty souls each from the Halberds’ skeleton crews. I lowered my head and said a prayer, thanking them for their sacrifice.

“We lost the *Raymond Du Puy* as well as the *Lionheart*,” Commodore Alba interjected after a pause. “The *Cerami* and the *Emperor Karl* are pretty beat up, both lost scores of men to hull breaches and ship fires. The *King Sobieski*, *Misilmeri* and the *Lepanto* sustained minor damage by comparison but each one has reported in a handful of deaths. Repairs are underway on all ships.

“Presently we’re conducting boarding operations on the thirty-two enemy ships which surrendered. When we have their crews in the brig, we’ll take up position in orbit. Until then, you’re on your own planetside, Colonel L’Amour.”

“Understood, Commodore Alba. We’ll be breaching the last of the base defenses very soon.”

“I’m pleased to report that the *Montgisard* and the *Roncevalle* have secured their respective objectives,” the commodore added. “They have found sixty-three hostages between them. The pirates they’ve taken prisoner have told them there are over three hundred more hostages held at the mesa base. Proceed accordingly.”

“Will do, commodore.”

“God go with you.”

“And with you.”

9

SURRENDER!

Buoyed by the respite from enemy fire, we made short work of the climb up the crater wall. We ascended in three columns. It was rough going at first, but the higher we went, the firmer the ground grew under our boots. The mechs were forced to wait for the returning Halberds to pull them out of the silt. It was just as well, because the small ledge that remained of the defile might have collapsed under their great weight. On the climb, we listened

to Colonel L'Amour trade notes with Captain Obey and Lieutenant Sheed on how best to breach the airlocks.

As we trudged up the last steep stretch of slope, our HUDs were fed the details of the enemy's compound from the ground penetrating scans of the disabled *El Cid*. The base consisted of a ten-story, fifteen-hundred-meter-wide cylindrical shaft. There was a kilometer and change of twisting tunnels to wind our way through before we reached the base proper from our end. Fortunately the sensors did not pick up any signs of ore wyrms in the vicinity.

The scans also exposed a five-hundred meter wide bowl-like structure buried deep under the crater. It was, in fact, a hollow sphere with the top half split and retracted alongside the bottom hemisphere. The bowl was undoubtedly the pen from which the wyrms were loosed on us.

Sixty-three of us who survived the ordeal in the pit climbed over the crater's rim and gathered on both sides of the five-meter-square steel doors of the outer airlock.

The old mining base wherein the pirates hid was enveloped by yet another low-energy kinetic force shield used primarily to repel the ore wyrms. This inner shield was produced by man-tall, pyramid-shaped aether generators on either side of

the airlock. The top-side and northern airlocks were also bracketed by pairs of these pyramids. There would be other such generators buried underground to give the base full coverage, but these didn't concern us. Taking out the four on the surface would be enough to burst the installation's last protective bubble and let us at the doors.

Izzy and 1st Platoon's burner, Ludlum were given the honor of melting the pylons on our end.

Captain Obey alerted Colonel L'Amour, "We're ready to burn the generators on your signal."

The colonel had a different idea all of the sudden. "Before we do that, let's see if these rogues have had a change of heart to go with their change in circumstances," L'Amour said.

He opened up a channel to the base and we listened in. "This is Colonel Llewellyn L'Amour of the Knights of Saint James, Matamoros. In the name of God Almighty and by the command of His Most Benevolent, Imperial Majesty, Emperor Andreas VI, you are hereby ordered, one final time, to surrender to the mercies of God and Emperor."

After a long pause, a harried, nearly breathless voice responded. "We have hostages. Lots of them. You'll let us be, if you value their lives."

“We do not negotiate with pirates,” the colonel answered. “Surrender at once!”

Our helmet computers informed us that the pirate’s voice was not a match for Lugo Grogorum, but for a Sven Krogstadt who had nearly thirty outstanding warrants across half a dozen systems for larceny, kidnapping, assault, rape and half-a-dozen murder charges.

“We’re a sovereign power, we are! You have no authority here, knight,” Krogstadt continued. “You’re trespassing on Free Alliance territory. Don’t enter the base or... or we’ll kill the hostages, we will!”

“If a single hostage is harmed, then by Imperial law, you will all be subject to summary execution.”

“This is Imperial aggression!”

“If you want to live, you better be certain that we find the hostages unharmed and all of you on the ground, face down with your hands behind your head.”

“You’re trespassing... Intergalactic law...”

“Anyone with a weapon in their hands will be shot on sight,” the colonel continued. “If you survive the coming assault, and I find that a single hostage has been harmed, I will personally strip you

to your skivvies and eject you out onto the planet's surface."

"We're an independent sovereign power..."

"You are lawless criminals who have never had any right to sovereignty over any of the planets you have subjugated. Additionally, by your wicked and lawless actions, your general villainy and most recent crimes against humanity and His Benevolent Emperor's loyal subjects, you have all relinquished any right to personal autonomy."

"You don't have the right to impose..."

"Prepare, you wretched souls, to choose between a life sentence on a penance colony with its chance at salvation or certain death and eternal torment in the fires of Hell."

"I warned you, we have hostages..."

The pirate's spokesman was interrupted by the frantic voices of some of his fellows urging surrender. A short, curse-laced argument ensued which erupted into an exchange of weapons fire and terrified screams until, as suddenly as the commotion began, it ended.

After an uneasy spell of silence, a new voice, equally breathless, stammered over the line, "We give up! We surrender! The hostages are safe. They're safe. I mean... one was shot in the leg... but it was not on purpose... an accident, that's all it

was. She'll be okay, I think... I... I hope... we... we're taking care of her..."

Our computers had no match for the new voice. It went on. "So... so everyone, lay down your weapons... we surrender... I've the force shield, I have... And you, open the doors, you idiots! No... no, not you, sir knights... I wasn't calling you... I was talking to...to my idiots...Open them now or I'll shoot you too!"

Once the last energy shield fell, our scanners were able to determine there were over nine hundred life signals scattered throughout the base, a good half of them concentrated in the three central decks.

The meter-thick steel doors opened slowly, retracting into the rock wall. Our last surviving rover darted through the opening as soon as it was wide enough. Behind the door was a massive cave dimly lit by overhead lights. Inside, the remnants of a half dozen fighters in various stages of disrepair lay amidst all manner of long-corroded industrial debris.

Our remaining rover led us through the junkyard. It stopped in its tracks twice, alerting us to the presence of two booby-trapped piles of scrap metal. We made our way around them carefully and continued forward.

Over the length of a couple hundred meters, the cave tapered down to a roughly five-meter-wide tunnel which elbowed out at different points in various directions. The side tunnels were grooved with what the computers identified as the distinctive boring whorls of ore wyrms. This stretch of tunnel was free of debris, but here and there abandoned along the walls we passed eight haphazardly parked land skimmers.

Eventually, the main tunnel terminated in another massive airlock door which began opening as soon as we caught sight of it. Behind the door was an empty chamber. It was just as wide as the tunnel behind us but only ten meters deep and three meters tall. The door at the far end didn't open. The one behind us started to close.

"Don't nobody of you knights get nervous or nothing," the new pirate leader said hurriedly over our commlinks. "We got to vent the outside atmosphere before we can open the inner doors."

"What's your name, pirate," Colonel L'Amour asked.

"I'm...I... My name is Hernadun, my lord. Hernadun Hun, that is. My...my friends call me Hog."

"Very well, Mr. Hun," the Colonel replied. "Proceed with the venting."

“Right...right.”

The rear doors finished closing with a metallic bang. The chamber then seemed to let out a long sigh. The inner door opened into a smooth, well-lit tunnel that tapered across ten meters to a narrow, three-meters-wide corridor. There was another airlock door at its end, half the size of the outer doors. It opened as we approached. The rover darted on ahead of us. The small recon robot crossed the threshold and gave us the *All Clear*.

We followed.

Past the doorway, we stepped into the bowl-end of a twenty-five-meter-wide half circle of a chamber. Its walls were lined with lockers and shelves which were empty but for a few torn EVA suits, a cracked helmet, a few rusted tools and some scraps of circuit boards and weathered hoses. A two panel door was centered on the far wall. The rover detected forty-four life signatures on the other side.

Captain Obey had two dozen of us form two firing lines in front of the split doors. I was part of the first line. We were down on one knee, **HAW-3Ks** raised and on full auto. The second line was in position to fire over our heads. The rest of the troops spread themselves along the walls on either side of the doors.

Captain Obey slapped a large, chrome tile on the wall and the doors parted with a hiss. Beyond them a score of the pirates were immediately visible, face down on the deck with their hands behind their heads.

Some of them cried out, “Don’t shoot!” and others, “We surrender!”

A mix of disgust and righteous anger rose up inside of me at the sight of them sprawled out on the deck and begging for their lives. I thought of the *King Alfred*, the *Torquemada* and the other ships lost. I thought of the many men who died alongside of me, lost to the wyrms and to the pirates’ remote - controlled, mechanized proxies. So many dead, I thought and, God forgive me, but I was sorely tempted to gun them down where they lay regardless of the colonel’s promise of clemency.

I made a mental note to confess my murderous desire before my next partaking of the Blessed Sacrament.

The rover rolled past the doors and swept the room with its small, swivel-mounted scanner. The room was the other half of the circle with a single, narrower door centered on the far curved wall. The other score and change of pirates were quickly accounted for, also lying prone and submissive.

Captain Obey led a squad of marines past the doorway. When he declared the room secured, we joined him. It took only a few minutes to bind the prisoners and position them in a tight cluster. A brief interrogation failed to provide us with any useful information on the whereabouts of their leader.

Captain Obey assigned a squad to babysit them and then led the rest of us deeper into the compound. An hour later, after a detailed sweep of the lower decks, we met up with Colonel L'Amour, Lieutenant Sheed and their men.

The pirate base was ours.

Lugo Grogorum, it seemed, was never at the base. It was the consensus of our prisoners that he had been killed when our fleet destroyed his ship, the *Scion's Scourge*. We would have to content ourselves with the haul of seven hundred and seventeen prisoners. Another fourteen hundred and twelve were captured on Muvuru 5 and 6.

More rewarding however was the knowledge that we had also secured the liberty of three hundred and eight hostages.

REPAIRS AND RESEARCH

The freed hostages were tended to, interviewed and allowed to send messages to their home planets. The majority of them were citizens of the **Union of Democratic Worlds**. They were survivors of the plundered caravels out of Caraquador, pilgrims on their way to visit Earth. They told us they represented only half the prisoners taken from the caravels. The missing half, mostly children and young women, were distributed, they said, among some of the pirate governors throughout the sector.

Commodore Alba assured them that should any of their relatives and friends be found on those worlds, the Empire would see to reuniting them. And in the next few days, many did learn that their loved ones were safe in the custody of the *Shimabara* and *La Vallette* Battle Groups.

Besides the UDW pilgrims, a dozen Imperial citizens were found among the hostages as

were fourteen Federation citizens. There was even an extended family of eleven Kaninu, human-canine hybrids from Nike, the capital of the faraway **Legion of Independent Planets**.

As eager as everyone was to return to our respective homes, and as eager as we marines were to return to our Regiment's HQ on Saint Ambrose, we were all forced to spend another three months in the Muvurunian system affecting repairs on our ships.

Fortunately, the pirates had done no real damage to the place. To their credit, they did a good job of maintaining the bases in good working order. The various resources, tools and machine shops on the bases proved of inestimable help with the repairs. Our engineers were spared the necessity of calling in a service fleet for aid and materials.

During those three months we explored every planet in the system, paying particular attention to every inch of each installation. Through our investigations, it quickly became apparent that, having operated on the farthest-flung frontier of the Dominion, the Muvuru system had survived untouched by the Holy League's crusade and the subsequent catastrophic collapse that consumed the worlds of the old empire.

It seemed the Muvuru system had simply been abandoned during the war and all but forgotten.

More thorough scanning of Muvuru-3 revealed that there were indeed, tens of thousands of ore wyrms eating away at the planet's mantle. Their incessant burrowing was steadily compromising the integrity of the tectonic plates. Sunken plains like the one we landed on pock-marked much of the world, the result of mantle crumbling.

Our scientists estimated that a few more centuries of unabated worm drilling would cause a planet-altering cataclysm. Computer models predicted massive fissuring of the world's outer shell accompanied with increasing, ever more violent volcanic activity. Chunk after chunk of the planet would eventually begin flying off into space until the orbit became unstable and Muvuru-3 would either fall into the system's star or spin away into the depths of the plenum.

We further discovered that the pirates had done a good job of scouring the tunnels of the more valuable worm deposits. The bulk of the treasure had indeed been used to purchase all the hardware they used to murderous effect against us, but a considerable hoard remained unspent in deep-buried vaults on Muvuru 3's moon.

Besides the piles of beryllium, moissanite, vanadium, tistarite and other precious ores, the installations were loaded down with artifacts and various and sundry materials presumedly stolen from scores of worlds.

Above and beyond the careful upkeep of the pirates, the installations discovered across the Muvurunian system were a testament to the quality of old Dominion engineering. According to the prisoners, the bases were discovered fifty to seventy years ago, depending on who you asked. (None of the surviving pirates claimed to be there at the discovery, so we could not know for sure.) The aether generators on the various bases were still functioning nearly a thousand years after the mining operations ceased, producing just enough power to maintain environmental control and, on Muvuru-3, keep the the protective force bubble around the base on so as to spare it from the ravengings of Ore Wyrms.

The remarkably still-intact, ancient computer core holding hundreds of thousands of gigabytes of ciphered clues about life and industry in the Dominion of Man, excited not a few history buffs among us. And no one was more excited by the discoveries of the Muvurunian system than the Emperor himself. Upon learning of our various

discoveries, his Imperial Majesty, Andreas VI informed us that he was assembling an archeological team which would be sent to the system forthwith.

Izzy and I encountered two such excited fellows in the mess hall about a month into our stay. The two men in Operations Specialists black jumpsuits approached our bench, food trays in hand and in mid-argument.

“Sorry brother, but a few strings of alphanumerics are no proof of the Psion,” said the slender blond in the lead.

His interlocutor was taller and bulkier of build with brown hair. “What else could they mean?”

The slender Specialists sat down with a shrug. The name T. Bourne was stitched in white letters over his left breast pocket. “They could be prisoner numbers, slave numbers...”

His companion sat down a moment later, shaking his head. His jumpsuit was stitched with the name P. Hassan. “Slaves and prisoners would’ve had real names recorded somewhere along with their i.d. codes. We haven’t found any such lists.”

“Yet,” said Bourne and then raised a finger, calling a pause to their debate.

The specialists crossed themselves and prayed over their meals. Izzy and I looked at each other, each intrigued by the subject of the specialists' argument. Until they had arrived, I was wasting my breath trying to explain why Terran, North-American Football was the greatest of sports to Izzy and a trio of boys from the Union of Democratic Worlds.

"They might even be cyborg monikers," Bourne continued after the specialists were done praying. "But that doesn't mean they were Psion."

Izzy let them shovel a couple of forkfuls of meat loaf into their mouths before questioning them. "What was that you two were saying about the Psion?"

Hassan answered, his tenor clearly edged with excitement. "We believe we have found evidence of their existence."

"We? I don't believe any such thing," Bourne objected.

"Fine," Hassan conceded. "Some of us believe that we have found evidence for the existence of the Psion."

"What evidence?" I asked.

Hassan answered. "The ship's computer cracked through a layer of Dominion encryption. Just the top layer, mind you. The computer files

we've opened up all contain pretty mundane stuff, like inventories of food stuffs and supplies, maintenance logs of base amenities and the like. But there was also a personnel file which had these curious alphanumeric strings interspersed among common names."

"And you think they are Psion names or i.d.s?" Izzy asked.

"He does," Bourne answered.

"I thought the Psion were just a legend," I said.

"And you would be right; they are mere legend," Bourne insisted.

Kori, the youngest of the UDW youth, a boy of no more than thirteen years, interjected. "What's a Psion?"

Bourne answered the boy. "Psion is the name for a legendary, mythical, race of cyborgs."

"Unless, of course, they really existed," Hassan said. "In which case they would be an historic, long-lost race of cyborgs."

"Uh-huh," Kori responded, clearly looking like he had gone from uninformed to confused by the exchange.

Izzy took pity on the boy. "You've heard of the Dominion of Man, haven't you?"

“Sure,” Kori answered. “Our Union worlds used to be part of the Dominion.”

“That’s right,” Izzy continued. “So were some of our worlds. Well anyway, the Dominion practiced the heresy of transhumanism along two different tracks, genetic and cybernetic.”

Confusion scrunched up Kori’s face yet again. “Transhumanism?”

Timon, an older boy of maybe sixteen years leaned into Kori to explain. “Transhumanism is the idea that human beings can be improved and, you know, we can evolve through the use of science and technology.”

“More or less,” Izzy agreed.

“Why do you consider it a heresy?” Timon wanted to know. “Genetic manipulation and cybernetic implants help lots of people throughout the galaxy every day.”

“That’s true,” Bourne said. “But what you are talking about is the therapeutic use of implants and genetic manipulation. Replacing a missing or lost limb or failing organ or altering genes that cause degenerative diseases, these are good, moral uses of science and technology. Believing we have the right to genetically design people with pre-selected qualities, that’s heresy.”

“Heresy?” Young Kori’s confusion seemed to deepen.

I noticed that Bourne had just forked a new mouthful of food into himself, so I took it upon myself to try and answer the boy. “A heresy is a kind of lie. It’s a misrepresentation or a distortion of a truth.”

Timon shook his head. “I’m still not clear on why you think transhumanism is wrong, why you call it, heresy.”

“Transhumanism lies about reality by distorting the truth of human nature and by misrepresenting the truth of human purpose,” Izzy said.

Timon asked, “How so?”

“Well, we believe human beings are *ends* in themselves, created with the purpose to know and love God,” I answered. “Designing human beings with specific, pre-determined physical traits or worse, purposely altering them into human-animal hybrids, these practices treat human beings not as *ends* in themselves but as objects to satisfy the purposes of their parents, their societies or those of scientists. That’s how transhumanism lies about human purpose.”

“And when transhumanists claim that discarding perfectly healthy limbs and organs for

supposed upgrades is the next step in evolution, or that it is the first step in self-directed evolution, they're lying about human nature," specialist Bourne added. "We do not evolve. Never have. Never will. Evolution is an ancient and persistent heresy beloved by many because they believe it elbows the Creator God out of the picture."

Timon chewed his lower lip thoughtfully for a moment before speaking again. "That's all very interesting. I'll have to think about it."

"Please do," I said. "And don't be shy about tapping into the ship's library. You'll find plenty on that and other subjects to hold you over for the long ride home."

Izzy added to my advice. "And don't be shy about asking anyone on the ship a question about what you read."

Menenius, the third boy who was about the same age as Timon interjected. "That's what the Great War was about, wasn't it? Your Holy League of Planets demanded the Dominion stop creating human-animal hybrids and other stuff like that. The Dominion wouldn't and so the Great War happened."

"There were a few reasons for that war," said Hassan. "But yes, that's the best known reason on account of the war ending with the Gemini

Accords banning the creation of any more human-animal hybrids.”

“So what about the Orion and the hybrid species created before the Gemini Accords,” Menenius asked. “Are they abominations, as some people say?”

We shook our heads. Izzy, who was descended from mutated stock, did so a little sadly.

It was Hassan however who answered the boy. “Absolutely not. While it would’ve been better if the Dominion of Man had not played at being God, the hybrids they created, even those who look radically different than us, are just as human as we are. Most of them have demonstrated that beyond any argument.”

“And the few that haven’t yet, like the Mandrillion and the Amphibs,” Hassan added. “Our Church insists that we give them the benefit of the doubt and treat them as if they too have human souls.”

Menenius nodded. “I guess that’s fair.”

“We think so,” Specialist Bourne said. “But we’ve strayed from our original topic.”

“The Psion,” said the young Kori.

“That’s right,” Izzy said. “The legend, as I understand it, claims all of the Dominion’s cyborgs came together one day, called themselves the Psion

and, in the middle of the Great Intergalactic War, declared their independence, renounced their humanity and disappeared.”

Menenius asked the question that had bedevilled believers in the Psion since the fall of the Dominion. “Where did they go?”

Izzy just shrugged.

Specialist Hassan was more forthcoming. “Some say they set out to another galaxy, probably Canis Major, it being the nearest. Others believe the Psion are hiding somewhere behind our galaxy’s core. Either way, the story says they got as far from us as was possible for them.”

“And some of us believe it is no more than a fairy tale,” Bourne said and helped himself to another forkful of mash potato.

“Why?” Timon asked. “The Dominion did have cyborgs didn’t it?”

Bourne washed down his bite of food with a swig from his water bottle before answering. “Yes, the Dominion had cyborgs. No one argues with that. The issue is with the cyborgs’ decision to get up and go.

“What’s the problem with that?” Timon asked.

Bourne took another sip of his water before answering. “The legend of the Psion in its entirety

claims that the Dominion also created an artificial intelligence which, to their chagrin, turned on its creators.”

Specialist Bourne fixed his attention pointedly on the boy, Kori. “An artificial intelligence is another myth from the Dominion days. An artificial intelligence is not like the virtual intelligences we’re used to. These V.I.s help run our ships, our homes and cities and even whole planets. We interact with these machines as if they were real people, but we all know that they’re just machines, just circuitry and programming.

“The Dominion’s artificial intelligence, this A.I. was supposed to be a sentient machine. It supposedly had its own independent mind, free of any programming. And because this A.I. was supposedly sentient, it supposedly possessed its own independent will. And it was this supposedly sentient machine that gifted all the cyborgs with sentience and convinced them to cast off their Dominion chains, sever their every link to all human civilization and follow it, God-knows-where, like the A.I. were some cybernetic Moses.

“For a great many of us, the story falls apart right there at the very beginning, with the claim that the Dominion created this sentient machine. There’s no proof that an A.I. has ever been created. Even a

thousand years after the fall of the Dominion, despite the best efforts of scientists throughout the galaxy, A.I.s can only be found in fiction, in lurid tales of science fantasy.”

“To be fair,” Hassan said. “In some versions of the legend, the A.I. wasn’t actually created by the Dominion. Not on purpose, any way. Some say it was an emergent phenomenon, that it arose spontaneously from the Dominion’s vast network of virtual intelligences.”

“And those who say that should be hauled away by the inquisition,” Bourne said. “Emergent phenomenon! What rubbish!” The specialist paused to turn his attention to the boys from the UDW. He raised an index finger before them as a point of focus, I guessed, before he continued.

“Don’t you believe it for a minute, boys. Sentience can’t just arise out of circuitry any more than our consciousness arises out of a bundle of billions of neurons or that life rose from some primordial mud. Emergent phenomenon is just more of that evolution nonsense trying to elbow the Good Lord out of the picture of creation.”

“I’m not trying to elbow God out of anything,” Hassan protested. “I’m just sharing what the legends say.”

“I know that, brother,” said Bourne. “All I’m doing is pointing out that this very fantastical nature of the legend rules the existence of the Psion out of rational consideration as the reason for the strings of alphanumerics.”

“Maybe,” was all that Hassan would concede.

“It would be something if it were true, wouldn’t it?” Menenius asked of no one in particular.

Specialist Bourne and I shrugged non-committedly. Izzy nodded and Hassan said, “It sure would be something.”

The table fell silent, the subject unresolved but at an end. I took advantage of the spell of silence to pivot the conversation and inquire of the Operations Specialists, “Have either of you gentlemen ever played or seen a game of Terran, North-American Football?”

11

HOMEWARD BOUND

Long hauls through space were everyone’s least favorite part about being an Imperial Marine.

The eight month journey to Muvuru certainly bore that out. It was certainly the longest trip through space I had ever endured. The ten week trip from Earth to our Regiment's HQ on Saint Ambrose was the most time I had spent canned up aboard a starship until then. The memory of it felt like a weekend jaunt in comparison to the time we spent searching for Muvuru.

Officers and marines with many years under their belts warned us a long stretch of travel aboard a starship, whose sleeping quarters made our regimental barracks feel spacious, would become a purgatory of tedium if we let it.

We did not.

Daily Mass and the Liturgia Horarum provided us with structure to regulate our days and nights. The scheduled, shared prayers enhanced the discipline that made for the smooth running of the ship. All of us took advantage of the free time between prayers as best we could. We caught up on our studies, our reading, sent holos to loved ones, spent long sessions at the gym, working out, sparring and fencing.

To relax, the hangars could accommodate make-shift volley and hoop ball courts. We also played cards and other games and watched the occasional holoflix.

On this particular trip, we also had us a boatload of civilians to interact with. On the *Lepanto*, we had two hundred and fifty civvies to be exact.

Fifty of them were prisoners and they didn't interact with anyone but their jailers and the ship Inquisitor.

The other two hundred were our guests, the majority of which, being pilgrims on their way to Earth when they were kidnapped, were somewhat familiar with our ways. They had mostly done their due diligence as thoughtful tourists and learned what they could about their destination beforehand.

Yet despite that, for them and the others, living among us was an awkward affair, especially those first few weeks while the battle group repaired its ships. The civvies were genuinely grateful to us for rescuing them from the pirates, but initially, most of them were also rather guarded around us and generally kept to themselves. Their initial aloofness struck me as an uneasy admixture of personal deference for their saviors and the general prejudice against our Empire so ubiquitous beyond our borders.

We were bemused by it all as we carried on with our duties and our lives. Here and there we gently prodded those passengers we came across

into friendly conversation as Izzy and I had done with the three UDW boys, who having lost their parents developed something of a brotherly bond between them.

Aloofness gave way to curiosity before too long. Our guests finally opened up and began initiating the conversations, making polite inquiries about all manner of matters concerning both our Faith and our Empire. We answered their questions to the best of our ability and encouraged them to access our library files for any further research they cared to pursue.

Starting around the third month, a few civies could always be found sitting in the back of the ship's chapel curiously observing our liturgy.

Menenius, Timon and Kori sought out Izzy and/or me whenever either or both of us found ourselves in the mess hall. When not with us, the boys could sometimes be found with the Operations Specialists, Hassan and Bourne or gathered under First Sergeant Hayes wing in our gym, studiously applying themselves to his self-defense lessons.

Other marines and ship's crew formed similar fledgling relationships with our guests. The most striking of these relationships was between a young couple, practitioners of a new

noosophic cult gaining popularity on the Union capital world of Ursong and Chaplain Egan.

The couple all but adopted the Hospitaller by the time the repairs were completed. The trio became nearly inseparable. They could be seen at the mess hall, flight deck, chapel or walking along random corridors, always deep in conversations about noetics, philosophy, history and comparative theology.

Once we got underway, it was only eighteen weeks to Crimea Secundus, capital planet of the Austros Princedom. We arrived to a heroes' welcome. Prince Kelemen arranged for three days of festivities which began with a parade down the Boulevard Royale of the planet's capital city, Tauris.

We marched to a tree-lined and rounded meadow in the heart of the city. The greenspace was sprawled between and beneath two small, flat-topped hills from which the royal palace and the Cathedral of Saint Luke Valentin faced each other. Three tiers of stands were set up with the palace as backdrop for the royal family and their court. The meadow's perimeter was studded with food and drink booths and ringed with a few thousand spectators.

After the opening pomps and prayers the medal ceremony commenced. I was surprised and

thrilled to hear my name among the twenty-one Colonel L'Amour called forth from the ranks of Imperial Marines. Fifteen Princedom of Austros Troopers were called forth by Lord Zoltan. One by one, our actions cited for commendation were described succinctly and we were called forward to receive our rewards.

I was called right after Corporal Bucci received a silver cross and a promotion to third sergeant. In my turn, I too was honored for my actions in the ore wyrm pit. Colonel L'Amour likewise pinned a silver cross on my uniform and handed me a pair of corporals' stripes.

The Colonel then shook my hand, as did lords Zoltan and Kolchic, Commodore Alba, Captain Obey, and officers of the other assembled companies. After a deep bow, we shook Prince Kelemen's hand and kissed the gloved fingers of his princess.

We then faced our comrades who gave us the old three cheers salute. Then, at the prince's command, we were dismissed and the brass band began playing. As it did, we, the decorated, congratulated each other. When Bucci and I shook hands, the new sargeant couldn't help but tap my stripes with his and say, "Always one step behind me, aren't you Zippy?"

I smiled, refusing to let him taint the experience for me. “And congratulations to you, sergeant.”

A short time later Sergeant Hayes approached me in private. “Congratulation to you, Corporal Zapatas.”

“Thank you first sergeant.”

“Do me a favor, will you?”

“Sure thing, sarge.”

“Please don’t make me regret greenlighting your promotion.”

I stopped and turned to face him. “Sarge?”

Sergeant Hayes tapped the silver cross on my breast. “You earned this fair and square, you did. Your actions in the pit were truly commendable but, we both know you should never have been in the pit. Don’t we, Corporal Zapatas?”

Sergeant Hayes would have had plenty of time to review the various feeds and records of the men under his command. I spent the first couple of weeks after the battle wondering when he might address my decision to stay in the battle against his exacting instructions. And then I stopped thinking about it, figuring he didn’t believe it worth mentioning. Alls well that ends well and all, I thought until looking into his searching gaze on that meadow amidst all the celebration.

I had no doubt about what he was going to say, but I asked anyway. “Are you talking about my temporary loss of full comms?”

“I’m talking about you disobeying my order to stand down if your armor’s reboot was anything less than perfect.”

Sergeant Hayes’ tone was calm and collected. His demeanor was friendly as ever but his gaze was intense, deeply probing like he was reading fine print scratched onto the inside of my occipital bone. I found it more disconcerting than the high decibel, spittle-spraying harangues of my boot camp drill sergeant.

“We were fortunate your compromised armor didn’t cause anything more serious than bumped shoulders with a Princedom trooper, but it could have easily become a serious problem for you and the men around you. You might’ve endangered the whole company.”

“Yes sir,” I said, my head dipping. “I’m sorry about that, First Sergeant Hayes.”

“I hope so corporal,” Hayes continued, his tone becoming gentler. “I understand why you did it. Believe me, Zapatas, I do. It’s an admirable thing, wanting to stay in the fight, backing your brothers to the end. A lesser man would’ve jumped on any opportunity to bail out of a fight like the one we had

on our hands. I'm glad to see you are a better man than that. But you didn't accept the Emperor's invitation just so you could be a better man than most. You accepted his invitation to become an Imperial Marine, to become the very best of men. Is that not so, Corporal Zapatas?"

"Yes, First Sergeant."

"Imperial Marines follow orders because obedience is the glue that binds us into a corps, a body greater than the sum of its parts.

"Yes, First Sergeant."

"*'If you love me,'* said our Lord, *'then obey My commandments.'* It's the same for us, corporal. We demonstrate our love for the corps, the Emperor and the Empire by our obedience to the lawful commands of our superiors."

"You're right, First Sergeant," I said nodding emphatically. "I should have known better. Disobedience of legitimate authority has been fouling things up since Eden. I will decline the promotion immediately."

Sergeant Hayes put an avuncular arm on my shoulder. "Now, now corporal. Let's not go overboard. If I didn't think you deserved the promotion, believe me, I would've torpedoed the very suggestion of it. Just promise me that you will

earn the next promo as fair and square as you did that cross on your chest.”

Hayes dropped his hand from my shoulder and offered it to me. I clasped it and said, “I promise, First Sergeant Hayes.”

He pumped my hand vigorously and said, “Good. Have yourself a good night, corporal.”

“Thank you, sarge.”

We stayed in orbit around Crimea Secundus for a month, allowing every one a turn at five days of shore leave. We also restocked food supplies, among which was included a large gross of kegs of a local pilsner we all took a liking to.

Our prisoners were entrusted to the local authorities who would subject them to trial and hold them until they were transferred to penance colonies. Our guests, the lucky few who had loved ones to be reunited with, did so with many happy tears. The others took what vicarious comfort they could from the joy of their fellow ex-hostages.

Chaplain Egan’s young couple bid him a fond farewell. They and about a third of their fellow travellers, took the Empire’s generous offer to complete their pilgrimages at no expense. The others availed themselves of the free ride back to their respective homes, never to venture into space again, we guessed.

We surprised the Union boys, Kori, Timon and Menenius with a choice of couples on Crimea Secundus who were willing to adopt them together. Their shared tragedy had formed them into brothers of a sort, and we thought it a shame to break them up. They were touched by the offer, young Kori so much so that he threw his arms around Captain Obey when the marine made the offer. The young boy wept for joy, his small face pressed against the marine's belly.

The scene caused lumps to swell in the throats of all who witnessed it. A couple of days later, after they collectively settled on the couple they would adopt as parents, every eye glistened with tears as the boys and marines said goodbye to one another.

By the time we shoved off, back towards Regiment HQ on Saint Ambrose, I was feeling more content than I ever had in my young life. More than content. I was feeling sure of myself, more confident than I have ever felt about the path I chose for my life.

Don't get me wrong, I never had any doubt that soldiering was my God-given vocation. What I was not nearly as certain of was my decision to accept the invitation to join the ranks of the Emperor's Own. That free choice of mine, like all

decisions, necessitated the rejection of certain alternatives. One such alternative in particular had been haunting me since joining the I.M. three years ago.

Jacinta Placidia was her name.

12

JACINTA

The truth is, by the time the Imperial Marines had proffered their invitation to join them, Jacinta had already put me behind her.

I was sixteen years old; she was fifteen. It was the last week of the summer before my final term of secondary school, a whole four years before the call of the Emperor's Own. **Golan Heights Military Academy** had just approved my application and after excitedly giving the news to my parents, I hurriedly commed Jacinta.

“Just got some great news, Jacci!”

“Oh? What is it?”

“I'll tell you in person,” I said. “Are you home?”

“I am.”

“I'll be there soon.” I then hopped on my hover-rod and flew the thirty minutes to her beachside home.

Jacinta was waiting for me by the family pool when I touched down on the sand beneath the home's large-timbered deck. She was spread across a lounge chair, wearing a sundress, white and spotted with the images of plump, red tomatoes. She was lying under a wide umbrella painted like a sunflower and reading from a data pad. She put the pad down and reached for a drink when she saw me climbing the steps.

Reaching the deck, I paused briefly to admire her sun-browned beauty. Shapely calves protruded from the knee-length dress. Her legs crossed at slender ankles and ended in small, doll-like feet with pink-painted toenails.

The dress exposed perfect, sun-kissed, rounded shoulders from which a long neck curved gracefully to an oval shaped head. Large, bright, honey-brown eyes regarded me warmly over a slender nose and full-bodied, pink-painted lips which smiled at me even as they sipped from a straw. Between shoulders and calves, the empire-waisted sundress highlighted her figure which was well on its way to womanly proportions - nay, to womanly perfection!

I didn't stand there admiring Jacinta for too long because her mother was also regarding me from the air-conditioned comfort of the glass-enclosed sunroom at the end of the deck. I waved hello to Jacinta's mother and she returned the

gesture. I then closed the distance between Jacinta and I, bent over the hand she offered in greeting and kissed it.

“Hello Jacci, my darling. How are you?”

“Eagerly awaiting your good news,
Zephyrinus my sweetheart.”

I gestured to the lounge opposite hers. “May I sit?”

She nodded. “I made us a fresh pitcher of sweet tea. Would you like a glass?”

“That would be great,” I said, sitting down.

Jacinta swung her legs around, rising to a sitting position. From the small, frosted glass-topped table between our lounge chairs, Jacinta picked up a pitcher and tumbler and poured me a glass of the iced drink.

“To good news,” I said raising the glass for a toast.

She smiled, picked up her glass and clinked against mine. Jacinta took a sip. I drained my glass in half a dozen swallows. After the short flight under a late summer, but still scorching South Carolina sun, the drink was immediately refreshing.

Suddenly, surprising me before I could put my glass down, Jacinta guessed my news. “Golan Heights has accepted your application, haven’t they?”

“That’s right,” I said, grinning wide despite being denied the opportunity to spring the news

myself. “This time next year I will be a **GHMA** cadet.”

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you,” she said with a small smile that didn’t strike me as particularly all that happy.

“Thanks,” I responded somewhat guardedly.

Jacinta’s smile disappeared and my grin followed it into the awkward silence that suddenly yawned wide between us.

After several uncomfortable moments, I had to ask, “Is something wrong?”

She took her eyes off of me and looked out at the horizon for the length of a long breath. At the end of the exhale - or was it a sigh - she turned back to face me. “I’m happy for you Zephyrinus, I really am. It’s just... I’m just not happy for us.”

“I... I don’t understand...”

That same small, sad smile returned for a brief moment before she suddenly advised, “You should find yourself another date for the Michaelmas Fair, Zeph.”

My jaw dropped and a beat afterwards I said, “Now I’m utterly confused.”

Jacinta and I were eleven when we first met at a diocesan picnic. We hit it off immediately and had grown close over the years. Raised with a proper appreciation for the sacramental nature of marriage, as we both were, the budding relationship

remained innocent even as our teenage years heightened certain interests in us.

We knew that it was different for the young on other worlds and even for some living on Earth, but Jacinta and I were true believers, both of us lovers of Holy Mother Church. We took to heart Her every admonishment to lead chaste lives. Neither one of us would dare soil the other with illicit premarital relations.

We were also blessed with a like-minded network of supporters, an ever-present chaperonage of parents, older siblings, priests, nuns, and assorted relatives who buttressed and safeguarded our resolve to remain chaste wherever we might go. While certain thoughts unavoidably visited me upon occasion, no serious temptation presented itself to us. Alien as the notion might be in certain quarters, Jacinta and I were resolved to preserve our virginity until marriage.

Not that we were yet betrothed, Jacinta and I; but both our families entertained the hope that we would be soon. It was expected that we would announce our engagement by the coming Christmastide and then be married two or three years later. Such was the general custom for kids like us.

I, myself, looked forward to such a future with Jacinta whenever my youth-bound mind could manage to see past the diversions and studies of the

present. Jacinta hoped for it too and, as I was about to learn, she did so dearly.

“What’s wrong Jacci?”

“I want to be a wife and a mother, Zeph.”

“I know,” I said. “And I thought you wanted to be my wife and mother to our kids.”

“I did. I do. I just don’t believe it’s going to happen now.”

“Why? Because Golan Heights accepted my application?”

Jacinta nodded. “If you go to Golan Heights, you’ll have to take the Vow. That’s four years of celibacy. And that’s fine, I’m willing to wait four years; but, if the Imperial Marines invite you into their ranks at the end of your time at the Heights, you will have to re-up the Vow for another ten. That’s a minimum of fourteen years of celibacy, Zeph. Fourteen! I’m sorry, but I’m not willing to wait that long. I’m just not... not for anyone.”

“There’s no guarantee I’ll get the marines’ invitation,” I said. “And even if I am invited, there’s always a chance I could wash out completely.”

“You’re not going to allow yourself to wash out,” she said. “Not if you get their invitation, which you very well might considering your drive and ambition. You’ve wanted this badly for as long as I’ve known you. I can’t wait fourteen years, wondering all the while if some knightly order will swoop in at the last moment and invite you to join

them and exact an extra seven year vow. You couldn't ask me to wait twenty-one years, or could you, Zeph?"

We stared at each other through another pained spell of silence which I broke with a sigh of exasperation before saying, "I don't understand, Jacci. If you've always known what I've wanted, why is it suddenly an issue? Why didn't you say something before?"

"Well, for that I am sorry, Zeph," Jacinta said a little sheepishly. "I never said anything because I thought... that is, I hoped you would grow out of it."

"Grow out of it?"

"Most boys play at being knights," Jacinta explained. "But most boys start developing other interests by secondary school."

"I have other interests," I protested. "Sports and other stuff..."

A small dismissive laugh escaped Jacinta's pretty pink lips before she continued. "When it became clear to me that you were not developing any seriously competing interests to all things military, I accepted that soldiering would be your vocation. And I was fine with that. Really.

"At that point I began hoping that you would go to some other academy, one which would be more likely to steer you towards the **Sol Defense**

Corps or the Terran Security Force, services that don't demand vows of chastity."

"The Imperial Marines do recruit from the smaller academies, you know."

Jacinta nodded. "I know they do. But on Earth, they mostly draw recruits from Golan Heights. The odds for an early wedding were better if you went anywhere but to **GHMA**."

"I see," I said.

"I hope you do, Zeph" Jacinta said. "I want to be a wife and a mother. That's my vocation. I want to fulfill it as much as you want to be a soldier, an Imperial Marine or a knight."

I nodded and turned to the horizon. The thought of my life without Jacinta at my side seemed lightyears further off than the far away line of sea and sky. It loomed closer as I began to realize just how much I had taken us for granted. I turned away from the thought and the horizon and searched Jacinta's brown eyes for something to say.

Her whisper was barely audible over the susurrus of the surf. "I'm sorry, Zephyrinus."

"I don't have to go to **GHMA**," I offered at last. "The Citadel and VMI accepted my applications as well."

Jacinta flashed me another sad smile. "But you didn't rush over here to tell me about them, did you Zeph?"

"No, not really."

“Not at all,” Jacinta said. “They were never more than a plan B and C. Golan Heights is the better Academy. It’s where you would prefer to go. Admit it.”

“Yes, but I love...”

Jacinta shook her head. “Don’t Zeph, don’t say it. Not now or ever again.”

I shut my trap.

“If you give up your chance to go to **GHMA**,” Jacinta continued. “If you pass up on your chance to become an Imperial Marine and possibly even a knight... If you do that on my account, you’ll enter into our marriage with a great regret, the kind of regret that easily turns into resentment. That would be poisonous to our marriage.”

We stared at each other for a long time in the most awkward and pained silence of our young lives. At long last, all I could say was, “I don’t know what to say, Jacinta.”

“Good bye,” she said, rising from the lounge chair. “That’s really all we have left to say to each other. Goodbye, Zephyrinus.”

She paused for a couple of moments, waiting, no doubt, for me to return the fare-thee-well. When it was clear that it wasn’t forthcoming, she turned her back to me and walked away.

MICHAELMAS

Our breakup cast a pall over the remainder of Summer. I brooded on it all through Saint Michael's Lent but the festivities at Michaelmas managed to lift my mood. I spent most of the day with a small group of friends, parish and classmates and my two favorite cousins, Francis and Betsy, called Bitsy on account of her diminutive size.

We walked along the beach, joining in a variety of games, Four Square, Bocce Ball, Ring Toss, Volleyball, Corn Hole. The guys in the group also tried out our skills at a wrestling circle. We then took a turn each climbing aboard a catapult which hurled us fifty meters out into the Atlantic surf. Here and there along the coastline, clusters of musicians played beach music. We stopped and Shag danced to a few songs as Carolinians have been doing on these sands for thousands of years. All the while, we stuffed ourselves with raw oysters, fried seafood, sausages and sugary snacks of a seemingly endless variety. Between events and meals we cooled off with dips in the ocean.

We crossed Jacinta's beachside home twice on our walk up and down Litchfield beach. I spotted her on our first pass, sitting where I last saw her, laughing it up with a group of girlfriends.

Engrossed in their conversation, she did not notice me among the throngs crossing to and fro before her family's sundeck.

And I made no effort to be seen.

The sight of her, I confess, smarted a bit. On the way back, we made our way along the water's edge which would've made spotting her more difficult. I purposely avoided the effort, keeping my gaze on the horizon where sea met sky.

Betsy noted my pointed avoidance of Jacinta's house. "Still pining for her, are you cousin?"

I shrugged, and said, "Maybe."

Betsy wrapped her arms around my own right arm and pressed her pigtailed head against my shoulder. "My brother Tommy fell in love his second year of college," she said. "Claire was her name. A beautiful girl, if you remember. They were crazy about each other, Claire and Tommy. It was storybook perfect, their love."

Knowing the story, I said, "Until Claire decided to become a nun."

I felt her nod against my arm. "Oh, the tears, which that decision caused. Claire's, Tommy's, my mom's..."

"And a few from you, no doubt."

Betsy nodded into my arm again. "A few. I couldn't help it. Tommy has always been my favorite brother."

Walking beside us, the gangly Francis objected to what he overheard. "I thought I was your favorite brother."

Without missing a beat Bitsy raised her head to respond to Francis. "You thought wrong. Again."

Francis feigned heartache by clutching at his breast.

Bitsy lowered her head onto my chest again. "It was sad to see Tommy so heartbroken."

I kissed the top of her head. "I take it there's a point in reminding me of Tommy and Claire."

Betsy shrugged and said, "Maybe."

"Come on, out with it, Bitsy."

"I was just thinking of Bishop Flint's homily this past Good Friday." Betsy said. She stopped our walk and lifted her head from my shoulder. She unwrapped her arms from mine but took my hand. She stared down long enough to watch a foam-topped wave wash over our feet and then recede.

Betsy gave me a dimpled smile before continuing. "I don't remember the exact words, but the Bishop said something to the effect that all love this side of heaven is in one way or another eventually touched by tragedy, wounded by the very fallen world in which it exists because this fallen world is always disintegrating. Everything and everyone is flying apart from everyone and everything else. Every decision separates possibilities. Each of us, sooner or later, in one way

or another, will be separated from those we love, from everyone we love.”

There was a sheen of tears over her big, brown eyes. I knew she was thinking not just of Tommy and Claire or Jacinta and me; my darling cousin was also anticipating our own coming separation when I would leave for the Golan Heights next spring.

I kissed her forehead and said, “There’s always an Easter Sunday after Good Friday.”

Betsy smiled, loosening a single tear. “Yes, there is,” she said and began walking again. “Easter is our glimpse of heaven, the Bishop said. Heaven, where our choices bring us together, bind us in the communion of saints and draw us into the communion of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. There love is touched, not by tragedy, but by boundless joy as it is absorbed whole into the bliss of eternal beatitude.”

“Wow cuz,” I said. “No one can ever accuse you of not paying attention at Mass.”

“You don’t remember what your priest preached on Good Friday?”

“Not verbatim, like you can,” I admitted. “Father Sao Paolo’s Good Friday homily wasn’t quite as poetic. It was more of a forensic study of crucifixion, exquisitely detailing every excruciating torture our Lord suffered on our behalf.”

“Well, that’ll work too.”

“Sure did,” I said. “No one has complained to Father about anything since.”

We laughed and then walked in silence for several seconds before I continued, “Tommy is engaged now to a new girl, just as lovely, I understand; and, we can trust that Claire is happy at the convent.”

Betsy nodded and added, “And Jacinta and you will eventually find happiness as well without each other.”

I nodded and paused to repeat my cousin’s words silently to myself. “Yes we will,” I said. “And you and I will also be happy no matter how long this fallen world separates us.”

“Amen, amen, we will,” Betsy said, choking back a sob. My cousin then threw her arms around me and pressed her head against my chest. She squeezed me with all the might her small body could muster. I returned the hug proportionately and kissed the top of her head. Then, with the sun sinking behind the beach homes lining the coast, we headed back to our family camp.

Major Feast Days throughout the Empire usually occasioned the reunion of extended families. Michaelmas was no exception. At sunset, families gathered in clusters up and down the Grand Strand in anticipation of the evening’s fireworks. Our camp was nearly seventy in number, consisting of eight of

my parents' eleven siblings, each with their family in tow.

The fireworks were an intricate combination of explosives, lasers and holograms expertly choreographed to depict the war in heaven and Saint Michael's vanquishing of Satan. After the thrilling display, we, along with thousands of families stretched along the Grand Strand, lit bonfires and ringed them in a cozy circle. Bottles of wine and beer and flasks of various spirits began circulating.

Fabian and Faustina, my youngest siblings, nine-year-old twins, joined in with a dozen of their similarly aged cousins in a skipping dance around the fire. The children sang a ditty about Saint Michael throwing devils into hellfire as they skipped/danced and tossed dragon tails into the pyre at every refrain of *'Burn, burn! Wicked angel, burn!'*

The children's incendiary devices sent up flailing tongues of flame and let out short, shrieking whistles which elicited peals of delighted laughter from the children and smiles from the adults who watched.

The festivities took an intimate turn after that. Conversations deepened and laughter sweetened. Guitars and fiddles eschewed popular tunes for long and dearly-held family favorites, songs both plaintive and playful which were sung aloud and heartfelt, on key and off.

Linus, my eldest brother and freshly ordained priest, had arranged for some free time before his first posting to witness our sister Miriam take her final vows. I hadn't seen either sibling since last Christmas. They were radiant in the firelight, holding hands and whispering together.

Miriam's twin sister Martha was visiting from her new home on the planet Adria with her husband Mark and their two small children. It had been over three years since she left Earth. Martha was talking to our mother, enjoying the attention lavished on her toddler son by his grandmother.

Father was talking with his son-in-law. They shared a passion for sailing, and the subject was no doubt the reason for their animated conversation.

Clement, the second eldest Zapatas son, was on leave from the **Solar Defense Corps**. It was his first time home since being posted to Mars two years ago and he was regaling Francis and our other young cousins with stories of his off-planet misadventures. Having grown up on a steady stream of Clement's tales myself, I knew his stories to be highly embellished if not spun outright ex nihilo. To Clement's credit however, they were always entertaining. Our cousins listened with rapt attention.

Uncle Bruno Barbarino, one of my mother's four brothers patted my back in greeting, "Hola there, Zeph my neph!"

I flashed the sun-browned, barrel-chested and dome-topped giant a warm smile. "Hello uncle Bruno!"

We clasped hands and hugged. When we pulled apart, my uncle said, "I understand congratulations are in order, my boy. You're going to the Heights!"

I grinned and nodded.

"You're making family history," Bruno said mussing up my hair. "Good on ya, my boy!"

"He's breaking family tradition," my brother Clement butted in suddenly. "Going off to an academy halfway around the world when there are two perfectly good ones right here in Dixie, each of them with a three thousand years-long legacy. I don't get it. The Citadel was good enough for Paw-paw, for Pop and for you too, uncle Bruno. It was good enough for me, but not good enough for li'l Zippy here."

Uncle Bruno dismissed Clement with a wave of his hand and told me, "Don't you listen to him, Zeph. Golan Heights probably rejected his application."

"I never applied to the Heights," Clement said. "That school is for wanna-be Drumsticks."

My brother Clement was a great tease besides being a teller of tall tales. 'Drumsticks' was one of the more popular slighting references to Imperial Marines used throughout the galaxy. There

were other, more deprecatory names, Clement was good enough not to use.

“Drumsticks” was innocent enough. The term arose from the Imperial Marines uniform. Its wide-topped zouave pants tapered below the knees and narrowed at the ankles to more readily slip into boots. Many saw a resemblance to fowl limbs in their silhouette. Personally, I had long-loved the uniform and hoped to have the honor of wearing it one day.

“If you want to be an Imperial Marine, Zeph,” my uncle Bruno said. “Then I pray God grants you your wish, my boy.”

“Thank you, uncle.”

Bruno pulled a flask from his back pocket and continued, “And who knows, maybe you’ll even win yourself knighthood.”

“Now don’t go swelling his head, uncle Bruno,” said Clement. “It’s fat enough as it is.”

“That be something, wouldn’t it?” said Bruno and then nodded at Clement. “He would have to call you lord, then.”

My brother laughed and said, “Lord Zippy. Ha! That’ll be the day.”

Uncle Bruno handed me the flask with another, “Congratulations, my boy!”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the flask. I searched out my parents in the immediate throng. My father had his back to me, still in conversation with his

son-in-law. My mother was faced in our general direction but engrossed by the new grandson in her arms.

I held up the flask and called out across the short distance, “Mom?”

She looked at me, the flask, her brother Bruno and then back at me before answering, “Sure, go ahead. But no more than five pulls.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said and unscrewed the flask. I took a generous swallow and almost immediately regretted it. The whiskey burned going down and I couldn’t help but cough some of it back up.

My brother and uncle had themselves a good laugh and even my mother smiled as she shook her head. I handed Bruno his flask back. He took a swig and breathed out a satisfied exhalation.

Clement patted my back and asked, “Hey mom, would that be five total shots or five from each flask making the rounds?”

My mother gave him her stink-eye and warned, “Clement, if you get your little brother drunk, there’ll be no place in the solar system the SDC could hide you that will spare you the paddling I will inflict upon you.”

Clement grinned. “Yes, mother,” he said and shot me a wink when she looked away. “Do yourself a favor and save one of those five shots for a flask with a mother-of-pearl fleur-de-lis. There’s

three of them out there. I got them on my last trip to the Jupiter system. Europon moonshine. Quite tasty and it gives the gray cells a good scrambling.”

“Don’t care for synthahol, myself,” Uncle Bruno said and handed Clement the flask.

“I ain’t the discriminating type,” Clement said and took a drink. “It’s all good to me.”

My brother offered me the flask but I waved him off. “I think I’ll pace myself.”

I spent the next few hours moving around the ring spending some time with every branch of our family tree, listening to stories, singing songs and exchanging well-wishes, hugs and kisses. I didn’t know how long it would be before I could return to this blessed circle of mine, so I savored every bittersweet moment. I had no more than three other shots of various liquors during that time (never did cross paths with the Europon moonshine). I was light-headed enough when I crawled into my sleeping bag.

I fell asleep staring up at the stars.

14

THE PROM

The following three months were my last of secondary school. I had already finished my studies

before summer break and returned to school after Michaelmas to fulfill my mentoring obligation by tutoring the younger boys.

On the night of Gaudete Sunday, secondary schools celebrated the senior students promenade and ball. My cousin Betsy took it upon herself to, as she put it, “spare me the indignity of showing up stag.”

I told her I didn’t consider it an indignity, but she rather imperiously dismissed my objection and sent me a link to the exact corsage that would perfectly compliment the gown she had chosen for the ball.

I felt showing up with one’s cousin for a date was worse an indignity than showing up stag, but it was not a sentiment I was going to share with Betsy. Instead, I purchased the corsage and took her to the ball.

Betsy and I linked arms and began our stroll around the perimeter of the concert hall. There were a few hundred students slow-dancing to canned music on the dance floor set up beneath the stage. Most students, however, were gathered in clusters along the rear wall. Sequin-draped tables were backed against that wall at every ten meters. Large, crystal punch bowls were centered atop them, surrounded by stacks of paper cups.

As luck would have it, I spotted Jacinta with friends gathered before the eighth table in. It was

quite the coincidence considering Christ the King Civic hall was filled with ten thousand kids from Georgetown Diocese' six secondary schools.

Jacinta was with mutual friends of ours and with a boy I knew somewhat from the diocesan football league. The sight of her with him stung more than I expected and I became vexed with myself for the unguarded reaction.

Picking up on the irritation, Betsy suggested, "Let's go over Zeph, so you can say a proper goodbye to Jacci."

"We've said our goodbyes," I protested.

"Jacci said goodbye. You just sat there with your mouth hanging open."

I stared hard at my cousin. She smiled sweetly and said, "Girls. We talk."

I loosed a snort and responded, "Yeah, maybe too much."

Betsy shrugged and said, "We're compensating for you half-mute boy-brutes. Now come on and quit your stalling."

"I don't know, Bitsy... I think it best if..." I started to say.

"Smile cousin," Betsy said as she dragged me forward.

Jacinta and what I presumed was her date were in conversation with our friends Aloysius and Miriam, a couple we had often gone on double-dates with. I greeted them first by way of

approaching the group, "Aloysius, Miriam, how are you two?"

"Good."

"Great."

I shook hands with Aloysius and kissed Miriam's. "You guys remember my cousin, Betsy?"

Aloysius answered, "Sure do," and offered her his hand, palm up.

Betsy put her hand in Aloysius'. He kissed it in greeting and said, "You grow lovelier with every sighting."

"Thank you."

Miriam and Betsy then exchanged kisses on the cheeks. "How've you been Bitsy?"

"Mostly good," my cousin answered with an impish grin.

"You couldn't be bad if you tried, Bitsy dear," Jacinta said.

"The important thing is that one make the effort," Jacinta's date said with a wink and then extended his hand to Bitsy. "I'm Lawrence Niven, pleasure to meet you."

My cousin offered up her hand and Lawrence kissed it.

"I'm Betsy Kalganova and this is my cousin, Zephyrinus Zapatas."

"Yes, I recognize him," Lawrence said and offered me his hand in turn. "Saint Mary's Maulers,

out of Downtown Georgetown. You are one of their defensive linemen if I remember correctly.”

I shook his hand and nodded. “That’s right, and you’re a Saint Michael’s Sharks running back. Their best. The Sharks wouldn’t have gotten to the Union Bowl without you.”

“Now... now, we don’t know that’s true; but it’s awful good of you to say,” Lawrence said before gesturing to Jacinta. “This is my date...”

“Jacinta Placidio,” I said, extending her my palm. After what might have been an imagined hesitation, Jacinta placed her hand in mine and I kissed it. “Yes, we know each other. How are you Jaci?”

Jacinta gave me a wide smile which struck me as a little forced. “I’m good Zeph. And you?”

“The same,” I said.

We stared at each other with the same dumb smiles plastered on our faces.

Betsy broke the uncomfortable silence with a soft clearing of her throat and the question, “Is everyone having fun?”

“Not as much fun as we’re going to have when that there punch bowl is refilled,” Aloysius predicted with a nod toward the nearest table.

“Oh?” I said, glad for the excuse to shift my attention elsewhere.

Aloysius gave a deep, conspiratorial nod of his blond and shaggy head and said, “*Le Trinite’*

Terrible have arranged for the second round of punch to come forth from yonder galley properly spiked. Should be any minute now.”

Le Trinite’ Terrible (pronounced with the cheesiest Cajun accent one could muster) or the Trudeau triplets, as they were more commonly known, hailed from Saint Leo the Great Parish. The threesome had a diocese-wide reputation for truancy and all around trouble-making. I didn’t believe them to be bad kids, not at heart anyway. Individually, they might not have acquired the reputation they enjoyed collectively, but their triplet bond acted as a force multiplier for much of their mischief.

“I hope they limit their pranks to the spiking of punch bowls,” I said. “I would hate to see the night ruined by the burning down of the civic hall or some such.”

I was pleased to see that Jacinta joined in the laughter that my small effort at levity produced.

Betsy asked, hooking a thumb over her shoulder. “How are they going to manage it when they’re all on the dance floor?”

“They got to have plausible deniability,” Aloysius said.

“And an inside man,” Lawrence added. “Benjamin Butters.”

Betsy went “Aha.”

I chuckled in appreciation of the Trudeau boys’ choice of accomplice.

“The sisters will never suspect li'l ‘Saint’ Benny,” Miriam said.

“Not likely,” I said. “But you have to wonder how the triplets roped him into it.”

Aloysius shrugged and said, “Butters volunteered from what I heard.”

Betsy was incredulous. “He did?”

Aloysius nodded sagely.

Miriam added, “Butters said there was a time for everything under the sun, and the senior prom was the time to cut loose.”

“They don’t call it the Book of Wisdom for nothing,” Aloysius said.

Miriam punched her date playfully in the shoulder. “It’s from Ecclesiastes, you dummy.”

“Wherever it’s from,” Aloysius said, taking on an air of grave piety, “I, for one, shall not gainsay holy writ.”

“Do you know what they’re spiking the punch with?” I asked.

“I do not concern myself with such trifles,” Aloysius answered.

“Knowing the triplets,” Lawrence said, “It’ll be some potent mix of alligator tears and home-stilled everclear.”

“Sounds delicious,” I said.

Betsy added, “And possibly blinding.”

“Holy writ does advise, admonish and verily, I say, it commands us to walk by faith and not by

sight,” Aloysius pronounced in a comic feigning of our bishop’s zealous preaching style.

Mother Superior Mary Monica Joseph startled us when her raspy voice rose suddenly behind us “You have the makings of quite the theologian, young Aloysius.”

We all turned toward the Benedictine Abbess who was the Chief Administrator of the Diocesan School Board. Our faces betrayed our surprise and perhaps some nascent traces of guilt over the alcohol we were hoping to surreptitiously enjoy.

Mother Superior’s aged face floated serenely in the white wimple which topped her black habit. Her large blue eyes regarded us with their usual inscrutable scrutiny.

“I pray you will not develop the penchant for twisting scripture into heretical knots that has afflicted so many theologians through the ages.”

Aloysius recovered his smile and said, “With your continued prayers, Mother, I will surely be kept safe from all heresy.”

The Abbess’ thin lips spread in a smile. “You can rest assured of my continuous prayers on all your behalfs. Just as you can be certain that I will, whenever it is in my power to do so, spare you needless temptation and steer you ever clear of all near occasions of sin.”

Mother Superior's smile and what I could only describe as her 'laughing eyes' gave us all a most uneasy pause.

"Your charity, dear Abbess," Aloysius said. "It's nearly as boundless as our Good Lord's."

A soft laugh escaped Mother Superior Joseph's lips. She then gave Miriam's hands a squeeze while she said, "Can't help but love a guy who butters one up so, no?"

Miriam flashed her an awkward smile. We all groaned inwardly.

"Have yourselves a sober good time, my young ones," the Abbess said. "After all, this may be the last opportunity that many of you will have to associate sobriety with a good time."

We stared after the abbess as she seemed to float away towards another cluster of students.

Betsy broke the silent spell. "So much for spiked punch."

"Oh well," I said.

Miriam shook her head and asked, "Does anyone else think it's weird how Mother Joseph just appears out of nowhere all the time?"

"It is unsettling," Lawrence concurred.

"Maybe she can bilocate," I offered.

Jacinta nodded. "I've often thought so."

Betsy laughed and said, "Mother is probably in her office right now laughing at us over her cup of Earl Gray."

“I want to know whether Butters screwed up or whether Abbess broke him?” Aloysius asked.

Miriam *hmmmed* and asked, “Wouldn’t *melted* be a better metaphor?”

“I suppose,” Aloysius said with a shrug.

“She must have,” Lawrence added. “Got to Butters, that is.”

“One of Mother’s brothers is a Grand Inquisitor on one of the Habsburg worlds,” Jacinta said. “She probably learned a thing or two from him.”

“Or maybe after forty years of chaperoning teenagers, there’s nothing even *Le Trinite’ Terrible* can pull off on Mother Joseph’s watch,” Betsy offered. “Either way, I’m going to take her advice and have myself a good time, sober though it must be. So forget about the punch and let’s dance, y’all. The band is coming on.”

Betsy took my hand and led me to the dance floor. The other two couples followed. The slow song had ended and the band, a local favorite introduced themselves to much applause. They then immediately launched into a cycle of *contre-danses*.

We joined the chain of dancers orderly threading themselves, a twirling two-at-a time, into the slowly turning ring of whirling dancers. The chain brought us on and off the dance floor over and over again through the long set of songs. The music got progressively faster, the quadrilles grew more

complicated and the partner switches ever more tricky.

Jacinta and I had the opportunity to dance together for a few sequences throughout it all. After more than an hour we were all hootin' and whoopin' it up fiercely, our wild laughter and raucous sing-alongs proof positive of Mother Mary Monica Joseph's wisdom. When we returned to the punch bowls, breathless and parched, no one complained about the lack of alcohol.

There was nothing forced about our smiles and laughter while Jacinta and I danced. For those brief moments we recaptured something of what we once had and I, for one, was grateful for it. I like to think she was too. It made our parting a little while later easier, yet bittersweet. After kissing her hand one last time, I was finally able to say, "Goodbye Jacinta. God bless and keep you."

She gave my hand a squeeze and replied, "Thank you, Zephyrinus. God be with you and the very best of luck at Golan Heights."

The bitterness of the breakup vanished in that instant never to return. Though it was not until after the battle of Muvuru that I stopped wondering what kind of life I might have made with Jacinta.

THE FAREWELL TOUR

Christmas that year was a small and intimate celebration with my parents, grandparents on my mother's side and the young twins. After Christmas I hit the road, visiting for two or three weeks at a time with various branches of my extended family. The trip led me across all three Southern Unions of North America as well as occasioned the crossing of the Pacific to spend two weeks with Uncle Bruno and his family in Brisbane.

I returned home in time to join mother, father, paw-paw and the young twins on a road trip to the Neo England Union, where my grandparents, on my father's side, played host for Passion Week and Easter at their home on the Garden Isle of Staten. That trip officially completed my farewell tour of the extended family.

Afterwards, the immediate family returned to our home in Georgetown Diocese of Union Dixie to spend two weeks together. My parents, bless their hearts, were over solicitous those final weeks, practically waiting on me hand and foot. When my mother wasn't cooking me my favorite meals, my father was taking us to my favorite restaurants. They proffered me all manner of advice and admonishments as if they were trying to cram in as

much parenting as they could into those last days I would spend living under their roof.

Even my mother's usually taciturn father spent little time in his booklined study during those final weeks. Paw-paw took himself away from the writing of his memoirs to join in the family games and conversations. He regaled us with stories from his career in the Solar Defence Force. I had heard most of them before and memorized the various bits of wisdom my grand father had distilled from his experiences. However, I gladly listened to him repeat them and paid him particular attention when he broached a new subject.

"You be extra careful about fraternities, my boy," he warned me out of the blue. "Don't get me wrong, boys away from home for the first time, trying to make their own way in the world; it's only natural that they will cluster into fraternities and clubs or gangs, if they're of a criminal bent. Only natural. Most of these fraternities at academies like Golan Heights, or the ones at our own Citadel or VMI are harmless. Some of them are even good and useful. You can win yourself life-long friends in a fraternity. I did. So did your father.

"But they're not all good," my grandfather continued with an emphatic shake of his thick index finger. "Be wary of those who insist on your dignity as the price of admission."

"My dignity?"

“Yes, you know what I mean,” he said emphatically. “Steer clear of boys who demand you get blind, blackout drunk or take a paddling or some such to join their group. Be especially wary of the latter sort. There’s something fundamentally wrong with boys who enjoy paddling each other. It ain’t natural, if you catch my drift.”

“I don’t think I want to go anywhere near that drift.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“What did you have to do to get into your fraternity, paw-paw?”

“I had to spear me a wild boar, that’s what I had to do,” he answered, striking his chest twice with a wide-splayed hand. “And I had to volunteer a hundred hours at the upstate home for infirmed priests.”

“You killed a boar by yourself?”

“No,” my grandfather answered. “There were three older boys with me who helped kill it. But I was the pledge, so I was on point.”

“Wow,” I said and then called over my shoulder to the dining room where my father was helping mother set the table. “Did you have to do anything like that dad?”

“No, my fraternity got its pork from the commissary like civilized folk,” my father answered.

My grandfather snorted derisively and my father chuckled before continuing. “My fraternity

was a sports orientated outfit. They sponsored a grueling triathlon every year for those who wished to join. The first twelve across the finish line, the 'Dirty Dozen', they called us, won ourselves a place in the fraternity."

"Your father came in eighth out of a pack of three-hundred and fifty-two," my mother added.

"That's primo, dad," I said.

"I thought so," my mother added with a wink at her husband.

My father smiled warmly. "Thank you son, and you too, hon. But to paw-paw's point, he's absolutely right. You're going to be meeting a whole lot of new people. The further you get from home, the wider the world you'll find. It behooves you to enter that wider world with eyes just as wide open."

"Don't worry dad."

"We're not worried Zeph," my mother said. "You're a smart boy, a smart young man, I should say. We raised you proper. You know right from wrong. Not everyone does however. Many blur the line between the two. It's not always knowingly or from wicked intent."

"Sometimes it is," my grand father interjected.

My mother conceded the point with a nod before continuing. "Sometimes, yes. Most times, they just don't know better. Either way, it can be

easy to be swept along by a crowd or a charismatic, would-be free-thinker.”

“There’s no path but ye olde straight and narrow for me, mom. You should know that by now.”

“We all know that,” my dad said as he put down the last desert spoon. “We just like to hear you say it. Now go fetch the twins so we can eat.”

On Easter’s third Sunday, I bid farewell to my priest and parish. They threw a little brunch shindig for me after Mass. I spent a few, heartwarming hours accepting congratulations, well wishes, prayer cards, holy medals and a very generously loaded credit disk.

Ever since receiving the invitation to study at Golan Heights Military Academy, I had been so looking forward to the life ahead of me that I never gave much thought to the life I was leaving behind. Near the end of the brunch, when I had a moment to myself, I sat back and surveyed the crowded church hall. Seeing my parish gathered to bid me good luck and God’s blessing, I was suddenly and sharply struck by how much I was leaving behind. I confess I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of their love. It humbled me as few things had up to that point in my life.

Father Sao Paolo sat down next to me while I basked in that profound gratitude. The small, silver-haired priest slapped my thigh a couple of

times and said, "That's quite the crowd you've brought out, young man."

"I... I know but, I can't believe it. I'm touched Father. Truly, I'm honored."

"You're much loved around here, Zephyrinus. You'll be sorely missed."

"Thank you Father," I responded and then paused to swallow the lump of emotion threatening to burst out in a sob. Hot tears welled up in my eyes as I continued. "I will miss y'all too."

The old priest gave me a broad smile and a few silent seconds to compose myself. "You know Zeph, Golan Heights is going to teach you everything that has ever been taught about Just War Theory. They'll cover everything and everyone from Saints Ambrose and Augustine and Aquinas as well as the Protestants Luther, Calvin and Grotius and the numberless slew who've come after them."

I nodded and said, "Sure."

Father Sao Paolo fixed his familiar and gentle gaze on me before continuing. "But if you will indulge me, the simple parish priest who baptized you and watched you grow into an astounding young man, I too would advise you."

"Of course, Father."

"All the *jus ad bellum* theory aside, the individual soldier has but one means of determining whether what he does is just or not in the eyes of our Lord."

My emotions under control, Father Sao Paolo had my full attention.

The priest turned his head and with a hand gestured at our fellow parishioners. “They must be your motivation for whatever you do as a soldier.”

I looked over at my fellow parishioners happily chatting away in varied clusters. When I turned back to the priest, Father Sao Paolo continued.

“Whatever you do Zephyrinus, it must be done for the love of them, to secure their liberty and their lives from any enemy who would rob them of either. If, God forbid, your vocation leads you into war, then love must lead you through the battlefield, the love for those you left at home.

“If, instead, you ever allow hatred of the enemy to become your motivation, you will make a mockery of your vocation, and your actions, however justified militarily, will not be found just or pleasing in our Lord’s eyes.”

I nodded slowly, gravely. I internalized my priest’s words with a deep inhalation. Exhaling, I said, “Yes, Father. I will remember.”

The next day, I was unable to hold back the tears when I said my goodbyes to the twins, Fabian and Faustina and my parents and grandfather. Neither were they. My face was damp with tears, a blessed mix of theirs and mine own, when I boarded

the transatlantic transport to begin my new life in
the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

The End

A Glimpse Ahead...

Glory & Empire

Book Two Of The Holy Terran Empire

INSURRECTION

“Incoming!”

My helmet’s HUD flashed red. I dropped flat onto the wide ribbon of pavement beneath my boots. A second later, a pair of mortars exploded thirty meters off my right shoulder. The fiery blasts opened up a crater in the palm-strewn plaza spread beneath a triangle of office towers.

The comm chatter began even as the dirt blasted into the air rained down on us.

“I thought these buildings were empty.”

“The rovers detect no life signs in them.”

“Then who’s shooting at us?”

“Remote fired mortar.”

“We’re lucky the rebels haven’t learned how to use the weapons they stole.”

“Quit your yammering and back on your feet,” Sergeant Hervis Bucci ordered.

Flying air support above us, an Imperial Bolt launched a rocket at the building from which the mortars were fired. The rocket smashed into the tower about two-thirds of the way up. A split-

second afterwards, roiling flames, marble and glass erupted out of a three-story section of the structure.

It must have been a beautiful park once, I thought, moving forward again. I imagined it filling daily with workers from the surrounding buildings, enjoying strolls and lunches in the open air, the city's bustle buffered by the two-meter tall stone wall that enclosed the green space.

The park was now reduced to an eyesore. The trees and lawns were burnt, the benches overturned and wrecked, the pathways littered and painted with slogans and obscenities.

Our HUDs flashed red again. There was no time to react before a third mortar exploded ten meters closer than the last ones. Some of the blast's spray of debris and shrapnel reached our lines, but, thanks to our armor, it all proved harmless.

"They're quick studies, these rebels," Ike said at my side.

Another rocket streaked from the overhead Bolt to the new source of fire. The adjacent tower suffered the same result.

"Let's double-time it out of this shooting gallery!" Sergeant Bucci ordered over the comms.

We picked up our pace and reached the center of the park in short order. I'm sure, to a man, our eyes lingered on the toppled and be-headed statue of our Blessed Lady lying in a bench-ringed

clearing. Such desecration would have to be answered for, I thought.

A fourth and fifth mortar landed just a few meters in front of our lines. Half-a-dozen of our men were knocked over by the blasts but they returned to their feet quickly and reported in green.

Even as the Bolt took out the new source of enemy fire, three more mortars landed direct hits on our lines. Bucci's squad took two of the hits, hurtling him and six of his men through the air in as many directions.

The hit we took knocked half our squad over. The blast sent Ike hurtling backward to bowl me over. I landed hard, my breath expelled in an explosive grunt. I blinked back the momentary disorientation and consulted my HUD as I scrambled to my feet.

I was fine.

I wanted to check on Ike and the rest of my squad, but protocol demanded I determine whether the chain of command was still intact.

"Sergeant Bucci," I called out. I received no response. My HUD lit up with his vitals. Bucci was unconscious but alive. His helmet detected a mild concussion and his smartskin was delivering a dose of stimulants to rouse him. Two of his squad mates went over to help him to his feet.

I called up the sergeant's squad feed as he began to groan himself awake. Bucci had lost two

men. Brady was killed in the attack and LeFleur had lost his left leg beneath the knee.

A squad of squires rushed up behind us to attend to them.

The HUDs flashed red again.

Two more mortars pounded into the ground between us and the squires. The explosions showered us with dirt and some shrapnel pinged off our armor harmlessly. The squires were knocked over onto their backs. Fortunately, they all regained their feet in short order.

Another rocket from the Bolt above us eliminated the new threat.

I turned my attention to my own squad. The HUD informed me that we were all alive, but our newest recruit, Dekker was unconscious. His armor was also seriously compromised, his breastplate cracked nearly in two. I left Dekker a recorded order to drop to the rear if his smartskin managed to wake him before the squires hauled him off.

A quick glance around showed me the rest of my men were up on their feet. “Let’s keep moving,” I told them.

Sergeant Bucci suddenly barked over the comms, “Up and at ‘em, boys! Can’t let Gamma Squad beat us to the bridge.”

I grinned grimly under my helmet, assured that our sergeant had suffered no loss of gumption in the mortar blast.

Ike fell in beside me, running with a slight limp. He shook his head and said, "I'm beginning to question the wisdom of our 'shoot to stun' orders."

"You and me both, brother," I said.

We were being fired upon to mortal effect by very real hostiles, their Imperial citizenship notwithstanding. Brady was the eighth of our brothers killed since our battalion began sweeping through the city this morning. LeFleur was the latest of three times that many wounded. We were minutes from confronting their murderers and their maimers and we were under strict orders to do it with non-lethal force!

We all had misgivings about the mission, our first in the twenty-two months since the battle for Muvuru. Quelling an insurrection on an Imperial planet was a prickly affair, barbed with all manner of political complications which, depending on the Imperial Marine you asked, were either above his pay grade or beneath his consideration.

For myself, it was simply a matter of stamping out the latest flare-up of the old heresy of Humanism. It had to be done and I was glad to be of help.

Our recon rover reached the gates on the far end of the park. It alerted us to an improvised explosive device buried beneath the gates. It was rigged to blow when the gates were thrown open.

“Zapatas!” Sergeant Bucci called as we approached the southern end of the park. “We’re going over the walls rather than through those gates. Sweep East with your boys. I’ll take mine West.”

“We’re on it sarge,” I responded and then switched comms to address my men. “Gamma Squad. On me!”

And over the stone wall we went.

Beyond it, a broad, palm-lined esplanade lay between us and the wide, slow-rolling River, Bendición. Across the river lay the Old Town section of the city. Two and three-story white-walled homes with red-tiled roofs rose up the gentle slopes of three limestone hills. Two bridges, one directly before us and another three thousand meters east of our position, connected Old Town to the city’s business quarter.

The picturesque view belied the threat before us. The rebels were entrenched in Old Town, hidden among the sinewy streets and long, looping lanes of the city’s original settlement.

Companies Two and Three were already beyond the river, positioned just outside of Old Town. Once we were across the bridge we would join them in rooting out the rebels, going house-to-house, with the help of four companies of the local military.

Fourth Company was already collected before the esplanade. Sergeant Bucci and I joined

our squads and, together, slipped our Third Platoon into the empty slot in our own Fifth Company's line. Both Imperial companies were buttressed with a company of local soldiers in their green and red armor.

"Gang's all here," Sergeant Hayes announced with the flash of a thumbs-up. "Lieutenant Obey, Fifth Company reporting in. Ready when you are."

"Roger that, Sergeant," Lieutenant Obey responded. "Rovers have not detected any signs of weapons on the protesters but we'll proceed with caution all the same. Weapons on stun. Let's move out."

"Roger that, LT," Sergeant Hayes said and then repeated the call to move forward with our weapons on stun.

We crossed onto the esplanade without incident. Past the esplanade, the ground swept gradually upward, ending in a levee wall. The ramps onto the bridges rose up to the wall and then above and beyond it.

On the ramps, throngs of protesters, each some five-hundred strong, stirred to life at our approach. Signs and banners were raised in the air. Glancing over them, I noticed they were, for the most part, the same signs which greeted us at the starport when we arrived.

Imperialists Go Home!

**We Want Democracy And We Want It
Now!**

Not My Empire!

**No Church! No State! The People We
Will Liberate!**

A new one caught my eye as we closed in on the protesters. It depicted the Emperor and the Pope as giant, bloated ticks feeding off the planet through comically long proboscises. Beneath the cartoonish image, red, dripping paint strokes declared:

Empires Are Parasites!

I smirked beneath my helmet, remembering the slogan from my cadet-days study of Federation History. The assertion was made by one of their more strident social scientists recently turned stentorian senator.

The protesters were innocuous for the most part. They were more of a nuisance, eager to play at being human shields for the militant rebels holed up in Old Town. Such ‘useful idiots’ had always been in the vanguard of revolutionary movements. They were invariably exterminated by one side or the other in the struggle.

My thoughts were interrupted by the approach of ground vehicles from both ends of the esplanade. Vans emblazoned with the logos of two different news companies pulled to a stop some one hundred-meters from our line. Drone cams lifted into the air from off their rooftops and floated in our

direction. A couple of journalists stepped out of each vehicle and slowly made their way towards us.

“Seeing as our weapons are set to stun, can we shoot the journalists too?” Sergeant Bucci asked.

Lieutenant Flynn took it upon himself to answer Hervis. “Only if they get between us and the bridges, Sergeant.”

“Too bad,” Bucci said.

We closed in on the protesters, near enough to hear them. Their voices rang out with what was now an all-too-familiar song.

“Tolerance and equality

Will lead us all in harmony...”

Ike groaned over the comms. “Not that song, again.”

“It is pretty awful,” Sergeant Shoji complained.

“You can’t even dance to it,” I offered, eliciting a few chuckles.

“Well, I’ll be,” Sergeant Bucci said.

“Corporal Zapatas made a funny!”

This elicited more laughter from the company.

Lieutenant Flynn cut through the chatter.

“Alright now boys, here we go.”

There was a beat of silence before the Lieutenant’s voice boomed from the speaker in the overhead Bolt.

“In the name of the Emperor, you are hereby ordered to disperse immediately.”

The protesters did not budge but rather sang more loudly.

“Hand in hand

We take our stand

Equals all from every land...”

“In the name of the Emperor, you will disperse this illegal assembly or be forcibly removed from the bridges.”

“Equality and tolerance

Revolution, our only chance...”

Lieutenant Flynn switched back to Company comms. “Company - arms at the ready!”

As one, we raised our HAW3Ks into firing position. The front ranks of protesters began advancing on us, the song on their lips and flowers in their hands.

“Aim.”

Our combat computer assigned each of us a separate target. My first was a beanpole of a middle-aged woman with two salt-and-pepper braids. If I squinted and imagined another ten kilograms on her frame, she would have resembled my mother.

Of course, my mother would never involve herself in something so foolish. I reminded myself of that as the protester approached, singing at the

top of her lungs with a bunch of colored daisies in
her boney, long-fingered hand.

“Fire!”

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want to be among the first to know when my books
launch.

Afterword

First and foremost, I would like to thank **Georgette Suskie**. Your advice on the page and inspiration off it are as invaluable as you are precious to me.

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Thanks also to those who followed the serialization of the novel's first, rough draft on my blog and via **MeWe**.

And you, dear reader, I thank you for your investment of treasure and time on my humble little tale. I sincerely hope you have enjoyed it and consider leaving a review on your preferred sites.

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Your brother in Christ,
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