



Zex™ - The Beginning

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## **Zex – The Beginning**

The radio crackled with static but the message was clear.

“The War is Over! The War is Over!”

Or so cheered the other pilots from their fighters as the last of the Ionic devices were detonated safely.

The night sky was still ablaze with the fire from the detonation, the huge conflagration had been burning for minutes and would burn for many more before it would die out. The last of the Ionic devices the R'Mparian had planted was destroyed and their masterstroke was undone. Surely the War was over.

Captain Roberts raised his gloved hand to the side of his specially modified helm to the ‘data jack’ that plugged directly into his flesh, making him one with the craft that he commanded.

The feel of the plastic and steel was as much part of him as his skin, and how he loathed it.

“How did it come to this?”

He asked the question in a quiet whisper, to no one in particular for he already knew the answer and yet he still found it almost impossible to believe.

“R'Mparian” a word that fifteen years ago didn’t exist. That was a time when the mention of aliens was only taken seriously by closet geeks and the insane. How right they had been all those years, if only we had listened.

He still remembered that day as clear as yesterday; he was twelve years old, sitting at home with Mom and Dad watching on T.V. like the rest of the world as the day of First Contact, of face to face meeting, was about to unfold.

Two weeks before the world had heard for the first time that we were not alone, when signals were received from space. It was a long stream of data, repeated over and over. The greatest minds on the globe deciphered it, telling us of people beyond the stars, a people wanting to reach out in peace, to communicate and be friends.

And in our naïve yearning to communicate we opened our arms to them, and welcomed them like lost brothers returning home.

And there at Cape Canaveral did the President of the United States raise his hands in the air and, in a voice amplified to be heard over a mile away, shouted to the heavens:

“The people of the Earth welcome you, and offer you our friendship!”

There was no translation needed in the reply, it was as clear as it was devastating.

The alien fire rained down upon the assembled masses. The scene was depicted across the world for a few seconds before the cameras too were engulfed in this inferno and all that was left in a billion homes were screens of static.

And so on the 24<sup>th</sup> July, fifteen years ago, the War had started; the battle to save the Earth from the aliens.

The R'Mparian's initial advances wiped away millions in a few days. We had not been prepared and were slaughtered like cattle. But the Human race is resilient. We holed up; we dug in and fought tooth and nail. And so, after the first advances, the war of attrition began.

The sky belonged to the aliens for their fighter ships used technology we couldn't even dream of. Our craft were simply outmatched and some of the greatest pilots to have ever lived were lost to us in useless sorties simply because their craft could not compete.

In one such battle a single R'Mparian vessel was taken almost undamaged and with the brain-power of the worlds finest avionics engineer, Dr. Simon Parker, was our retaliation formulated. New weapons were created, based on the alien technology he discovered, that evened the score and soon the skies were not such a one sided affair. And our overwhelming numbers made inroads in the massive advances they made in the early years. Soon we regained much of the sky and land that we lost but eventually this lead to a stalemate between the warring worlds.

But Dr. Parker did not rest on his laurels, he worked on the captured ship, learning from it and then modifying it, designing a ship with a sole purpose, tuned to perfection to do a single task, that of destroying R'Mparians. And so Zex was born.

A ship like no other, man and machine working as one, linked so that all its systems were controlled by thought. The R'Mparian's had opened the gates for Dr. Parker's mind, allowing him to see things that we had thought were impossible; his intellect did the rest. A fighter with more raw fire power than our amassed fleets of war ships. At last we saw a glimmer of hope.

We had discovered by this time that the aliens wanted the Earth, to populate it, to take it for their own. Generations before, the R'Mparian's had turned on themselves in a bloody and destructive civil war. With weapons of such power not only had one faction been eradicated but the planet itself had been turned into a barren wasteland, unfit to keep any living creature alive. Light years away sat their graveyard of a planet and since that day the survivors left in an armada of craft, they have wandered the Galaxies searching for a new home to conquer; and so their attention had been drawn to us. We had discovered

their method of entry to our Galaxy, through that of a warp-hole. Probes had been sent through to the other side but none had ever reported back. But we knew in our gut that they waited on the other side, like a huge spider waiting for the fly to wander into its web.

Yet it was the R'Mparian's that forced the issue instead of waiting for us to make a move. We can only guess that they became frustrated by our stubborn resistance. Their thinking was beyond the scope of our minds for we didn't comprehend the lengths they would go to win this war. They brought huge mother-ships through the warp-hole to place Ionic devices around our planet. They were placed to shift the Earth off its axis and send us back into an Ice Age, to kill us once and for all. Leaving a world that would be inhabitable for them, but a graveyard for us.

And in our darkest hour, one man had been selected to pilot our final hope, Zex, and to lead a fleet of fighters against each of these heavily guarded Ionic devices.

Captain Roberts mused over the 'honour' of being selected for the job. He remembered the terrible good-bye to his wife and child.

How can you break to the ones you love that you are going on a suicide mission, that if you fail we all die? Captain Roberts still wasn't sure how he ever came through that moment in his life, but he had and it had left him shattered and resigned. To say broken-hearted would have been like comparing the sun to a light bulb. He lost everything in that goodbye, and most of all, his will to live.

And yet he had, and the War was over, wasn't it?

The radio crackled again but this time instead of euphoric voices of the pilots, it was the voice of General Johnson.

"Well done men, you have saved us all. Return to base, Captain Roberts will you please head straight to Debriefing Room 1"

"Yes, General", replied Captain Roberts.

So much for the victory celebrations he thought. Yet he felt somewhat hollow, as if living was an anticlimax. At that moment he felt more machine-like than ever.

Again he touched the data-jack and shuddered.

He hated that, the feeling that he had somehow lost part of himself when that circuitry had been integrated with his brain. He didn't believe in a soul or anything like that, but he felt less human, as if part of him had died on that operating table.

The hangar was a scene of jubilation when he arrived; shouting and cheering filled the air and happy laughing faces were abundant. The sense of relief was almost a sentient thing

as he walked through the hangar. He lost count of the slaps on the back he got, the offers of drinks to be bought in his honour, or babies named after him or other such promises. He walked like a man in a daze, not seeing where he was headed but knowing his feet were dragging him towards Debriefing Room 1.

Captain Roberts knocked on the door and waited for the acknowledgement from the other side before entering and saluting the General.

The General was not alone; with him was Commander Stokes, the leader of Intelligence for the Earth Defensive forces.

“Before we get to business Dan. Well done son, I never thought it could be achieved but you have done it and I thank you.”

“Thank you, Sir” replied Captain Roberts crisply.

“Be seated Dan, I’m gonna be blunt so we might as well be comfortable”

Captain Roberts felt the snake in the pit of his belly roil again. The last time it had he was being volunteered to save the world from the R’Mparian master plan. Captain Roberts sat and waited for the General to start.

“Well I appreciate that there is a party going on outside Dan, but the truth of it is, all you have done is prolonged the War. Had you failed the War would have ended and we would have lost. You have saved the World, but only for now Dan, only for now.”

Captain Roberts said nothing, although the news was new he felt as if he had always known this would be the case.

“And this morning I received a report from Dr. Parker. He has been doing simulated tests with the prototypes he created before he built Zex. Now Dan you’ve got to except that Dr. Parker was under tight time constraints and so long-term testing wasn’t possible”

“What are you telling me Sir?”

The General almost looked embarrassed as he broke the news to Captain Roberts.

“Well it seems that Zex becomes linked to a host, and it will reject all other users. Dr. Parker is working on it, but as of now there is no way for the craft to be piloted by anyone but you.”

Captain Roberts breathed a sigh of relief.

“I thought you were going to tell me that I had a terminal illness Sir”

“No, no Dan. But it does mean that you aren’t free to go until Zex can be piloted by someone else. And this is why we are here now. But I’m going to pass you over to Commander Stokes for the rest”

Commander Stokes was a hard faced, unsmiling man, with cold calculating eyes, he did not preamble but headed straight to the point.

“Captain Roberts, as always my information is classified; it will not leave this room.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Captain Roberts.

“We have received reports back from the probes we sent through the warp-hole. In fact we received them six months ago and we can confirm that they lead to open space and many R’Mparian mother ships.”

“But this is where it becomes interesting. They are spread about space and not amassed together. We feel this is because they have no concern about us coming through but are more concerned about being able to cover as much space as possible, almost if the mother-ships were making a perimeter to make sure they can spread their ships as far afield as possible. It may be hard to believe but we feel this is because they are trading with other races out there, buying supplies and weapons to keep their war machine running. This can be used to our advantage.”

“Our advantage Sir?”

“Captain Roberts, some time ago we had a party of R’Mparians make contact with us. At first we were mistrusting but after they won our trust and we theirs they flew here on a small transport. They are now kept hidden in a small military facility, the location of which I can’t disclose. They are much like humans Roberts, not in looks, but in attitude. Some want War, some don’t, some hate the atrocities they brought down upon us, some glory in it. To our fortune it was a group of scientists who only wanted the War to end, and as part of their request for sanctuary they offered designs and advice. And we accepted.”

“For three months we have been building mother-ships and it was our plan that if you failed we would evacuate as many people as possible with them. This morning while the world and the R’Mparians were watching your exploits we launched them through the warp-hole. They are spreading out into space not unlike the R’Mparians but their main purpose is to be fuel depots for our fighters, though in truth we may have to emulate the R’Mparians to keep these mother-ships running.”

“We are taking the War to them? This is insane, you might have better technology than you had but the fighters won’t do anything against a mother-ship!”

Captain Robert’s clenched his fists so tight that his knuckles ached and yet the seething grew in his belly, burning away the trepidation and fear.

“Is this your great plan Sir? It is suicide damn it, suicide!”

Roberts realised he was standing but couldn't recall standing and yet Stokes stood cold and calm in the face of his tirade.

“Again I agree Roberts, but you see that is where you come in.”

“What! So it's no fleet, just me and Zex and a posthumous medal cast into the ether in the hope it finds my floating corpse?”

Captain Roberts looked at the General pleadingly but it was Commander Stokes that answered.

“Not quite, as we speak we are making modifications to Zex to disguise its signature and change the shape a little; you're too well recognised after today.”

“We are putting on a warlike front so you can move quietly in to space and take them out from the inside.

Our guests were the ones to tell us that there are other races out there; there is an economy of trading between worlds, hell even though they are at War Roberts they still need supplies and traders flock around them like flies selling and buying goods. It keeps their War effort alive.”

And so as a trader you will venture into their space, undercover if you like. Disrupt the War effort any way you can, gain their technology and use it against them. Between what you buy and our guests here we can make sure our guys will be on the same field.

And if at all possible destroy those mother-ships.

But once you leave the base you must leave your name and rank behind. We must assume they know your name, and possibly what you look like, though in truth it most likely its Zex they know and although we have disguised it, they are not stupid, someone will put two and two together.”

Captain Roberts grinned a cold smile, so he was too die after all, just not quick and painless as he first thought but a slow painful one as he headed out into space alone, left to R'Mparian mercy. Yet the thought of risking his life again sparked a fire inside him that had been extinguished since his success. The danger made him feel alive.

“So I have to tell my wife goodbye again?”

“No Roberts. In one hour we are going to go into red alert to lock this place down tight. Secrecy is our ally and we have too many open mouths. There will be no contact, no one

leaving the base. Everyone will be on standby waiting for the 'reported' attack to happen.

Then tomorrow a group of trusted men will venture out on patrol, in fact the famed Captain Roberts and three of his best wingmen.

They will be ambushed, a terrible tragedy, but the sacrifice of their leader will allow them to escape. So the Earth's champion Captain Daniel Roberts will be gone. A funeral that will be televised across the heavens will see him buried with all the pomp and ceremony fitting a man of his stature."

"And you expect my wife and son to keep a secret of this magnitude?"

"No, she will receive a telegram to say you were killed in battle. The military will ensure the widow of our saviour will be well looked after for the rest of her days."

"Screw you!" Roberts shouted as he leapt across the desk. His mind had let go and his fury took over, and it only regained control when his knuckles screamed in agony and he gazed down at them to find them scrapped and bruised. He was at first perplexed at the blood on them until he saw Stokes on his back, blood pouring from his ruined nose. He remembered what Stokes had said and he raised his fist again with every intention of killing him.

General Johnson shouted and his voice cut through the red haze like a knife.

"Sit Down Soldier!! You forget what you signed up to do. To serve in the best way you can. And if that means giving up the life you once had so be it. You are married to Zex now, it will not function without you and the pair of you combined will do what needs to be done."

"Like hell I will General, I have given enough, do you hear me?"

"Dan, listen to me. I have lost count of the number of friends that I have lost to those things but that does not mean I'll stop till we are safe. My family were lost to me and still I fight and will go on fighting till I am dead and cold.

You will go on fighting because that is all you know! Hate me if you wish Dan, if that will get you through each day. To put it into simple terms everyone on this planet is expendable compared to you and Zex. If it can be done then only you and Zex will be able to achieve it."

Roberts didn't know how to respond, the fury writhed in his belly but he knew there was no way out. He was trapped and there was no escape from the fate he had been given.

Stokes held a handkerchief to his nose and stared coldly.



“Shall we now finish this debriefing?” His voice muffled by the handkerchief.

Roberts sat back down, feeling the hate leech out of him and be replaced by resignation.

Stokes droned on about what he must do but all he could think of was how could they do this to him?

“So Captain Roberts you have two days rest before you will launch. Enjoy the peace you have now for you will have hard days ahead.

Roberts stood, saluted crisply and turned to go but the anger burned hot again for a second and he turned back.

“Commander Stokes, when this is over and I return, you’re a dead man”

As he strode away he realised that the War would never end for him. He had sacrificed himself to be part of Zex and now he could never be free.

“Death to the R’Mparians,” he growled under his breath.

And for the first time in his life, he meant it.