

NATE JOHNSON

# DRAKE'S RIFT



HUMANITY HANGS IN THE BALANCE

**Drake's Rift,**

**By**

**Nate Johnson**

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**Dedicated to  
Harold Snodgrass**

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# Drake's Rift

## Chapter One

Some things never change, Alicia Miller thought with a small smile as she glanced up at the night sky. The stars seemed brighter here at home. Closer, more personal. More hers.

In Tannerville, she couldn't get the same sense of being this alone. Too much light, too much noise. A bustling, hustling town. Growing faster than a Jonathon weed.

Here, at Drake's Rift, her family's farm, the night was softer. The constant chatter of the red beetles plus the distant call of a poller bat produced a comforting blanket of sound. And the wind of course. The slow warm breeze funneled down their valley. With that unique sense of the planet Intrepid. A combination of green grass and distant rain. It was enough to make a girl's heart relax for the first time in months.

Yes, it was good to be home. Even if only for a short time.

As she looked out over the valley bathed in the silver moonlight, she thought of the possibilities. What should she do? She'd just graduated college. She really couldn't put it off much longer. Try for that job in the Foreign Ministry? Or return to this valley?

Mom wanted her back. But, they didn't need her. Not really. Jake, her older brother, would shepherd things. Henry, her younger brother, would keep the equipment running. Like their grandfather, he was a natural mechanic.

As for little Stephan, who could tell? If the boy lived to adulthood, it would be a miracle. The kid was in constant trouble. But he fit here. Wild, free. Stephan was a part of this land as much as the Yarks and Kairns.

She, on the other hand, didn't fit. Not really. Home was safe, home was really all she'd ever known. But there was an entire galaxy out there. Dozens of planets to see. Places to go, people to meet.

Sighing, Alicia ran her hand through her long brown hair, placing it behind her ears. Decisions. Stay or go. What was a girl to do?

For quite some time, she continued to stare out at the valley. Lost in

thought. She might very well have stayed there all night, but her evening was suddenly interrupted by a brilliant white flash in the night sky.

Alicia's jaw dropped as she tried to understand what had just happened. The black sky had erupted with a soundless explosion. A brief, brilliant flash that burned the back of her eyes.

For some reason, she felt the source was close. Not a distant star. It took up too much of the sky. Something near.

Her heart raced as she continued to search for anything that would tell her what had just happened.

As she watched, the sky returned to its normal black. No sign that anything had ever disturbed the cosmos except for a new, bright yellow pinprick of light where none had existed before. Then, in the far corner of her vision. A shooting star. Traveling west to east. A bright orange light trailing a long tail of flame.

Her lips curled up into a smile. So beautiful, she thought.

The blackness of the sky was interrupted again by another shooting star. Then another. Strange, she thought as her brow narrowed. What was it? Debris from the explosion? Had a ship exploded, and now the remnants were falling to Intrepid?

The beauty had changed to tragedy. People would have been on that ship.

Suddenly the night sky was filled with dozens and dozens of shooting stars. All of them burning brightly as they descended. The view was unbelievable. A hundred lights streaking across the sky.

Then, without warning, several of the blazing travelers changed direction. Some turning north, others south. The majority continuing on in the direction of Tannerville.

Her heart jumped. How was that possible? She knew enough about orbital mechanics to know that falling debris did not change course like that.

She bent forward at the waist and leaned over the porch railing as if a few inches would give her a better view. As if it was possible to understand what was happening.

Should she wake Mom? Jake? It would have been the smart thing. But



by the time they got here, it might all be over. Besides, she couldn't have looked away if she tried. She had never seen anything like this. No one had ever seen anything like this.

The small group of shooting stars heading north drew her attention. She tried to judge their course, tried to figure out where they would land. To her, it looked like they would come down in the upper valley and the mountains to the west.

She was safe, her family was safe. They were not going to be destroyed by falling debris, or whatever this was. Sighing heavily with the realization of their continued safety, she watched until the last light had disappeared over the horizon.

As the darkness returned, and the sounds of the valley resumed. A cold shiver ran down her spine. Whatever had happened, she felt a change washing over her. Things were going to be different, she thought. She didn't know how, didn't know when, but she was positive, they were going to be different.

The valley of Drake's Rift, her family's valley, was not going to be the same.

**.o0o.**

Halfway around the galaxy, on the planet Taurus, Imperial Marine Sergeant Dex Carter smiled to himself as he looked out over the base from the hill outside the wire. The early sunrise was just breaking over the far horizon. A long morning run had put him in a good mood.

Ten years, he thought, ten years in His Majesties Imperial Marines, and life couldn't get much better. Ever since the second day of boot camp, the day after his seventeenth birthday. All he had ever wanted was to be a platoon sergeant. The center of the action. The tip of the spear.

For the last two years, he'd been living his dream. What next? he wondered.

He'd been across the galaxy four different times. He'd fought warlords on Glarr and pirates in the Crulet system. He'd sampled beer in every tavern between here and Montlake. Swam naked in the red lake of Valeria under three moons and hunted Yarks on the plains of Intrepid. To top it off, there was more than one woman on more than one planet that would be thrilled to

hear he was in town. A guy had to admit, not bad for a twenty-seven-year-old, the son of a dentist from the suburbs of Pyre.

Most important, though, he'd turned a ragtag group of fresh recruits into a top platoon.

Even with all of that, a nagging thought tugged at him. There had to be more to life. Something to fill this hole that was starting to build inside of him. Was it time to think about settling down? Was that what he was missing, a family? A wife? Something more.

Shaking his head, he shuddered as he started towards the base. Where did this idea about a wife and kids come from? If the Marines wanted him to have a wife, they'd have issued him one.

Pushing the thought to the back of his mind, he turned to head to the barracks when the tablet buzzed in his shoulder pocket.

Pulling the reader, he frowned while he studied the screen. As he read, his skin turned cold, sending a chilly shiver down his spine.

**\*\* All Imperial Marines return to barracks. Prepare for immediate deployment. This is not a drill. \*\***

Swallowing hard, he read the message again. Then, he reread those last five words. 'This is not a drill.'

Not good, he thought. All hell was breaking loose, and he wasn't there with his men.

Forgetting his sore muscles or the stitch in his side from the morning's run, he sprinted towards the barracks.

As he ran, he wove back and forth between other Marines racing for their own units. Men with serious expressions and a fierce determination to get to the right place as fast as possible.

Slamming the barracks door open, he raced into the long hall and called out. "Daniels, Obamway, Jones," at the top of his lungs. That familiar smell of wood, men, and brass cleaner washed over him. The warm embrace of home.

Immediately, his three corporals stepped out into the hallway. Each had been inspecting their squad's preparation for deployment like they were supposed to.

Dex sighed, his men knew what to do. He needed to slow down and trust his corporals. He'd trained them. They wouldn't let him down.

"Report," he said as started for his room at the end of the hall. Pulling his sweat covered uniform over his head.

"First Squad present," Daniels said.

"Second Squad present," Obamway said with his normal scowl.

Corporal Jones hesitated for a minute, "Third Squad, nine present, one absent."

"Who?" Dex asked as he halted to pierce Jones with a disappointed stare.

Smith swallowed hard then said, "Cleaver."

Dex rolled his eyes and shook his head. Why was he not surprised? The kid was never where he was supposed to be. If he wasn't so damn good in a fight, the Captain would have bounced his ass a year ago.

"Okay, get your men ready. Full armor, weapons issued, combat packs. Have them formed up in ten."

As the last word left his mouth, the back door to the barracks blew open as Private Ben Cleaver rushed into the hall. Sliding to a quick halt when he saw his sergeant scowling at him.

"Get your butt in gear," Dex said to the young private with his angry gravel voice that his platoon knew meant there would be no discussion. Just do it and shut up.

Cleaver nodded and scurried past them into his team's room.

Dex tried to hide a smile. All his chicks were in place and under his wing. He could at least let that worry go. Now it was just a matter of figuring out what the hell was going on and what they were getting themselves into.

Leaving his corporals to take charge of their men, he hurried to his room to get into his own gear. As he donned his armor, he thought of the privates getting ready for their first combat. The backbone of the Marines, he thought. Each private a part of a three-man team. Three teams with a corporal a squad. Three ten-man squads, a platoon with a sergeant. Three platoons for a company. Plus, the heavy weapon team and the command team. All of them together. A ninety-nine-man company overseen by a captain.

Three companies for a battalion. Three battalions for a regiment. Three regiments for a brigade, three brigades for a division, and three divisions of ten thousand men each for the Corps.

Thirty thousand men spread across the entire galaxy. He wondered if they were all getting ready for deployment or just the Marines of the First Division here on Taurus.

Grabbing his combat pack and his rifle, he headed for the parade ground.

“What’s going on, Sarge?” one of the men called to him.

Dex turned to see two dozen men looking at him expectantly. They are nervous, he thought. This wasn’t normal procedure. Usually, they’d have been briefed up the ying-yang. Hell, usually, there would have been two weeks’ worth of rumors before something like this happened.

He smiled reassuringly, “Does it matter?” he said. “You are Imperial Marines. Someone, somewhere, is going to get their asses kicked. Just remember, the only thing you have to worry about is pissing me off.”

The men smiled.

His insides, however, turned over. Until he knew what was going on, he wouldn’t really be able to relax. Despite what the men might think. Sergeant Dex Carter cared about them deeply. The thought that he might lose some of them tore at his soul.

But, he was an Imperial Marine, First Platoon Sergeant of Bravo Company, 2nd battalion, of the Taurus Regiment. It was his job to destroy the enemies of the empire. Simple really.

Or at least it would be when someone told him what the hell was going on.

## Chapter Two

Professor Janet Sinclair tried to understand what was happening. She was in the middle of her lecture on the marsupials of Siska when her boss, the head of the Biology department, Dr. Timlinson, rushed into her classroom and physically pulled her into the hall.

His beet-red face and rushed breath made her wonder if the man was having a heart attack.

“The Palace called. They want you over there. Right away.”

Professor Sinclair frowned in confusion. The Palace. Why would they want her?

Dr. Timlinson instantly recognized her obvious confusion and said, “I don’t know why. They wouldn’t tell me. Only to get you over there immediately. I have a vehicle ready to take you.”

Janet balked. She wasn’t dressed for the Palace. She didn’t know anyone at the Imperial Palace. She didn’t even know anyone who knew anyone at the Palace.

Why her? Why now? She was a Xenobiologist here at the university. She studied alien life forms and taught what she knew to young people. Most of whom couldn’t care less.

None of this made sense. As the vehicle made its way to the Palace, she tried to logically dissect the problem.

At thirty-five, she wasn’t old enough to really be considered for any senior academic position. Her research was not that controversial. Her latest paper on why humanity had not discovered any other cognizant species in the galaxy hadn’t stirred up much debate. In fact, she would be surprised if ten people had read the paper.

She wasn’t married, and not currently attached to anyone. So that wasn’t the issue.

Her heart raced when the vehicle pulled into the Palace gates. The fact that she was a little in awe surprised her. She had always considered herself a reasonable, rational person. A scientist, not easily impressed by the trappings of power.

But there was something about the fairytale quality of the Imperial

Palace that made her heart beat just a little faster.

Frowning at herself, she allowed a young aide to guide her through the front door and into the great hall. The same hall she had seen hundreds of times on the vids.

It looked even more impressive in real life. Tall statues, gold leaf decorations. Imperial Marines in full dress uniforms at attention, servants in livery scurrying around.

She halted and took it all in. Heaven knew she would never get another chance like this.

“Please, Dr. Sinclair, we need to hurry,” the aide said as he motioned for her to follow him.

Janet nodded and tried to keep up as the aide hurried up the stairs.

As they wove their way through the hallways of the Palace, Janet’s heart beat faster and faster. Everyone looked so serious. So worried. What did these people have to worry about? They worked at the heart of the galaxy. At the very seat of power. What could possibly disturb them?

At last, the aide stopped before a set of large double doors and drew a deep breath. As he composed himself, he glanced at Janet, giving her a quick examination, then shrugged his shoulders as if she didn’t quite meet his expectations but he was stuck with her.

She felt a small anger begin to build inside of her as she prepared to call him on his dismissive look. But then, before she could say anything, he turned and opened the door and her world changed.

There, standing near a large round table were the power brokers of the universe. The men and women who controlled things. The people who pulled at the levers of power.

Her heart jumped into her throat as she recognized Aurora Clemmons, the Foreign Minister. And Admiral Frank Jacobs, the head of the Imperial Navy. And there, off to the right was Senator Paul Richards, Majority Leader of the Imperial Senate.

What was she doing here? she wondered to herself. She was a lowly professor at Taurus University. Why did they want her?’

Glancing quickly at the young aide, she raised an eyebrow in question, as

if to ask ‘Are you sure I’m in the right place?’ The aide simply smiled and held the door open a little more.

Janet forced her feet to move. Taking her into the inner sanctum of the Imperial Cabinet room.

“Ahhh, Doctor Sinclair,” a young admiral in full dress uniform said as he stepped towards her. “Thank you for coming.”

Her mind tumbled over a thousand different questions as she tried to bring some kind of order to her thinking.

The man was handsome, strong jaw, black hair, in his early forties. Young for the two wide stripes on his uniform sleeve. His smile seemed relaxed. Not forced. As if he were actually glad that she was there.

Why? she wondered.

“Mac McKenzie,” he said as he held out his hand for hers. “Everyone calls me Mac. I’ve admired your work for quite some time.”

“Janet Sinclair,” she answered automatically as she shook his hand.

Something about him was different. Obviously intelligent. A person didn’t rise to the rank of Admiral in the Imperial Navy without being extremely intelligent. Fit, trim, especially for a man of his age. But there was something more. A charisma that was both reassuring and focused.

A lifetime habit of observing animals in their own environment lead her to make a snap assessment, he’s comfortable in his own skin, she realized. Comfortable with who he is.

The thought surprised her, but before she could delve deeper into its meaning, a door in the back right corner opened. A rather large Imperial Marine stepped through, followed immediately by His Imperial Majesty, Emperor William III of the Taurian Empire.

Janet felt her knees grow weak. How? Why? She stumbled to catch herself and was ever thankful that the man next to her gently took her arm in support.

Her eyes tracked the Emperor as he made his way to the large chair at the head of the table.

“Let’s get started,” he said as he sat down.



Janet had to shake her head to clear the thoughts tumbling over each other in her mind. What the hell was going on?

Everyone made their way to a seat and quickly joined him. Janet noticed that the military men in the room congregated on the right side of the Emperor and the civilians on the left.

“Please, sit here, Doctor Sinclair,” Admiral McKenzie said as he indicated the chair next to his.

Janet swallowed hard and followed his lead, unable to take her eyes off the Emperor. He looked just like he did in every video she had ever seen. Handsome. Not too tall, but not exactly short. Golden hair and deep blue eyes.

It was the Emperor. It really was. And she was in the same room with the man who ruled the galaxy.

“Thank you for coming,” the Emperor said as he looked at the people seated at the table with him. “Before we get started, though, I wanted to introduce Doctor Janet Sinclair, professor of xenobiology at the university. I’ve asked her here to help provide some insight.”

The men and women around the table smiled and nodded their welcome. Janet hesitantly smiled back while she tried to force her heart to stop beating so fast.

“Admiral McKenzie will lead the brief,” the Emperor said as he nodded to the man next to her.

The Admiral stood up and looked at each person around the table. His kind eyes coming to rest on hers for a moment at the last.

“Four hours ago,” he began, “a junior petty officer in our network systems room noticed a message that had been misrouted. Being a curious person, he opened the message to try and figure out who it should be delivered to. If he hadn’t, we might very well not have received the report until sometime next week.”

Janet wondered briefly about the inefficiency of the Imperial Navy. They had such a reputation of never making a mistake. Always strong, professional. It did something to her insides to realize the Navy was made up of humans. Subject to all the human foibles and errors.

“I think it best if you see the message first, then we can discuss it further,” Admiral McKenzie said as he pointed to the center of the big table.

Janet jumped when a hologram, about eighteen inches high, energized into being.

A young man, about her age, in a Navy work uniform, a silver oak leaf on his collar, came into focus.

“This is the I.S.S. Mesquite out of New Kansas,” the man said as he looked directly into the camera. “We were working beacon number twenty-eight in the Intrepid system when we noticed something strange.”

Janet tore her eyes away for just a moment to case the rest of the room’s reaction. Most of them were leaning forward, their eyes narrowed as they focused on the hologram.

It was their first time seeing this, she realized. Only High Admiral Jacobs, General Thompson, the Marine Commandant, and the Emperor himself were acting as if they had seen it before.

The hologram continued, “... As if out of nowhere, nineteen ships appeared from behind Intrepid’s sun. They were in line, obviously together, and slowing down as they approached the planet.”

The man on the screen swallowed hard and looked off to the side. He nodded to someone, then returned his focus to the camera.

“It took us a while to realize they were not Imperial Navy. In fact, they didn’t match any known class of ship, military or commercial. Either an imperial planet has developed a deep space capability we were unaware of. Or. ... or, these ships were from ... somewhere else.”

Someone to Janet’s right gasped, but she didn’t turn away from the hologram to see who it was. She could not have looked away if prodded with a stick. Was it possible? Had it finally happened? Were they aliens? Cognizant, technologically advanced aliens?

Finally, after all these years searching the cosmos. They had found intelligent aliens. Or to be precise, aliens had found them.

Holding her breath, she waited for the Mesquite’s captain to finish his report.

“The ships continued on to take up orbit around Intrepid. Once the

nineteen vessels were arranged around the planet, seven additional ships cleared the sun and are currently in route to Intrepid. These vessels appear to be bigger, blockier. For some reason, I have the feeling they are transport, not fighting vessels. Of the original nineteen, eighteen of them are similar in shape and size. Sleek, long oblongs. Approximately four hundred feet long. Eighty feet wide. With no sign of propulsion or maneuvering jets. The remaining ship is three times as large. Twelve hundred feet long. One hundred and seventy feet wide. Again, no sign of propulsion.”

The people in the room were looking at each other, some were smiling. Others had very concerned looks on their face.

“I have tried raising the ships,” the Mesquite’s captain said. “But have received no response. I am rather confident that they are not from a known planet. That large ship could only be built in space. And in our galaxy, only the Taurian docks are large enough. No way were these built on some backwater planet without us knowing. Therefore I am confident they are from a civilization unknown to the Empire and am following the established protocols for meeting them.”

Janet’s heart began to race. Finally. It had happened.

“I have buttoned up, set the outer armor to full reflective and have turned off all weapon tracking sensors,” the skipper of the beacon tender said. “We have attempted contact in every known language. I have adjusted course so that we are not in any danger of approaching too close. In the meantime, we will continue to advance and investigate.”

The hologram went blank then sunk back into the table as if were never there.

Janet looked around the room at the stunned expressions on everyone’s face.

“Is this true?” Minister Clemmons asked.

“Yes, Madam Minister,” Admiral McKenzie said with a frown.

“Why the long face?” Senator Richards asked. “I thought this was what we were hoping for? Finally, contact with an alien species.”

The young admiral grimaced.

“We received a second report, Senator, about twenty minutes after this

one.”

The hologram once again appeared in the middle of the table.

This time, the captain’s eyes were big, his hair was stuck to the top of his forehead with sweat. Janet’s heart dropped to her stomach when she saw the worry in the man’s face.

“This is I.S.S. Mesquite. We are under attack. We made no hostile move. I swear. We were simply advancing toward the unknown ships. Approximately fifteen minutes ago. One of the nineteen broke out of orbit and made course directly towards us. I slowed down and tried hailing the vessel again. But the vessel made a course correction. Maintaining bearing and constantly decreasing range.”

A small pop sound on the hologram was followed by an eruption of sparks originating off camera and shooting across the scene behind the captain.

“Without warning and without provocation, the vessel approaching us opened fire with what appears to be a high power laser.”

Again, another pop and the ship shuddered.

The captain grimaced and yelled to someone out of the scene, “Tell Dobson to shift to the port batteries.”

Swallowing hard, the captain refocused on the camera. “The beam has not left us. I have been unable to maneuver away from it. I shift, and it shifts with me. They are starting to penetrate our armor, and I don’t know how much longer we can last.”

Janet’s heart raced as she watched the captain’s worried frown. Just a short time earlier, he had been a normal man, doing a hard job maintaining beacons. Now he was in the center of an interstellar battle.

- “I have decided to break protocol and return fire. If I don’t, the ship is lost.” The captain paused for a second then looked into the camera with an intense plea. “My men deserve to at least be allowed to fight b ...”

The screen went blank.

A shocked silence fell over the room.

“What happened?” someone said.

Admiral McKenzie's lips formed into a straight line as he once again nodded towards the center of the table.

"This is from beacon twenty-eight," he said as the hologram once again sprang into existence. Janet was greeted with a dark scene of deep space. Blackness and stars. In the distance a large yellow star, and in the foreground a blue planet.

"I've taken the liberty of marking the two vessels. The Mesquite is in blue, the alien ship in red.

As she watched, Janet bit her lip, dreading what she was going to see. The red and blue circles continued to move towards each other. If she concentrated, she could see the ships inside their designated circles of light.

The Mesquite, the typical, small naval craft, big in the belly, sharp angles and a dozen different sensor arrays located across the outside of the ship. The alien craft was clean, smooth. Glistening in the distant sunlight. No windows, nothing to mar the streamlined shape of the craft.

Her brow narrowed as she tried to understand the differences. Why? she wondered. What was it about this alien culture that called for streamlining and perfection? Where her own species seemed to focus on function.

As she watched, the two ships approach, she felt her heart rate begin to increase, and the inside of her mouth became very dry.

Without warning, a long blue streak of light left the alien ship and immediately struck the Mesquite, reflecting off into a vibrant rainbow of color.

She held her breath as she thought about what was going to happen. That young man, all of those young men, fighting for their life.

Then, suddenly, without warning. A bright white light filled the hologram. Nothing but whiteness that slowly resolved back into the blackness of space.

Everyone leaned forward, staring at the small blue circle in the middle of the scene. Dreading what they were going to see, yet desperately hoping they were wrong.

Nothing. No ship. Where before, there had been an Imperial Naval vessel and a crew of twenty-four men. Now there was nothing. They were gone.

Blown into oblivion by an alien race that didn't seem to care.

## Chapter Three

Rear Admiral David (Mac) McKenzie stared at the center of the table. Unable to look away. Every time he saw the report, he prayed for a different result. Those were his men. It was he who had established the alien protocols. Oh, Admiral Jacobs had signed them. But he had written them. Those men might very well be alive if they had not followed his instructions to the letter.

Biting his lip, he looked at the stunned faces around him. They were in shock. And if this upset them, wait until they got a load of the next report he had for them.

The Emperor frowned and bit the corner of his lip. "I need to inform you that technically, this is not our first contact with an alien species."

"What?" Director Aurora Clemens demanded.

The Emperor looked almost sheepish for a moment than ducked his head and said, "We discovered an alien species on a distant planet almost a year ago. But this could not be those aliens. They are rather primitive with no space faring capability."

"But," Senator Richards yelled, "why weren't we informed? Why all the secrecy."

"Because," the Emperor began, "the Imperial Senate couldn't keep a secret if their paychecks depended upon it. And we had not determined if we would approach them or not. In fact Science Minister Rogers is in route to the planet to make the final decision."

"And let me guess," Director Clemens said, "he departed from Intrepid, after all, it is at the end of known space. And now, just after he leaves for a distant alien inhabited planet, strange, new aliens show up to attack Intrepid. Don't you think these events might be related."

Janet sucked in a quick breath, unable to believe anyone would use such a tone with the Emperor. But the Emperor didn't seem fazed in the slightest. But then, he had a lifetime of dealing with stuff like this.

"We don't know. And might not for a while. At this point, it really doesn't matter. As you will soon see," he said with a somber tone as he nodded for Admiral McKenzie to continue.

Mac took a deep breath and then began, "About one hour ago, we



received this from the Viceroy on Intrepid.” The admiral said, “I have condensed some things. The entire report is available if you wish to see it. But I removed the first part of the message, it contains a lot of speculation and conjecture.”

The hologram opened with a bird's eye view looking down on the grass plains of Intrepid. As the drone pulled back, the fields of green wheat came into view, then the edge of a city, two and three story buildings made of beige brick.

“Tannerville,” the admiral said in answer to their unspoken question.

The video swung to the side, bringing a long gray road into view. As the drone swooped down, a group of people came into focus.

“That’s Viceroy Simmons in the front,” he said as the video focused on a close-up shot of a slightly overweight man in his late fifties. He glanced up at the drone for a second. The camera catching the hesitant nervousness in his eyes.

The drone held on him for a second before pulling back and showing the four Imperial Marines standing behind him. Each of them with a stoic face, looking forward, down the road.

Twisting on its own axis, the drone panned down the road until a new group came into view.

Mac heard Dr. Sinclair gasp next to him when she saw them. He knew what she was thinking. Their otherness sent a sudden fear through a person.

The aliens were walking down the road as if they owned it. At almost six foot tall, each carried a rifle at port arms. Marching in time with each other.

Mac wished he could stop the video and get Dr. Sinclair’s first impression. But he restrained himself. Let this play out, he thought.

Ever since seeing the video, he had wondered what stood out more. Their snout like faces or the furry heads. They reminded him of rats, evil, disgusting rats. Each of the forward eight guards were a dull brown. Behind them was a taller, rat-like creature, followed immediately by another eight of the guards.

Their snouts weren’t super long, just enough to be noticeable, with two big, needle sharp, canine teeth curling up over the upper jaw. Their fur

seemed coarse. Across the chest double breasted plates of armor rippled with each movement.

Their arms were normal length, or at least what Mac believed should be normal. The hands gripping the weapons looked like they had an opposable thumb and three long fingers.

The creatures wore full armor. It must be hot in there with all that fur. The first time he had seen them he had almost laughed. It was strange seeing animals wearing clothes.

He shuddered and glanced down at Dr. Sinclair.

She was focused on the creatures. Taking in every detail. Her eyes narrowed as the group came to a stop.

The drone pulled back to show Viceroy Simmons make a motion to the Marine escort to remain behind. Smiling, he turned and held his arms open wide as he started walking towards the group.

The group of aliens remained rock still for a few seconds, then, without warning, the front right guard lifted his rifle to his shoulder and shot the Viceroy through the head with a blue laser beam.

A gasp erupted in the cabinet room as each person processed what they had just seen. Unarmed, welcoming, and the man had been shot down like a wild beast.

Mac had to give the Marines escort credit, they didn't take long to react. Each of the four men shouldered their rifle but each man was killed before he could bring his weapon to bear.

A blue light shot from the rifles, taking each Marine in the head. A powerful laser that left a small burning hole in each of their skulls. Mac cursed under his breath, protocol called for the Marines to be in full armor, but the Viceroy had overruled the protocol and those men paid the full measure.

Just like that, five men, down and dead.

"Why?" the Senator asked. "What did they do?"

"Nothing," Admiral Jacobs answered.

"It doesn't make sense," Ms. Borough, the public relations officer for the Emperor said. "Why? We wouldn't do that."

Dr. Sinclair leaned forward. “I don’t know. What would you do if you came home and found a New Kansas three step viper in your living room? Or a cockroach in your kitchen. Most people would kill it without a second thought.”

“But we aren’t poisonous snakes or filthy insects,” General Thompson said with a heavy scowl.

“Maybe to them we are,” Dr. Sinclair said without taking her eyes off the hologram.

The drone continued to hover above the scene as if nothing had happened. The five bodies lay on the road like discarded wood.

Mac swallowed hard knowing what was coming.

The forward guards brought their rifles back to port arms across their chest and started forward. When they reached the Viceroy, they stepped aside and let the larger alien through their ranks.

The tall rat-like creature stopped before the man lying in the middle of the road then looked up to the sky and touched the side of its head. He held the pose for a second, then dropped to his knees.

Mac held his breath as the creature bent and bit down into the body. Pulling back, it ripped a long section of red flesh and muscle away. Tearing it from the Viceroy’s body with its teeth.

The alien adjusted his bite, then swallowed the entire thing in one gulp.

Someone on the far side of the cabinet table choked and sounded as if they were going to be sick. Mac didn’t take his eyes away from the hologram. He felt as if it would be a disservice to these men to look away. As if their sacrifice had not really happened.

On the hologram, the larger alien rose and stepped back. He was followed immediately by the front right guard who followed the same procedure. Stopping, touching the side of his head, then kneeling and taking a bite out of the Viceroy.

Each guard followed suit. The same actions, the same single bite.

The desecration continued for several minutes as each body was given the same treatment. Mac could swear he could hear General Thompson’s teeth grinding as the aliens ate his Marines.

Once the group was done, the leader pointed up into the sky again. This time, his long finger was aimed directly at the drone. Immediately, the front right guard brought his rifle to his shoulder, and the screen went blank.

“That has been the last report we have received from Intrepid,” Mac said with a dry croak as he sat back down. His body wanted to shake, his mouth felt as if he’d swallowed a bag of sand.

Looking around the table, he tried to determine what they were thinking. It was easy to see the fear and anger in their eyes. Only Dr. Sinclair remained unreadable as her eyes looked off into the distance.

“So, now you know as much as I do,” the Emperor said, bringing everyone’s attention back to reality. “Any ideas? Suggestions?”

Each person looked back at the man with a hesitant gaze. They weren’t afraid of saying the wrong thing, Mac thought. The Emperor wouldn’t tolerate yes men and women. No, they didn’t know what to say. A thousand thoughts were dancing around in their heads as they tried to come to grips with what they had just seen.

“Destroy them,” General Thompson said through gritted teeth. “I’ve already ordered every Marine in the Empire to prepare for deployment. Give the word, and we will kill every one of them and use their bodies to fertilize the Intrepid grasslands.”

“No,” Foreign Minister Aurora Clemmons exclaimed as she leaned forward. “We can’t. We don’t know what they want, or why they are here.”

The General scoffed. “It is pretty clear to me. Those are the actions of conquerors. They even waited until they were done before they shot down that drone. They wanted us to get a message. Prepare to be erased from the Galaxy.”

“I don’t know,” Senator Richards said. “I just don’t know.”

The Emperor looked at him for a long second, then his glance roamed around the room. Pulling every person back to the here and now.

“Sir,” the senator said. “I represent Pyre, not the Empire. And as the planet next in line to Intrepid. Its nearest neighbor. I can tell you that I demand you protect us.”

The Emperor nodded his head. “This Empire was founded on two

bedrock principles,” he said. “One, the empire ends at the edge of a planet’s atmosphere. As long as their leadership is elected fairly and they abide by the Empire’s laws. They will be left alone. We cannot interfere with a planet’s unique situation unless assistance is requested by the local rulers.”

“Sir,” Admiral Jacobs said. “This stopped being a private concern the instant they destroyed the Mesquite.”

“Second,” the Emperor continued without addressing the Admiral’s remarks. “The Empire has promised to protect its citizens. They have no need of a military of their own. No need for a space fleet. As a result. Large-scale war has been eliminated. We did this by creating a Navy so strong that no single planet. Hell, no group of planets could even think of fighting our fleet. We built a force of Imperial Marines. A land force so strong that a small contingent can subdue any rebellion, local warlords, or criminal gangs. No local army could ever hope to defeat them in the field. Especially not with our Navy holding the high ground.”

Mac noticed several heads nodding in agreement.

“I think we can dispense with the formal request for assistance.” the Emperor added. “I will brief Senator Johansson from Intrepid in my quarters later today.”

Mac saw the Emperor wince with the realization he would have to show the senator the video and tell him that even now, his people might be fighting for their very lives.

“My question is, what are your impressions? What are we facing? And what actions do we take?”

Again, an awkward silence fell over the group.

Mac noticed Dr. Sinclair fidgeting as if she wanted to say something. He nudged her with his knee and nodded for her to go ahead.

She looked at him and smiled slightly.

“Sir,” she said to the Emperor. “A few observations.”

“Yes, Doctor,” he said. “This is why I asked that you be here. What can you tell us?”

She frowned and shook her head. “Not much, sir, at least not yet. But there were a few things.”

“Yes?”

Taking a deep breath, she began, as if she were worried that someone might stop her.

“Well, sir, they are obviously intelligent.”

“I would have thought that was a requirement to travel halfway across the galaxy,” General Thompson said.

“Actually, Sir,” she replied. “We don’t know if they came from the other side of the galaxy or the planet in the next star system. Maybe they received signals from Intrepid when it was founded, and they’ve spent the last forty-eight years getting there.”

Mac had to hide a smile. It wouldn’t do for General Thompson to see him amused at his expense.

“In addition,” Doctor Sinclair continued, “we don’t know if these creatures built those ships, or even piloted them. For all we know, they could be passengers or mercenaries. Maybe even pets. We just don’t have any idea.”

“Yes, Doctor,” the Emperor said. “What we do not know will fill a data center.”

Dr. Sinclair nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, Sir. I just wanted to illustrate the dangers of making the wrong assumptions. But there is quite a bit we did learn.”

The Emperor looked at her with a piercing stare.

“We know they are tool users, and we can assume they are the makers of those tools. The opposable thumb. We know they are individual thinkers and not a hive mentality.”

“How can you know that?” Admiral Jacobs asked.

“The front right guard, the one who initiated the shooting. He has an insignia on his shoulder. A rather complex symbol of circles and triangles.”

“So?”

The good doctor sighed, “To me, that indicates a rank structure. Rank is not needed in a hive mentality situation. In addition, the bigger alien suggests a class system. Again, in a hive mentality, everyone is equal, perhaps

specialized, but equal. No one commands them except the collective.”

The room was silent for a moment.

“What else?” the Emperor asked.

“Well, they are obviously cognizant, perhaps even religious. Either way. They recognize the finality of death and are probably aware of their own mortality.”

“Okay, I’ve got to ask,” Minister Clemmons asked, “how did you come up with that and why is it important.”

Doctor Sinclair smiled slightly. “The recognition of the inevitability of death is a uniquely human condition. It is the main thing that separates us from the animals.”

“Every animal fears death,” Admiral Jacobs said. “It is what drives both them and us.”

“Yes, animals fear death. But they are unaware that it is inevitable. They might know that if they don’t eat, they will die. They may know that if the Valerian bear catches them, they will die ...”

“I’ll say,” General Thompson said with a slight laugh.

“... but, they are not aware that no matter what they do. Death will come for them eventually.”

“So?” the Emperor asked.

“Well, Sir, it just means that these aliens are aware of their ultimate fate, and have developed rituals dealing with that fact. The looking up to the sky, the touching the head. Taking just one bite and then moving on to allow the next. Death is significant, even for a defeated foe.”

Admiral Jacobs scoffed and started to ask “What about...” when the Emperor held his hand out to stop the admiral.

Doctor Sinclair saw the indication to go on.

“Well, Sir, if you think about it, that awareness of our eventual death is what has driven us up out of the jungle. Our need to be attached to something bigger. Something that will last beyond our death. Some scholars believe that in the ancient Garden of Eden, we became human the moment we made the connection of an inevitable death. That was the Tree of Knowledge.”



“Come now,” Minister Clemens began. But the Emperor held up a hand stopping his advisor from continuing.

Professor Sinclair took a deep breath and continued, “It is why we build and invent. It is why we discovered God in all his forms. And why we spend resources making sure death is delayed as long as possible. We built armies, and yes navies, to protect us from death. We search and find love in the hope of raising children, making sure we leave a part of us behind.”

“And why is this important, Doctor?” the Emperor asked.

She looked around the room, surprised that no one else had seen it. “Well, Sir, It means they can be killed. And at a certain point, they will judge it better to change their behavior before they are all killed.”

General Thompson shook his head. “I can think of dozens of instances when fighters have knowingly sacrificed themselves. Knowingly accepted death for the greater good.”

“Yes, Sir, that is my point,” the Doctor said. “They willingly accepted death because they knew there was something bigger being left behind. If a person is going to die anyway, isn’t it better to do so for a greater cause.”

“So?”

“So, Sir,” she continued, “these creatures obviously evolved from predators. Learned to make tools, grew in intelligence, developed religion and/or rituals associated with death.”

A silence had fallen over the room before Dr. Sinclair continued, “I believe, that for all practical purposes these creatures are closer to being human than animal. It would be a serious mistake to assume they were simply dumb animals with fancy tools. These are smart, cunning, disciplined creatures that know how to kill and don’t seem to care who gets in their way.”

## Chapter Four

Mac McKenzie smiled to himself. As soon as he had seen this woman he had known she would be an asset. Someone to be listened to. Her books on the similarities of ALL of species across planetary systems based upon their environment and chemical makeup had been critical to shaping his thinking on the matter.

It was nice to see that his belief about her had been well founded.

The Emperor cleared his throat then addressed the group.

“Our doctrine in these matters call for us to approach a new alien race with caution and no hint of aggressive behavior. We are to give them no reason to feel threatened. I believe we have done this. And both times, we were answered with force. These creatures are not here to trade, or discuss, or discover. They are here to destroy and conquer. Does anyone disagree?”

Here he looked at his foreign minister for a moment. The woman hesitated, then nodded her head in agreement.

“I also believe, that this is no longer a local matter on Intrepid but a situation which calls for the Empire to take action. Again, does anyone disagree?”

Several people swallowed hard, but each nodded affirmatively as they shot furtive glances at each other. They knew where this was leading.

The Emperor sighed heavily, then said, “As such, I believe we must take steps to convince these aliens to stop their actions or be destroyed. And that if we do not do so, they might very well expand and continue their destruction through the rest of humanity until no one is left alive or free from slavery.”

Mac’s insides tightened up into a ball. The Emperor was right, this really was the stark reality. It was either kill or be killed. There were no other options at the moment. And that humanities very existence might rest in the balance.

Seeing no disagreement, the Emperor continued, “We will have to send a force to Intrepid to destroy these aliens.”

“What if at some point they attempt to negotiate?” the Foreign Minister asked. Mac wondered if the woman was fighting for political maneuvering room or if she truly thought she might get an opportunity to sit down across

the table from these creatures.

The Emperor smiled weakly. “We will deal with that issue at the time. But in the meantime, our focus must be on eliminating the threat.”

The minister frowned slightly as she nodded her head.

“Now then,” the Emperor continued, “the question before this group is what kind of force, how large, and how quickly can we get it there? Every day we delay is one more day where the people of Intrepid are fighting alone against a very evil enemy.”

“Sir,” Admiral Jacob’s said, “One option that should be explored is the possibility of cutting off Intrepid. Destroying the wormhole portal between it and Pyre.”

Dr. Sinclair gasped. Mac noticed that several people looked appalled at the idea. It made his heart feel good to know that they had been bothered by the mere suggestion of abandoning a planet. Of cutting it off from the rest of humanity. But the idea had to be broached.

Each of them automatically thought of Earth, the mother planet, that had destroyed its own portal. Abandoning the galaxy.

The Emperor looked at Admiral Jacobs for a long moment then shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We can’t. No planet would ever trust us again. It would be the beginning of the downfall of the Empire. Plus. We still don’t know how these aliens traveled to Intrepid. We don’t know if they can create their own wormhole. What if we cut off Intrepid, then Pyre next and so on down the line? At some point, we will become a conglomeration of independent worlds with no ability to communicate or interact. No, I won’t do that.”

Several people relaxed. Mac noticed that Senator Richards especially seemed pleased.

“At least, not yet,” the Emperor added.

“In that case,” Admiral Jacobs said, “the Navy has developed a contingency plan for this situation. I will ask Admiral McKenzie to brief them.”

“Sir,” Mac said as he stood up once again. “Several years ago, your father asked the Navy to study this possible situation and to develop different

options.”

“McKenzie was a part of that group, back when he was a commander,” Admiral Jacobs interjected. “In fact, he wrote the final report.”

The Emperor nodded, and Mac continued.

“The Navy can have four ships of the line at Intrepid in one week. But I seriously doubt they would be very effective. Especially since they would have almost no Imperial Marine’s attached.”

“I’ve ordered all Marines to prepare for immediate deployment,” General Thompson interjected. “But we don’t have a significant quantity in that region. As you know, most of the Marines are stationed here on Taurus and on Montlake.”

Once the Emperor had nodded his understanding, Mac continued, “We can have half the fleet, fourteen vessels with a Marine Brigade there in two weeks. And we can have three-fourths of the fleet, twenty-two vessels, there with two divisions of Marines in three weeks.”

“Three weeks?” Senator Richards asked. “Why so long. There might not be anyone left on Intrepid. In fact, the monsters might move on Pyre in that time. We have spent billions. No trillions, on the Navy, and you’re telling me you can’t do anything for three weeks.”

Mac took a deep breath. “Sir,” he said. “Our fleet is spread across twenty-four planets.

“How long to gather the entire fleet?” the Emperor asked, obviously trying to stop the angry Senator from going off into a side issue.

“At least ten weeks, Your Highness,” Mac answered.

“Ten weeks. No, that is unacceptable,” the senator said.

“And the Navy’s recommendation?” the Emperor asked, ignoring the sputtering senator.

“The three-fourths of the fleet and the three-week option, Your Highness,”

“No, No, we can’t wait that long,” the Senator said as his face began to turn red.

Mac nodded and said, “Sir, if we feed the fleet in piecemeal, we will

lose. Simple, four, or even eleven ships will be defeated, and we will lose their firepower. We must go in with a fleet strong enough to defeat them.”

“And you’re confident that a fleet of twenty-four ships will be enough.”

The young admiral paused for a long second. This was the moment he had been dreading. At last, taking a deep breath, he said, “No, Sir, I’m not. We don’t know their capabilities. We don’t know their strengths and weaknesses. We don’t even know how many ships they will have when we get there. What I can promise you is that if we go into battle without enough ships, we will surely lose. If we go into battle with all our ships, I can’t promise you that we will win.”

Mac felt the room grow suddenly cold. He noticed Dr. Sinclair next to him stiffen. The reality of the situation was finally settling in.

“Admiral Jacobs,” the Foreign minister asked. “Do you agree?”

The old man slowly nodded his head. “Yes, I do. We must go in with a large force. Yet hold enough back to be the core of a new fleet if we have to build another.”

“Another fleet?” the Senator asked. “Do you have any idea how much that will cost?”

Admiral Jacobs stared at the man for a long minute. “Sir, if our initial fleet is destroyed, how would you suggest we protect Pyre?”

Mac watched the Senator’s face drain of all color. His heart went out to the man. He had just come to the realization that the Navy was the only thing preventing him and his people from being eaten like a herd of cows.

**.oOo.**

Sergeant Dex Carter ran his hand along the outside of the transport shuttle as he and his men waited the order to load. Seven hours from the original directive and they were ready to board a shuttle for transport to a starship and be sent anywhere in the galaxy.

God how he loved the Marines.

He looked out over his men, mentally counting off until he was sure they were all still there. Letting out a silent sigh of relief when he saw Cleaver standing next to Corporal Jones.

Knowing the good corporal, he wasn’t letting Cleaver out of his sight

until they got aboard the transport.

Each man was fully armored, with their faceplates up, ready to drop down if the shuttle lost pressure.

The armor was currently set to neutral white. But he knew, at a moment's notice the armor could switch to the appropriate camouflage, desert, forest, city, or even over to fully reflective mode if they were facing lasers.

Each man had a battle pack on their back and a space bag at their feet. But it was the M72 dual action rifle across their chest that always drew his attention. The most powerful weapon ever developed for individual infantry troops. Its laser could punch through armor if you could hold it on point long enough. Or place an round down range accurately out to two thousand yards. With the flick of a switch, the rounds could be switched over to soft slugs for the maximum damage to a human body. You might lose a little in distance, but you picked up significantly in destruction.

Dex smiled to himself, his men looked mean, bad, and fierce. Just like a platoon of Imperial Marines should look. Now if someone would kindly inform him who and what they were up against. Life could move on.

"Form up" First Sergeant Puller yelled across the space-way tarmac. Dex smiled to himself. The First Sergeant never used his radio when a good scream would work just as well.

Great, Dex thought to himself. Maybe they were finally going to learn what was going on.

It really didn't matter, though. His Marines could handle just about anything the galaxy could throw at them.

**.o0o.**

Alicia Miller grimaced as another ship passed overhead. The damn things had been streaking across the sky for the last ten days. Almost always headed for Tannerville.

Her stomach clenched up into a tight ball as she thought of her mother and two older brothers. They and half the village had left for Tannerville the morning after the first arrival, and she hadn't heard a word since.

All of the farm hands, even Mr. Struthers, the general store owner had

reported for militia duty right after the call-up. And once again, she was left on the outside looking in. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. Life was passing her by, leaving her in this backwater while all the excitement was somewhere else.

It sometimes seemed as if that was to be her life. Never in the right place at the right time.

Her skin prickled as she thought about the fight she and her mother had before her mother left to report to the hospital. Jake and Henry had been waiting for their mother. Shaking their head at their sister's stubbornness.

"You need to stay here," her mother had said repeatedly. "Take care of Stephan, take care of the village, take care of the farm."

That was her, babysitter extraordinaire.

Alicia had clenched her fist and bit her lip. If she'd been a little girl, she would have stomped her foot. But it wouldn't have mattered. Her mother had spoken, and that was that. Alicia would remain behind. While Henry and Jake got to go off and have an adventure.

Sighing, she turned to look down towards the small village of Drake's Rift. Twenty buildings lining the only road that led to the cleft in the mountains behind the village.

People she knew and cared about. People she had grown up with. So why didn't she want to stay and help? Why this overwhelming urge to go to Tannerville?

Because you are an idiot, she thought as guilt washed over her. Stop wishing for what you don't have and accept what needs to be done.

The door banged behind her as Stephan ran out onto the porch and down the steps.

"Where are you going," she yelled after him.

"Luke's" he screamed over his shoulder as he raced towards the village and his best friend's home.

"You need to muck out the barn, refuel the grader and both tractors," she yelled, trying desperately to match her mother's commanding voice.

Stephan totally ignored her and continued running.



Let him have fun, she thought as she shook her head. At least someone should be enjoying life.

Alicia paused for a moment and looked down the valley, then back at the Rift that cut into the mountains and leads to Tannerville. Why hadn't she heard anything from her mother? Or her brothers? Why the silence?

The thought sent a cold chill down her spine. What was going on? That had to be the worst of it. The not knowing, the constant fear of the unknown.

What if they come here? she wondered. What if the aliens landed in her valley?

The thought made her chuckle. Why would aliens from a distant world want to come to this place? There was absolutely nothing of significance here. Not unless they had a particular desire for red beetles, pollar bats, dust, and a lonely wind.

No, aliens would never come here, and she was never going to get to Tannerville. Once more, on the outside looking in.

## Chapter Five

Aboard the I.S.S. Hamilton, one of the newer Attack Transport ships, the men of Bravo Company stared at their Commanding Officer with slack-jawed disbelief. A group dynamic where each man unknowingly mimicked the other. Each unable to believe what they had just heard.

“Aliens?” Dex asked with disbelief. “You mean, little green men type aliens?”

Captain Andrews nodded. “Actually, most of them are a tan brown color, but some of them are sort of greenish. With fur, like a rat. At least that is what we know so far.”

The group of Marines around the Captain were obviously stunned. It wasn't every day a man was told he was being sent to fight aliens.

Ten days out of Taurus and they were finally getting the word. Aliens had invaded the planet Intrepid. The Navy was being sent in to destroy their ships. The Marines were being sent in to mop up on the ground.

Dex shook his head as he tried to get his mind around the idea of intelligent aliens. It was the farthest thing possible from what he had expected.

“How many Marines?” someone from the back asked.

“All of them,” the captain answered.

“The entire brigade?” First Sergeant Puller asked. His mind obviously reeling at the thought of over three thousand Marines fighting in one battle.

“No,” the captain said with a frown. “All of them, the entire Corp. or almost all of them. Two divisions and a few stragglers we're going to pick up along the way. The two Brigades on Montlake won't make it in time. Otherwise, every Marine within hailing distance is being sent.”

The entire group of men froze in silence. Their jaws dropping at the thought of that many Imperial Marines in one place. In the entire history of the Imperial Marine Corp. It had never taken more than a Brigade to bring any fight to a quick end.

Dex's gut tightened up into a ball. That many Marines meant it was serious. Damn serious.

“Major Brown will be giving a more detailed briefing tomorrow

afternoon.” The Marine Captain said referring to their battalion commander. “You now know as much as I do. When I learn more, you will learn more. Until then, keep working on your equipment. Focus on your training. Listen to your sergeants. Dismissed.”

The group of Marines came to attention then broke up into their platoons and squads. Small collections of men forming globs that just sort of naturally came together. Their faces either shocked white or red with anger.

“What the hell is going on?” someone asked Dex. He shook his head. How could he answer that question?

“I don’t care who it is,” Corporal Jones said with a firm voice. “As far as I am concerned, they are just another target.”

Suddenly everyone was talking at once. Their voices fighting with each other to be heard. Dex’s shoulders ached with tension. This was serious, every fiber of his body was telling him. This wasn’t some rebellious warlord wanting to carve out a piece of a planet for himself. This wasn’t some gang trying to intimidate the local authorities.

This was a stand up fighting force. Sent across the universe to attack a human planet. They would be disciplined, well-armed, and probably difficult to defeat. Despite what the guys thought. This was not going to be easy.

**.o0o.**

Onboard the I.S.S. Churchill, Command ship for the fleet, Admiral McKenzie stood alone on the observation deck. His arms folded behind his back. His mind lost in a thousand details as he reran possibilities and outcomes over and over through his mind.

He shook his head, still unable to believe that he had been put in command of the fleet. The Emperor had been impressed with the report he had written all those years ago on what to do if this situation occurred. In addition, Admiral McKenzie believed deep in his heart. The Emperor was retaining Jacobs close to home in case they needed to create a new Imperial Navy.

While no one had come out and directly said so. It was rather obvious that the Imperial staff was not exactly confident that this was going to work. If he failed, if the fleet was destroyed. Every resource would be needed to build again.

A light tap at the hatchway drew his attention.

“Excuse me, Sir,” his aide said. “You asked to see Doctor Sinclair.”

Mac hesitated for a moment then nodded. “Yes, send her in please.”

The aide stepped back and allowed Doctor Sinclair to enter the observation deck.

She was a pretty woman, he thought. It always struck him every time he saw her. Those clear, intelligent blue eyes. The warm chocolate colored hair framing a heart-shaped face. He wondered briefly why she had never married. A woman such as her, pretty, intelligent, with a sweet smile, surely she must have had many suitors. Then he mentally shook his head at the ridiculousness of his thoughts.

“Come in Doctor,” he said as he stepped towards her.

The Doctor frowned for a moment, “You asked to see me, Sir?”

“Yes, yes,” Mac answered, “and please Doctor, I know that protocol dictates we refer to each other by our formal titles. But, I do hope we can ignore protocol in this instance. You are a civilian, call me Mac.”

She smiled slightly and dipped her head, “Only if you will call me Janet,” she replied. “Every time you say Doctor I expect my department head to appear behind me.”

Mac nodded and indicated a set of cloth covered chairs arranged around a small table.

“Coffee? Tea?” Mac asked. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything stronger. But this is a Navy ship, and I do have to set an example.”

Janet smiled back, “Coffee would be nice.”

The Admiral turned to his aide and asked for two coffees.

“Now then,” Mac said. “Are you settling in okay? Any problems with Commander Evans? You are getting to see all the reports?”

That was one of the many things he worried about. Bureaucratic infighting. Men more worried about their careers and their own little empires. He would not tolerate it here. Not now. Too much was at stake.

“Yes,” she said as she took the mug of coffee from the aide. “Yes, Commander Evans has been very welcoming and is making sure I see

everything.” She paused for a moment. “In all honesty. I expected to be treated cautiously. An outsider, and an academic at that. Excuse me for saying this, but a lot of military men would have been more recalcitrant in their welcoming when they were forced to take on an outside consultant.

Mac smiled. “That is one of the things I like about Commander Evans, he only sees the problem that needs to be solved. The politics of a situation are meaningless to him.”

“Yes, well, everyone has been very nice. I even have my own stateroom.”

“And the men, anyone giving you any problems?”

“No, no, everyone has been very nice, a little disappointed when they learn that I don’t know anything more than they do. But nice.”

Mac nodded, then took a long slow sip of his coffee.

“I know that you didn’t want to be here,” he said. “In fact, I imagine this is the last place in the universe you wanted to be.”

Janet shrugged her shoulders. “No, I will admit that I was not happy with the idea. But, when the Emperor asks you to do something, it is hard to say no.”

“It does feel more like an order than a request, doesn’t it,” he said before pausing a slight moment. “The thing is,” he continued, “I wanted to be clear up front. The Emperor asked for you to accompany us at my request.”

Janet’s eyes opened wide in surprise, it was obvious that she had not considered that possibility.

“Really? Why?” she asked.

“Because I need an outside perspective. I need someone who sees things differently. Someone who doesn’t just see an enemy or a target. I need someone to tell me when I am thinking wrong. Does that make any sense?”

She looked at him for a long moment, he could well imagine the thoughts jumping through her head. At last, she glanced down at the coffee mug in her hand and nodded.

“I understand,” she said. “That is a rather heavy burden to place on me.”

That was it, he realized. No forgiveness, no anger. She understood and

accepted the situation.

“I am sorry,” he said. “But it is a burden we must all carry until this thing is finished.”

She looked at him over the rim of her coffee cup and frowned. “At least the rest of us have someone to blame if things don’t work out. We can go to our graves knowing that we weren’t the person in charge. An ability that you do not share. It must be a much heavier burden you bear.”

Mac, laughed slightly, “What? Knowing that every decision I make might result in the end of the human species. That hundreds of thousands of years’ worth of history could be wiped out. That if we are not successful, the universe will quickly forget that humans ever existed. Yes, it is a bit of a burden. You could say that.”

She laughed with him at the absurdity of two people trying to solve such a massive problem.

“Here, let me show you something,” he said as he waved his hand over the table. A hologram popped into existence. Stars in the distance, then small red circles appeared, a name in blue next to each of them.

“The fleet,” he said. “Twenty-four ships of the line. Five transports. Three auxiliary vessels, and a couple of other things up my sleeve.”

She stared at the scene in front of her, obviously enthralled with the complex nature of everything.

“The strongest fleet in the history of mankind,” he continued, “any one of those ships of the line could destroy a city. Thirty-four thousand men brought together for one purpose. Saving the Empire. So at least I am not alone.”

She smiled at him, “Thirty-four thousand men, and one woman.”

He laughed and nodded. “Forgive me. And one woman.”

The woman across from him studied the picture for a long moment then leaned back in her chair.

“Why only one woman?” she asked. “Why won’t the Navy allow women to serve. Do you really think we are incapable?”

Mac frowned and slowly shook his head. “No, not at all,” he said. “Women have proven that in the commercial fleet. No, that isn’t the issue.”

“Then why?”

He paused for a long moment. “You have to remember. When the Empire was formed, when the Navy was stood up. The galaxy was wide open. More planets than we knew what to do with.”

“So?” she asked, obviously enjoying putting him on the spot.

“Well, at the time, it was decided that the Empire needed children to populate all those new worlds. And it was thought that a naval career might interfere with that. The belief was that spacers could be gotten at a dime a dozen. But mothers were more valuable.”

She frowned and shook her head. Obviously not liking the implication.

“That’s the explanation?” she asked. “A simple desire to produce more children?”

“Well,” he said. “You must surely know how much value the empire places on having children. Growing our population.”

Her eyes narrowed into a hard stare. “Mac,” she said, “I am a single woman, childless, in a field still dominated by old men and their judgmental wives. Believe me, I am well aware of the outdated beliefs of some people.”

He smiled slightly and said, “I can well imagine. But, you should know, that there has been talk of opening things up. Of changing. I think that regardless of how things work out over the next few weeks, the Imperial Navy is in for a major expansion. This will be an excellent opportunity for the Emperor to make the necessary changes.”

She nodded slowly and returned to studying the hologram in front of her.

Mac watched her for a long moment. His curiosity about this woman continued to grow. Without thinking his thought through, he asked her, “So Janet, why have you never married?”

Her eyes opened wide in surprise at the personal nature of his questions. He quickly held up his hands and said, “Please, I wasn’t being judgmental, just curious. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

Shaking her head, she smiled back, “No. That is all right. It is an honest question that deserves an honest answer. Why haven’t I ever gotten married?” she paused for a long moment. “Because I am unwilling to settle,” she said with a firm set of her lips. “Growing up, I saw so many young

women put more thought into having a family than into the thought of who they would be sharing the rest of their lives with. I determined that I would not settle. That the person I married would be someone I couldn't imagine living my life without."

He nodded slowly as he thought about her words.

"And you?" she asked. "Why aren't you married?"

A quick grimace flashed across his face before he could stop it. See, this was why a person shouldn't ask personal questions. People had a habit of asking them back.

"I was," he said slowly. "My wife and daughter were killed in an accident on New Kansas almost twenty years ago."

"Oh," she said as she brought a hand to her lips. "I am sorry. I didn't know."

The memory of his wife washed over him. He could still remember his daughter's smile. The way her eyes would light up when she was happy. He could still remember the smell of his wife's hair and the way she felt in his arms. Some memories time could not erase.

"I was on a discovery patrol. The old I.S.S. Essex. Six months in deep space looking for new planets. A first lieutenant. I didn't get the word until we got back. By then they had been buried for three months."

A cold shudder ran down his spine as his mind brought up the sight of the two graves next to each other.

Janet gently reached over and placed her hand on his knee, "I am sorry Mac. I didn't know."

He smiled kindly. "That's all right, it happened so long ago, yet sometimes it feels as if it had happened yesterday."

She nodded slowly, and the two of them sat there quietly for a moment. Both of them lost in thoughts of what might have been and what should have been.

After a long pause, Mac smiled and waved his hand over the hologram.

"Now then, Janet," he said, "the reason I asked you here is to go over the last reports from Intrepid. I want to get your thoughts and any insights you have. If we are going to win this, we need to understand who we are dealing



with.

Janet looked as if she were taken aback for a moment at the quick shift in the conversation. But she swiftly brought her focus back onto their true problem. How did they make sure that no more daughters were lost to their fathers?

## Chapter Six

Dex looked around the room and sighed. His brothers-in-arms. His fellow Marines. Every sergeant and officer in the battalion. They looked like a bunch of kids on Christmas morning. Waiting to open their presents.

Major Brown was finally going to reveal their objective. They were finally going to learn what they would be doing during the attack.

“Gentlemen,” the major said as he held up his hands for quiet. “The Second Battalion has been selected for a special mission.”

The Major smiled and waved his hand over the center table. A hologram came into view of a long V-shaped valley.

“I give you Drake’s Rift. ”

You could have heard a Valerian squirrel fart, Dex thought as each man leaned forward to get a better view.

Two long mountain ranges converged at the bottom apex of a V-shaped valley. The opening facing north. Several more mountain ranges with straggly peaks were piled up to the south behind the valley.

A rushing waterfall fed a small creek that made its way down the valley, running north, hugging the mountain range on the right for several miles before it crossed over and ran along the left side until it disappeared over the horizon.

Strange trees, tall and thin, dotted the side of the hills. The floor of the valley itself was wide open dusty grassland. Two separate groups of herd animals were grazing under the mid-day sun. Cairns, Dex thought, remembering a hunting trip on Intrepid a few years earlier.

A small village sat inside, to the right of the V apex. A large house with a full veranda sat on a small hill to the left.

Dex pushed aside a small feeling of longing. The place looked bucolic, peaceful. The kind of place a man could treasure. He looked up at the major, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Sir,” he said, “where are the aliens? They’re sending in a full battalion to protect a village?”

The Major smiled and pulled his hand back. The hologram shifted to show an expanded view.

“Tannerville,” he said. “Sixty miles south of Drake’s Rift. Separated by a continuous chain of mountain ranges. Like saw teeth. One after the other. We believe the majority of the aliens are here. In Tannerville. General Thompson will be landing on the plain north of the city. Here.” The Major pointed to a wide area of land. More than enough room for two divisions of Marines.

“The second object is Clarkson,” the major continued as the hologram swept rapidly to a new view. “Over three hundred miles to the north. The second largest city on Intrepid.”

Now every Marine was frowning, trying to understand the significance of their objective.

The Major, seeing their concern smiled slightly.

“There are only two ways to get from Clarkson to Tannerville. Along the coast. Over sixteen different bridges. Or through the natural cut in the mountains here at Drake’s Rift. ”

Once again, the hologram shifted to show the small village. The major pointed and a small circle appeared highlighting a small separation in the rock cliffs at the base of the V. Zooming in, they could see a sixty foot wide cut in the cliff face.

“This is the back door to Tannerville. General Thompson is worried that once he lands, the aliens will send reinforcements through here and hit him from behind. If they get through. It could screw up a good day. Maybe even change the course of the battle. It is our job to stop them.”

“We aren’t going to be in on the real attack?” Captain Andrews asked. Dex nodded. Exactly the question that needed to be asked. If they didn’t go in with the attacking force, they might not get into the action.

“Won’t they come down the coast, it’s shorter?” the captain added.

The Major shook his head. “The Navy’s going to take out each of those bridges, hopefully, when they are filled with aliens.”

“Why don’t they take out the Rift, ? Hell, a squad with a butt load of explosives could do it.”

“Because,” the major said, obviously fighting to maintain his patience, “those cliffs are solid granite. It would take a week to drill and set charges.

And it's too small a target for the Navy. Too tight, too narrow. Besides, the divisions will be coming up through that Rift on their way to Clarkson. After they shut down the front door along the coast, it will be the only way to carry on the attack of Clarkson."

Dex nodded, it made sense, but he still didn't like it. They'd be left out of the action. No marine liked being left out of a good fight. The last thing he wanted was the ration of shit his platoon would take from the guys in the thick of things. They'd never hear the end of it.

"Sir," First Sergeant Puller asked. "If these aliens do send reinforcements. How many are we looking at?"

The major frowned as he looked down at the hologram. "It depends. Intel says they might have as many as five thousand at Clarkson."

Several of the men gasped. How were three hundred men going to hold back five thousand? They might be Imperial Marines, but they weren't gods.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," the major said. "But if it does, our orders are to hold until relieved. You've all seen the reports out of Intrepid. All seen what these monsters are like. This is a fight to the death, no surrender, no retreat. They cannot be allowed to get through that Rift. Do you understand?"

The men around Dex nodded, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Each wondering which was worse, missing all the action or being in a fight for their lives.

The major started laying out the deployment of the different companies. Pointing out landmarks and where he wanted to place outposts. Areas he wanted to be scouted. Dex let the information wash over him. He knew they'd be studying the details for the next week as they got ready to drop down to the surface. By the time they got there, the information would be a part of his soul.

Five thousand aliens, Dex thought. Five thousand unknowns. It was enough to make a man pause and consider the problems. What tactics would the aliens, these Scraggs, use? What were their weapons like? How about high powered stuff, air coverage? Would the Navy be in place to protect them? What about the alien fleet?

A thousand different things flashed through his mind all at the same

time. Basically, they were going in blind against superior numbers in a fight that might determine whether the human race survived or not.

For the first time in his life, Dex felt a deep nervousness. A sense that this was more important than anything he had ever done or would ever do. In fact. It might very well turn out to be the most important thing anyone had ever done. A fleeting sense of worry rushed through him. Would he be up to the challenge? Would his men hold up? And what would happen if they failed?

**.o0o.**

Doctor Janet Sinclair twisted in her swivel seat away from her monitor and looked out over the semi-darkened control room. Thirty men sat focused behind their monitors. Each tapped into a dozen different data streams.

This was it, they had finally reached the jumping off point. Once they passed through the final wormhole, there would be no turning back.

Her insides turned over, would she survive the day? she wondered. Would she be alive to tell this story once they were done? Would any of them be alive?

With her brow scrunched up in confusion, she wondered how they did it. Sit there so quietly, focused on their job. How did they pretend that they weren't about to enter into a life-altering arena that may very well result in the destruction of the fleet, if not humanity itself?

Shuddering, she tried to focus once again on the reports coming out of Intrepid. She scanned the pictures. Looking for anything that would give her a clue as to how to defeat these monsters.

That is what they are, she had come to realize. There was no better word for them. They might think and behave like humans. At least on some levels. But they were monsters. Pure and simple.

She knew her scientific mind shouldn't allow such biases. But it was hard not to after seeing what she had seen.

The Scraggs, as Commander Evans called them, had spent the last three weeks rounding people up and herding them into holding pens. Men, women, and children. Sweeping through every building in Tannerville. Killing and destroying any who tried to stop them.

Once the humans were gathered into several different open-air corrals. The monsters would dip in every so often to pull an unlucky person from the horde. Then kill them right in front of everyone by ceremonially eating them. Quite often, they would start while the person was still alive.

Janet had stared at the crowd of people, crying and screaming as they watched. Her eyes could not look away from the pain and misery. Mother's watching their children dismembered. An old man being dragged through the gates feet first, kicking and screaming.

Monsters. Each and every one of them.

As she watched the screen changed to show Admiral McKenzie, Mac, in his full space pressure uniform.

Twisting in her chair she turned to look at the man directly. She wanted to watch this live, not on some screen.

He sat in the center of the room in his command chair, surrounded by three different monitors. A bank of screens on the bulkhead behind him.

The man looked calm and confident. Not a doubt in his eyes. Janet wondered briefly about the weight resting on this man's shoulders. Her heart went out to him. They had become close over the last few weeks. Spending their evening meals together discussing the threat before them.

Mac had used the opportunity to talk out his thoughts. To explore options and try and determine motivations and weak points of the enemy. Janet had tried to help him. She had let him brainstorm and ramble. All without judgment. All the while, afraid if she said the wrong thing he would miss something important. Or she might send him off on the wrong tangent.

Now, here he was, ready to send over thirty thousand men to their possible deaths and he looked as cool as a Sunday parson before his congregation.

"Men of Task Force Thirty-Two," he said as he glanced over at her and gave her a small smile.

Turning back to the camera, he continued, "We are about to embark on a great crusade. Our mission, to save humanity." He paused to allow his words to sink in.

"For millennia, our species has scraped and clawed our way up out of the

jungle to reach the stars. Through hard work and endless toil, we have developed a great civilization. Built on the idea that all people are created equal. That life is important and should be protected at all costs.”

Janet held her breath, she had never heard the command room so quiet. And she knew for a fact that the entire fleet was just as quiet, each man leaning forward to make sure he heard every word.

“Today,” he continued with a slight frown, “Our species is threatened. Our history is in danger. The work and sacrifice of our ancestors is placed in doubt. Even the possibility of future generations continuing the long line of humanity is in question.

“You, the men of this Task Force, are all that can stop the human race from falling into oblivion. Forgotten. A footnote in some other species history.

“You, the men of this Task Force, are the wall. The force that will stop the tide of evil.

“You, the men of this Task Force, are humanities answer. You are the people who will save us as a species. Not because your emperor asks you to. Not because your family and friends are depending on you. No! You will save us because you are the meanest, baddest, sons of bitches the universe has ever known. In the history of our people, no fleet, no group of men has ever had so much power, so much skill and been so determined. There can be no doubt. You will rain down death and destruction on our enemies like they have never seen.

“Never doubt, never waiver. Do your duty and we will succeed.”

The admiral paused once again then nodded slightly and said, “Captains, execute phase one. I.S.S. Pine, you have the honor of leading us through.”

Janet felt the goosebumps rise on her arms as she stared at the man in the command chair. Turning slowly, she observed the rest of the room.

Men seemed to be sitting a little taller in their seats. Their shoulders didn’t seem as slumped or burdened. More than one man shot his neighbor a quick smile. It was on and there was no turning back.

## Chapter Seven

Admiral McKenzie took a deep breath and once more scanned his star charts and the layout of the enemy.

They hadn't shifted an atom since his task force had entered the space around Intrepid. It was as if the aliens were purposely ignoring them. As unconcerned as a man hunting fruit squirrels on Siska. They didn't react because they weren't worried.

Not a good sign.

Twenty-seven alien vessels in orbit around Intrepid. Occasionally, a small shuttle would shoot down to the planet's surface or another would lift off and rejoin the fleet.

But other than that, no change. A small chill ran down his back. It would not be that easy, he knew. A space battle was a long, boring affair with brief moments of sheer terror.

With the distances and speeds involved. A battle could take days to play out. Ships maneuvering and jockeying for position. All for those few brief seconds when they could rake each other with murderous fire. Fighting desperately to obtain that killing shot before the other guy found it.

Shifting around, he addressed his wall of Captains, as he liked to call it. Each screen showed a different man. Each one responsible for a different vessel. The top left held a picture of Rear Admiral Weber, commander of his five Marine Transports, the screen next to it held a picture of General Smyth, commander of the ground forces once they landed.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing each of them. "Is there any reason not to execute phase two?"

A wall of silence greeted him. A few shook their head but no one offered a reason not to go forward.

"Very well."

Turning to address the men in the room around them, he said, "Command staff, any reason not to execute phase two?"

Again he was greeted by silence, except for a faint "No, Sir," from the back of the room.

Okay, here goes, he thought. Everything was laid out. Every movement



planned down to the ninth degree.

Nodding his head, he said, "On my mark, Task Force Thirty-Two is to execute phase two."

The Admiral glanced again at the screen showing his fleet. Twenty-Nine ships. Each one traveling thousands of miles per hour. Separated by five miles of black space. Everything must be done in concert, he thought. A millisecond off could have two ships colliding and a tenth of his force out of the fight.

"Stand by ... Execute."

At the very front of the fleet, two large oar carriers out of the planet Corona slowly opened their massive cargo doors.

"I hope you're ready for us," the merchant captain said.

"Don't worry," Lieutenant Commander Marks of the I.S.S. Pine responded. "We are in place and will pick you up."

The merchant captain nodded, then reached forward and pushed a button.

Impulse engines fired on both of the monstrous ships.

Mac smiled to himself. His wrinkle was about to be executed. Several rather large asteroids had been pulverized to fill those ships. Reduced to tons and tons of gravel. Now, with the ship slowing slightly, the cargo continued on, flowing out of the opening and into space.

The ships maneuvered again, expanding the wall of rocks in front of them. Working to spread them out until they covered thousands of square miles.

A small rock might not seem like much of a threat to a starship. Such a small amount of mass, surely it wouldn't be deadly. But connect that mass to a high rate of speed and you increased the kinetic energy to the equivalent of high explosives.

And there were now millions of them headed directly for the alien fleet. Too many to be shot down or destroyed.

If his staff had done their job correctly. Those rocks would be arriving at the same time the largest of the alien vessel came around the far side of the planet.

Because his own vision of the enemy was obscured by the wall of rocks, he had stationed the old ISS York out to the far right to peek around the edge of the stone wall. Her sensors were now the only thing monitoring the Scraggs.

He focused on the screen for a long moment. But there was nothing. Shrugging his shoulders, he said, "Okay, Task Group Thirty-Two Point One, take your positions."

"Roger, Sir," Commander Hall replied.

Twelve yellow flairs lit up the blackness as the twelve small ships of Task Group Point One brought themselves in behind the wall of rock. Hidden, Mac hoped, from any radar.

Twelve, single man vessels. Small darts packing a solid punch.

"This is Pine. We've picked up the crews of the Merchants," the beacon tender's skipper said, interrupting his study of the darts.

"Thank you, Pine," Mac said. "Go ahead and fall back to your assigned position."

The Pine acknowledged their orders and started slowing down to let the fleet pass her by. Mac smiled to himself. The skipper of the beacon tender had begged to be included in the initial attack. The Mesquite had been her sister ship. She had a special need for revenge.

But Mac had refused to allow himself to be swayed. The ship wasn't configured for this kind of fight. Better that she hold back and pick up survivors from distressed vessel.

He had a sinking feeling that the Pine was going to be busier than any of them before the day was done.

Now it was just a matter of waiting. Watching and waiting.

Sighing, he settled back into his chair and closed his eyes as he thought through the plan.

It would depend upon how the Scraggs reacted, he thought. It could all have been a waste. Or it could work like a champ. They wouldn't know for an hour.

Folding his arms across his chest he waited. Watching the numbers. Silently measuring the distance between the two groups of ships. Ticking off

the miles with every second.

At last, the interminable waiting was broken with the crackle of Commander Hall's radio. "Point One moving into position."

"Roger," Mac said simply.

Because the small darts and rocks were traveling at virtually the same speed, the small ships were able to simply push them aside and stick their nose through the rock wall.

Suddenly, twelve new views of the enemy were available on his monitor. Mac enlarged Commander Hall's view. It was direct on and provided a better aspect than York's.

"Thirty-Two, this is Point One." Commander Hall's voice broke the silence. "It looks like one of them is breaking out of orbit."

"Yes, headed straight for you," Mac said. "Your weapons are free, but hold your fire as long as possible, let the bastard get close."

"Roger, Sir."

Mac held his breath as he watched the alien ship approach. Just like in the vids from the Mesquite, it was sleek. Long, narrow without any antennas or protrusions on the hull.

She'd broken orbit without any obvious engine thrust. Interesting. Something he would have to keep in mind. What kind of propulsion were they using? Did they have Higgs engines? If so, could they breach a wormhole?

Before, he could delve into the issue any further. An intense blue light lit up the screen.

"Damn," Commander Hall said. "My ..."

A small flash of a yellow explosion lit each monitor in the control room as Commander Hall's ship ceased to exist.

Mac swore under his breath and swallowed an angry growl. Focus, he reminded himself.

"Point One, Fire," Lieutenant Commander Jarvis, the second in command of the Task Group, yelled into his radio.

The crackle from his radio had barely ended before eleven shiny steel

spherical balls appeared in space. Each weighed exactly twenty-four pounds and was traveling at close to Mach fourteen as soon as they left the end of the railgun. Close to ten thousand miles per hour.

Each one was on a collision course with the alien craft.

Within a few seconds. Another group of spheres appeared, each following the same track as the previous shot.

The second round was a complete waste. In fact, it might be said that the first round was a bit of overkill.

The Enemy ship tried to blast the incoming shells but quickly found its lasers were useless against such highly reflective material. Besides, even if it did burn through. The beam would encounter solid steel.

Seeing its ineffectiveness, the ship started to pull away and up. But it was too late.

The first shot hit the vessel just to the port of the forward nose and exited out the starboard aft quarter. Leaving a wake of death and destruction in its path.

The remaining shots from the initial firing peppered the vessel like a shotgun taking down a duck. It didn't stand a chance.

Mac watched with satisfaction as the other vessel died a quick death.

The second group of shells pounded into the dead vessel with small pops when they entered, followed quickly with small outward explosions when they exited.

Several hundred feet, Mac thought, there might have been thousands of those aliens on the ship. Hundreds at least. He wondered briefly if any of them were still alive.

"Maneuvering?" Mac called out. "Will we miss that vessel?" The last thing he needed was the fleet having to move themselves around a dead hulk of a ship. They'd be out of position for the next round.

"Just a second, sir, we are working the numbers," a young officer from the front of the room said.

A long heavy pause hung in the air, each man knew how difficult it would be if they had to move everyone.

“No, Sir,” the voice said strong and clear so that the entire room could hear. “The Fleet will pass well above the vessel. Some of the rock wall might catch it, but we should be fine.”

“Good,” was all Mac said as he turned back to examine the enemy.

Finally, it seemed, they were taking the matter seriously. What did it take? he wondered. The complete destruction of one of their ships to get their attention.

As he watched, each of the enemy’s ships was slowly climbing out of orbit. One at a time, pulling themselves into a long line. Heading up and away from the planet.

He did a quick mental calculation.

The wall might get three or four if they didn’t hurry.

It was a race against orbital mechanics as the gray gravel wall traveled closer and closer. The planet’s gravity was holding the ships back just enough.

“Yes,” he said as he pumped his fist as the upper edge of the racing wall caught the four to last vessels in line.

It was like a broom sweeping a pile of dirt into the blackness of space. At first, there were four ships, then there were a million little pieces of ships. All wrapped up in a swirling dust cloud.

Five down, Twenty-two to go, he thought.

Mac knew that most of the wall would travel on into space. Probably eventually falling into the sun. Admiral Weber should be able to move his transports into position without incident.

He smiled to himself. The wall had done its job. It had forced the aliens to break out of orbit. Clearing a path for the Marines to get down on the ground.

“Point One, peel off and enter orbit to provide cover for Task Group Point Two. Admiral Weber can use you. You’ll never be able to catch up to their fleet from there. Not without a long stern chase.”

“Yes, Sir,” the new commander of the dart ships said. “Point Two, this is Point One. We will fall into orbit and come in around behind you.”

“Roger, Point One,” Admiral Weber said. “It will be nice to have you with us.”

Mac tuned them out for a moment and addressed his staff.

“Plot a course to intercept,” he instructed. “I want to cross their T. I doubt that they will let us. But it’s a good starting point.”

Several men bent over their monitors and started furiously working the numbers. While they worked, he looked over to Doctor Sinclair.

“Any insights?” he asked.

Her face was as white as a Siska bunny in the dead of winter.

“Um, No.”

“Really? Anything?” he asked, desperate for anything that could give him an edge.

She paused for a moment as her brow creased. “They seem slow?”

“Slow?” he asked with confusion.

“Not slow to act, but slow to understand. Does that make any sense?” she asked with a shrug of her shoulders.

He nodded, yes it did, things had gone better than he had thought they would. One small dart, with one brave man gone. But the enemy had lost five large ships with thousands of crew.

He knew that if he had been in their position, he would have played it differently. He would have broken orbit earlier. Given himself some maneuvering room.

It really seemed like these guys had no idea what they were up against.

Well, good. It was nice to know that they were in the same boat as him. Fighting blind in a dark room the size of a large solar system with weapons that could destroy cities.

Yes, this was long from over, he thought.

## Chapter Eight

Sergeant Dex Carter pulled his straps down tight and said a silent prayer. It was one of those rituals he performed before every drop. He told himself that he did it to settle his nerves. But if he delved deeply, he did it because he hoped that if there was a God, he might look kindly on him and his men.

Besides, it couldn't hurt.

Leaning into the straps, he tried to look down the line at his platoon. Daniels was mumbling under his breath. Cheevers had a focused scowl that could have peeled paint from the bulkhead. Most of the men had their heads back, eyes closed.

They were ready, he thought. As ready as they could be, dropping into the unknown.

Glancing over his shoulder, he looked forward to Captain Andrews and Sergeant Puller locked in conversation with First Lieutenant Munro. The three of them were probably going over the deployment details for the tenth time.

Counting his breaths, Dex settled into his seat and focused on trying to relax. There wasn't much he could do at this point. They were trapped in this metal tube until they got onto the ground. Best to just let it go. Let the worry and fear flow over him like a stream over a rock.

A heavy clunk reverberated through the shuttle as she dropped from the transport. He reached up and pulled his faceplate into place. A dozen clicks next to him let him know his men were doing the same.

The shuttle surged forward, then twisted away from its mother ship. Within a few seconds, the fiery orange glow of reentry began to show at the edges of the portal.

They continued to fall. The gravity slamming into their butts and backs as the shuttle slowed. Dex held his breath as he waited for the ship to regain control of flight surfaces. Once they kicked in, the shuttle became a machine and stopped being a falling hunk of metal.

The voice next to him broke through his attempt to shut out everything around him.

"Finally," Jones said with a long sigh.

Dex scoffed but kept quiet.

The ship made a long slow bank to the right as the RAM engine kicked in. Dex caught a quick flash of one of the other shuttles. Three machines, one for each company. Each with enough extra room for the battalion HQ staff.

Three hundred and thirty three men dropping out of the sky.

Gripping his rifle, he went over his instructions. Second Company had been assigned the far right of the valley. By the stream. They were to dig in and await instructions.

His men could do that in their sleep. It still didn't answer the question of what they would find when they got there.

A flash of bright blue was followed immediately by a distant explosion. The shuttle rocked to the side as the pressure wave caught and lifted a wing.

"What the ...?" Someone yelled.

"Oh God, they're gone," Daniels said under his breath as he stared out of the window. "Alpha company's shuttle. It's gone."

"What!" a dozen different men asked?

Dex could feel the panic beginning to rise in his men. His own stomach felt as if it were twisted into a tight knot. Had they really lost their sister Company? A hundred men gone, just like that. Wiped out as if they had never existed. He thought of Corporal Josh Stevens. They'd gone through boot camp together. They'd humped packs over the mountains on Aurora. Gotten drunk together in Valeria.

Was he really gone, just like that?

"Hold on guys," he said over the platoon radio frequency. "Just hold on. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

The rushing voices and panicked exclamations began to settle down.

Feeling like there they were getting themselves under control again, he twisted to look up forward when the inside of the shuttle was lit up with a brilliant blue light.

"Nooooo!" someone screamed as they were pulled from the ship and into the high atmosphere five miles above the surface of the planet.

Dex's insides turned to jelly as he watched a giant hole appear towards



the forward end of the ship.

Captain Andrews, Sergeant Puller, all of them were gone. The far bulkhead was painted red with blood and guts of Imperial Marines. Men unlucky enough to be in the way of an alien laser.

Where before, his superiors had readied themselves for battle. Now nothing existed but a gaping hole and broken bodies.

Air rushed from the shuttle as it twisted and began to dive towards the ground. Weaving back and forth like a pendulum hanging in the sky.

The sudden acceleration slammed him back into the seat. Holding him in place like a giant hand wrapped around his throat. He huffed and forced his muscles to push his blood to his core. No, this couldn't be happening. Not like this.

They had a mission. A job. They couldn't die before they got a chance. No. This was impossible.

Nobody had said anything about anti-air capability. Why hadn't they known about this crap? Dex fought desperately to bring his brain back to reality. This was so screwed up. Dropping into an environment where you didn't know what they were facing. Where was the Navy? They were supposed to take out threats like this before the shuttles dropped. It was ridiculous.

The edges of his vision began to turn black as he felt the world closing in on him.

The shuttle swung to the far left then began to level off as the pilot fought to bring it back under control. Dex could feel the wings biting into the thicker air.

"Please God, please God," he begged under his breath. "Help him."

As his vision began to clear, Dex pounded his helmet shielded head back into his chair to try and clear the final cobwebs.

He shifted over to the company frequency and said. "Hold on guys. Prepare for a hard landing."

The words had no sooner left his lips than a huge mountain range flashed by in the window.

They were close, he thought. Now it was just a question. Would they

land or crash? The difference between walking away to finish their mission, or spreading themselves over a barren field in a million pieces.

Whatever was going to happen, they were going to know soon, he thought as he lifted his legs and prepared for what was coming.

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Alicia Miller stood in the middle of the road and stared in disbelief. Three weeks of nothing. Not a word. Not a sighting. And now, marching down the road toward them were over fifty rat-like aliens.

The aliens marched in formation, their long rifles held on their shoulders as if they were in a parade on Taurus.

The rumors and stories were true. Her guts turned into a solid rock of fear as the otherness of the creatures struck her. Their long snout-like faces. Their hard armor. They were not of this world or any other humanity had ever found.

She wondered if all of the stories had been true. Suddenly, she realized that there was nothing to stop them. Nothing between them and certain death.

Twisting, she yelled, "Run!"

The people around her looked at her with bewildered brows creased in confusion. She could tell they were wondering what the hell she was yelling about. Run? Run where?

It wasn't as if they had a castle to hide in.

Alicia silently cursed herself. Why hadn't they spent the time preparing? Why hadn't she made them build walls to hide behind?

Because you never really believed it was true. She answered herself. No way could there be aliens bent on destroying her and her people.

Finally forcing her feet to move, she started grabbing people and pushing them back towards the village.

Mrs. Stockton looked at her with a lost, confused expression.

"Hurry," Alicia said as she pushed at her shoulder. "Get the others. To the schoolhouse."

It was the only thing she could think of. The walls were made of brick. It was the village shelter in the event of violent storms. When the late summer

winds tore down the valley, the village would gather behind the strong walls and wait them out. Emerging only when they were over to pick up the damage.

Stephan, she thought. Where was he?

“Stephan,” she called as she twisted around, her eyes searching for her brother. Where was he? Her mother would kill her if anything happened to the boy.

“Stephan,” she yelled again as she glanced towards the approaching aliens. They were drawing ever nearer. Coming on relentlessly. Seconds, that was all she had, seconds.

Her heart raced as she frantically searched for her brother.

Alicia froze at what she saw. The alien formation broke up into individuals as they started running after them, grabbing people and throwing them to the ground hard enough to make them bounce.

A sharp high pitched scream drew her attention. Mrs. Stevens was being dragged away. The aliens had broken up and were individually chasing villagers. One of them was pulling Glenda Steven along the ground by her leg. Her long cotton dress had bunched up, revealing a white, fat thigh.

One of them unstrapped his weapon and pointed it towards a fleeing older man, Mr. Diamond, she thought.

A blue streak of light caught the man squarely between the shoulder blades, knocking him to the ground. A small whiff of smoke rising from his singed clothes.

All of this happened in a flash. The images registering in the blink of an eye.

Alicia felt the bile in her stomach begin to rise. He was dead. Mr. Diamond was dead. Her world was gone. Where was Stephan? She had to find Stephan.

“Nooooo.” A voice yelled, sending a cold chill down her spine.

There, in the far distance, an alien had Stephan by the collar of his shirt. Holding him up so that his feet barely touched the ground.

“No,” Stephan yelled again as he swung and kicked at his attacker.

Alicia's heart fell to the ground as she began to run towards her brother. All she could see was the beast taking her brother from her. All she could think about was taking him back. She had no idea how, but she couldn't let her brother be taken from her.

As her feet pounded into the dusty road, a sudden whoosh of air knocked her to the ground by the side of the road. She didn't see it coming, no one did. But suddenly, from nowhere, a shiny metal ship swooped down and slid along the dirt road.

Dust and redbud bushes exploded into the air in a far-reaching fan.

Alicia froze in place on her hands and knees and stared at the new monstrosity.

The doors sprang open and creatures dressed in highly polished shining armor poured out from inside. Each with their own weapon, sweeping back and forth searching for targets.

Her heart fell. They could never defeat this. The fifty original aliens had been too much. But this, another hundred, in armor, with rifles and a ship. They were all doomed, she thought as a heavy sadness fell over her.

As she watched, one of the new creatures broke away from the others and walked towards her, his rifle never leaving her. She knew if she moved, she was dead. There was no doubt in her mind. The small hole at the end of the barrel held her death, she was sure of it.

The creature stopped before her, looking down at her for a long moment. The mirror surface of its faceplate showing her own reflection.

She stared back up, unable to move. A feeling of shame washed over her. She was going to die on her hands and knees in the dirt like a rabbit.

The creature's attention shifted away from her to look out over the field behind her. She twisted to look at what he was looking at as she fought to catch her breath.

Alicia's insides crumbled. Stephan hung between two rat aliens. Each of them held an arm. Pulling him away. The boy twisted and turned trying to escape. Her heart filled with love. At least he was still fighting, she thought.

It wouldn't matter, he would die, but he would die fighting. Like a Miller should.

Suddenly, a sharp explosion behind her made her jump. Before she could shift to see what had happened, the head of one of the aliens holding her brother erupted into a red mist. A heartbeat later. The other alien turned to see what happened. Just in time to catch a bullet squarely between the eyes.

Both creatures crumpled to the ground.

Alicia frantically tried to understand what had happened. Her brother was free. How was this possible?

She turned to see the creature from the ship with his rifle braced against his shoulder as he continued to track back and forth between the two targets laying in the dirt. Obviously waiting for them to move.

“Stephan,” she screamed.

Her brother sprang up from the dust and stared at his two attackers. His head shifting back and forth as if unable to believe what he was seeing. Then a menacing grin creased his lips as he reached back and kicked the aliens. Over and over, as if unleashing all the pent-up fear a twelve-year-old boy could ever hold.

Alicia turned back to the creature in the shining armor. Seeing that the aliens were truly dead, he lowered his rifle and stared at her for a moment.

Then, as if realizing something, it reached up and pushed its faceplate back.

A handsome face appeared from inside the helmet. A handsome human face. Alicia felt her knees grow weak with relief. The man’s deep brown eyes searched hers, locking her in place as he studied her.

Then, slowly, a small grin twitched at the corners of his lips.

“Sergeant Dex Carter,” he said, “Imperial Marines. Get the boy and get behind us. This isn’t over yet.”

His words washed over her like an incoming tide. Relentless and without meaning. Then, finally, what he was saying seeped into her consciousness.

“Stephan,” she yelled as she jumped up and held out her hand.

Her brother raced towards her. Sliding to a stop by her side, his eyes as big as dinner plates as he looked up at the man standing in the middle of the road. The boy wasn’t even out of breath as he continued to stare with his mouth hanging open.

Suddenly, the man in the road, twisted and brought the butt of his rifle around in a circle and connected with an alien rushing past them.

The creature dropped like a sack of potatoes. The Marine leaned forward and put a bullet into the monsters head. The rifles explosion making her flinch.

Alicia felt her insides freeze. He'd killed the beast like he was stomping on a bug. There had been no hesitation. No chance for second thoughts.

"Come on," the Marine said. "Hurry."

Alicia threw her arm around her brother and started back towards the village, her mind reeled with information overload. What had happened? And how.

She noticed that the man followed closely, his rifle sweeping back and forth as he escorted her back to the village.

Pulling herself together, she looked around. Men in shining armor had spread out. Forming a wall between her village and the aliens.

Dead aliens lay everywhere, their blood and gore staining the ground. People were moving toward the village, their eyes lost in long stares off into space. Tears and blood staining their faces. Each of them in their own little world. Fighting desperately to make sense of what had happened.

Alicia tried to bring herself back under control. They were going to live. Stephan was going to live. Somehow, these men, these Marines had appeared from nowhere and saved her village.

A prayer had been answered. Somehow, they were going to live.

At least for now, she thought, as she turned to follow where the Marine was staring, north, down the valley.

There, on the far horizon, a group of aliens were gathering.

Alicia felt her stomach clench up into a tight ball as she slowly tracked the aliens from one end of the tree line all the way across the valley to the other tree line.

There must be thousands, she thought as her heart sank.

Maybe she had given her thanks too early, she thought. As the man said, this wasn't over yet.

## Chapter Nine

Dex scanned the far horizon and felt his guts clench up.

Damn, he thought as he hurriedly shifted to scan the sky. Where were they? The major and the rest of the battalion. They should have been down first. Had they really lost Alpha and Charlie companies? The thought was enough to tighten his gut into a knot.

The wind brought him a quick sharp scent of dust and green grass.

Landslide, he thought. After three weeks of canned air, the sharp, sweet taste of fresh air pulled at him. Reminding him of where he was and what he was doing.

Shifting, he quickly scanned his surroundings and made a snap decision. To hell with them. He couldn't wait.

"Report," he said into his suit microphone. He might be assuming too much responsibility. But someone had to do it. Besides. It wasn't like there were a dozen guys waiting in line. He was senior. It was his responsibility.

As the reports began to trickle in, his insides began to quiver. Seventy-six men. Not three hundred and fourteen. Seventy-six. Most of the First and Second platoon, a good part of third.

Seventy-six. He thought again as he looked out to the horizon. Hell, three hundred wouldn't have been enough.

Swallowing hard, he said, "Dig in, Obamway, you've got First platoon, take the left." He glanced over at his other two corporals to make sure they understood. Both nodded back to him. Turning to the companies other sergeants, he raised an eyebrow to see if they had any objection to him taking charge. Both of them nodded their concurrence.

"Daniels take your Second platoon to the right," he said, "Smith your Third platoon has got center."

His fellow sergeants got their men moving and soon three-man teams of Imperial Marines quickly turned to digging. Two manning shovels, one standing guard.

Dex took another deep breath and tried to juggle the thousand thoughts rushing through his mind. He and his men were now responsible for stopping a hoard of aliens.

A weight settled on his shoulders that felt as if it would crush him. They could not fail. He could not fail. Too much depended on it.

Shifting to get a look at their new environment, he saw the woman was still there, along with the boy. Both of them looking at him like he was some kind of fish who'd dropped out of a cloudless sky.

She was too young to be the boy's mother. For some reason, he quickly checked out her left hand. No ring.

Get a grip, he thought to himself. Here he was in the middle of a do or die battle and he's checking out if she's married or not. How ridiculous could a guy get?

Granted, she was as beautiful as a woman could be. Blond hair, and an angel's face, with quick intelligent eyes that seemed to sparkle in the mid-day sun.

Shaking his head to try and bring himself back to reality he said to the pair, "Get some help and move the bodies of your friends back."

The woman glanced at the heavyset woman, lying dead in the middle of the road and then across the field to the old guy, face first in the dust. Her skin turned white as she stared at him in disbelief.

"Can't your men do that?" she asked, her voice registering a silent plea.

He shook his head, "they are too busy, and if we have to move back we will have to leave them behind. Believe me, you don't want them being left for the Scraggs."

She looked again at the corpses then at her brother. At last, she nodded to the boy, "Stephan, go get the others. We need to move them."

Dex sighed internally. One less problem for him to deal with. It was nice to see she wasn't going to fall into some kind of puddle and become a useless mess.

"What's your name?" he asked as the boy ran off towards the village.

"Alicia," she said, "Alicia Miller."

Dex got the impression by the way she said it that the name should mean something to him. But really he didn't have time to figure it out.

"What is the situation?" he asked. "How many people here? Who is in



charge?”

The young woman shook her head. “There’s about thirty of us. Mostly women, old men, and children. A lot of children.”

“Where is everyone else?” he asked as his mind tried to wrap itself around what she was telling him.

“They left when the Militia was called up. It’s been almost three weeks. My mother, my brothers, the ranch hands. Everyone went to Tannerville. We probably should have gone with them.”

“No!” he barked before he could stop himself.

She looked up at him expectantly. “Why? What have you heard? We haven’t heard anything.”

He slowly shook his head. See, this was why they put officers in charge and not sergeants. Sergeants didn’t know how to keep their mouths shut.

“Just that most of the Marines are going in to take it back,” he said. No need to tell her of what the latest reports had shown them.

Turning away from her so that she wouldn’t see the lie in his eyes, he scanned the perimeter. His men were busting their hump to get dug in. There was no need to hurry them along. They knew that the best protection was a hole in the ground. Preferably deep and solid.

“What weapons did they have?” he asked as he turned back to her.

She furrowed her brow. “Lasers,” she said. “Blue ones.”

He nodded and clicked over to the command channel to contact HQ. A high pitched whistle greeted him on the new frequency. Damn, they were being jammed. He shifted to secondary and then to tertiary. All of them were being jammed. His stomach tightened again. If this kept up he was going to end up with a knot in his intestines so tight that it would never get untangled.

Muttering under his breath, he turned, ignoring her, as he made his way to the front of the shuttle.

Damn, the pilot looked like a pin cushion. A dozen jagged pieces of metal were jammed into the guy’s body. Some as big as a hand, others, long and narrow. It was a miracle, but somehow he’d gotten them onto the ground before bleeding out.

Dex grit his teeth as he reached in past the pilot and pushed the radio's button to the left. Patching his suit into the ship's radio. He double checked to make sure both were set in secure mode.

"Task Group Thirty-Two, Point Two. This is Task Unit Eagle, I repeat this is Task Unit Eagle."

He held his breath as he waited. There wasn't the high pitched whine on this frequency, which made absolutely no sense. Why block the Marines but not the shuttles bringing them down.

Hell, maybe these Scragg freaks were as screwed up as his commanders. The thought sent a small warm feeling to his insides. They weren't perfect. They screwed up just as much as the Marines.

"Thirty-Two point Two, this is Eagle, Over?" he repeated.

Again there was a long pause. Finally, someone said, "You're on the wrong frequency Jarhead, this is the shuttle frequency."

Dex clenched his jaw. If the man had been in front of him he would have planted a fist in his face just to hear the bones crack.

"The other regular frequencies are jammed," Dex said through tight lips. He noticed that the woman had followed him and was watching him with a confused expression on her face. She gasped when she saw the dead pilot but then quickly turned to focus on him.

Great, now he had an audience.

"This is Eagle, Task Unit Point Six," Dex said into his suit radio. "I need to talk to Marine Command."

"This is the shuttle frequency." The voice said again as if it were talking to an idiotic baby who needed care and understanding."

"Damn it, I know," Dex said. "But you might want to tell someone that Task Unit Point Six has had about seventy percent casualties and I've got a hoard of aliens about ready to break through and ram their weapons up General Smyth's ass."

Again the radio remained silent for a long moment. Then a new voice came on and said,

"Eagle, shift to frequency Alpha three. It should be the third slot on the shuttles radio."

Dex sighed, finally someone who didn't have his head up his ass. "Shifting."

Reaching down, he pushed the lever into the third spot and said, "This is Eagle, over."

Almost immediately, someone said, "Stand-by."

Dex felt his blood pressure rising like a thermometer on New Kansas in the dead of summer. But, before he could really start cursing a new voice came on the radio.

"Eagle, this is Commander, Task Force Thirty-Two. Over."

Dex's stomach dropped to the ground. Either someone had screwed up their call sign. Or he was talking to the head honcho himself."

"Sir, I mean, Thirty-Two, this is Unit Point Six, the Eagles."

Why in the hell was he talking to an admiral? He glanced over at the woman next to him. Alicia, she was looking at him with one raised eyebrow. It was rather obvious that she had no idea what was going on but that he was obviously just as confused.

"Eagle, go ahead with your report. We will get it to Marine Command once we reestablish communications. Who am I talking to?"

"Um ... Sir, this is Sergeant Dex Carter. Platoon Sergeant, First Platoon, Bravo Company, Second Battalion."

"Yes, go ahead."

Dex took a deep breath. The voice on the other end sounded calm and cool, like a Sunday afternoon walk in the park. Not what he would have expected an admiral to sound like. Especially not while the galaxy was coming to a quick end.

"Sir, our assignment is to block Drake's Rift ..."

"I am aware of your mission. Go on."

"Um, yes, Sir, well, two of the companies, didn't make it. Our shuttle got hit as well. Somehow the pilot got us down. But we lost our skipper and exec." Dex paused for a moment, "Sir, we have seventy-six men left to hold this position. And I can see about three or four thousand of the enemy on the horizon chomping at the bit. We need reinforcements, Sir, immediately."

The radio remained silent for a long minute. Dex was getting ready to repeat himself when a sharp crackle stopped him.

“Eagle, this is CTF Thirty-Two. Roger I understand.”

Dex let out a long sigh of relief. At least someone got it. He was no longer the senior guy with a secret. Now it was someone else’s problem.

The radio hissed again. “Eagle, things are a little hectic right now,” the voice said with its soft soothing tone. “I’m afraid there will be no reinforcements. You are on your own. Do you understand?”

Dex took a step back. It felt as if someone had just hit him in the gut with a sledgehammer. On their own. That was impossible.

“We can’t get anyone to you right now.”

“How long until you can, Sir?” Dex asked, forgetting for a moment who he was talking to.

Again there was a long pause. He could imagine the admiral’s staff were frantically working the numbers.

“That is unknown at this time,” the radio said. “You have to hold that position. Do you understand? It is imperative. The way things are shaping up. It might be the key to everything.”

Dex took a long deep breath and nodded to himself. Well, that settled that, he thought.

He glanced over at Alicia, her eyes were wide, she had heard the exchange and immediately recognized it for what it was. Their death sentence.

Dex remembered that they were waiting for him to answer. “Roger, Sir, I understand. We will hold. As long as we can. What about the Fleet. Any ...”

“The fleet is out of position,” the commander said. “We are halfway across the solar system chasing these bastards. Don’t expect any support there.”

Dex nodded, he had expected as much.

“In the meantime,” the Task Force Commander said, “I am promoting you to Commander of Bravo Company. You are now Captain Carter. I need you to hold that Rift, son. Do you understand? No matter what. Hold the

Rift. ”

Dex glanced down at his arms as his three chevrons disappeared. Almost immediately, two black, parallel bars appeared on each shoulder.

Damn, he thought. It took him eight years to get those chevrons. Then, the realization of what had just happened began to sink in. A battlefield commission. They only gave those out when it looked like there wasn't much chance of anyone surviving.

Shaking his head, he said into the radio, “Sir, we will hold until there is no one left to man a position. But I don't know that it will be enough.”

Dex held his breath as he waited for a response. At last, the radio hissed. “I understand, Captain Carter, do your best. That is all anyone of us can do. This is Commander Thirty-Two out.”

His shoulders slumped. How was this possible. General Smyth must be getting the hell beat out of him if he couldn't send help. Damn, things were royally screwed up. But then, what else was new?

“Obamway, get a squad unloading the shuttle. I want everything moved back into the Rift. At least two hundred yards back, behind that first bend.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” the corporal said then halted and looked back. “I mean, yes, Sir,” he said with a sad grin that let Dex know just how worried he was.

Well, with good reason. One thing he knew. His men weren't dumb. They could read a situation as well as anyone. He'd spent two years teaching them. They knew they were screwed.

Swallowing hard, he turned to the woman still standing next to him.

“I better meet with your people,” he said.

She stared at him for a moment as if trying to understand a foreign language, then nodded and started walking toward the only brick building in the village.

As they walked, Dex glanced over his shoulder. The Scraggs were still there, waiting, watching.

Why? he wondered. There was more than enough to overrun his position. Why hold off and give him time to get ready?

Oh well, it never paid to assume your enemy knew what the hell they

were doing.

The women next to him kept looking at him with big eyes. As if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. He tried to give her a reassuring smile but his guts told him that there was a very good chance this woman, along with everyone here, was going to end up as rat food unless he pulled off a miracle.

The thought saddened him. Surprising him with the strong sense of wrongness. Nothing had the right to hurt these people. Especially this woman. And it had now become his responsibility to make sure it didn't happen.

## Chapter Ten

Alicia stared at the man next to her as she fought to bring her mind back to the here and now. When they invented the word – Hero – they were thinking of this man.

Tall, big, strong, confident. Everything about him told the world that he was in charge and he would make sure they were safe.

She glanced over to try and get a good look at him. His skin was tanned like soft leather. The corner of his deep brown eyes were creased from staring off into the distance too often.

He walked with long strides that forced her to run to keep up with him. A man on a mission with no time to adjust for other, lesser mortals.

She remembered the way he had coolly dispatched those two monsters taking Stephan. As if he was on a range taking target practice. Then calmly shot that alien lying in the road.

This man wouldn't second guess himself to death, she realized.

His mirror like armor didn't make a creak or groan when he moved. It seemed to flow around his body. Adjusting to accommodate him. He slipped his rifle over his shoulder as he turned slightly to look again at the distant enemy.

Shaking his head, he started again for the group of people gathered outside the schoolhouse.

"Is this everybody?" he asked her with that deep, gravelly voice of his.

She nodded and said, "I think so," Mrs. Diamond was crying quietly in the back. Jenny Hobson had her arm around the old woman, trying to comfort her.

Everyone looked as if they were in shock. Their wide eyes staring into nothingness. Their hands fumbling as they pulled children close. Why hadn't they gotten ready? she thought. Why hadn't they prepared?

The tall Marine came to a halt and slowly looked the group over. He stared at them for a long minute, taking in every detail.

"I'm Captain Dex Carter of the Imperial Marines," he said with a large commanding voice. "I need everyone to gather what food and water they can carry and head for Tannerville. Through the Rift. "

“Nooo,” someone yelled.

“We can’t walk that far,” someone else said as a dozen voices were raised in protest.

The Marine just stood there and let the words wash over him. When everyone was done and silence had returned, he said, “You’ve got ten minutes.” Then turned and started to walk back towards his men.

“Stop,” Alicia yelled as she grabbed his arm to hold him in place.

He looked down at her, waiting.

She swallowed hard. “They are right. A lot of these people will never make it. Besides, this is our home. And you said Tannerville was in the middle of a big battle.”

“I’m not leaving,” Stephan said from behind her. “I can fight.”

Alicia glanced at her brother and realized he was right.

“Listen,” she said to the Marine, “my grandfather discovered this planet. My other grandfather was given this valley by the Emperor himself. We are not leaving. You can’t make us.”

The Marine slowly turned and looked at the crowd surging around him. He stopped and looked at Alicia for a long moment and mumbled under his breath. Alicia thought she might have heard something about it not making much of a difference either way.

At last, he shrugged his shoulders.

“Get your stuff and get into the Rift. You can stay there for now. Out of the way.”

A man of few words, she thought. He hadn’t said they could stay, but he wasn’t forcing them to leave. At least not yet. Her heart jumped with hope.

“What can we do to help?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow, then turned to look off to the horizon where the enemy continued to gather.

“Do you have a doctor here? I think we’re going to need one and we lost both our corpsman.”

Alicia slowly shook her head. “My mother is a nurse, I’ve helped her. It’s the best we’ve got.”



He nodded back to her as he watched a line of Marines carrying supplies back into the Rift, . She watched as his mind raced with a dozen different problems. At last, as if coming to a decision, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Get your people back into the Rift, . Every bit of water and food they can get together. Set up an aid station back there. Get blankets and anything else you need. Don’t count on being able to come back into the village. Do you understand?”

Her stomach fell with the realization of what he was saying. Everything they didn’t take with them was going to be lost. Swallowing hard, she said, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good, make them hurry, I have no idea if this quiet is going to last. When you’re done, come find me.” The young captain gave her a long look that let her know just how worried he was. Then turned and started talking into his radio. Ordering an inventory and sending a man up to the main house.

Alicia felt a nervous fear wash over her. If this man was worried then things must really be dire. Maybe they should try for Tannerville like he wanted. No, she said to herself. They’d never make it. Besides, her grandfathers would roll over in their graves if they knew she abandoned the valley to a bunch of rat faced aliens.

Gathering herself, she headed back to the schoolhouse. The man wanted an aid station. Then she’d build the best aid station on Intrepid. Unfortunately, her heart told her that it was going to be sorely needed.

.oOo.

Dex put the woman and her people out of his mind. Once they were set up around the bend in the Rift he could ignore them. They’d be safe there. At least for a while. If the Scraggs got that far then it meant he and his men were dead and they had lost.

Scanning the area, he watched as his men worked. His company, he reminded himself. His responsibility. The idea sent a sharp pang of fear to his guts. How was he going to pull this off?

Oh well, he thought as he moved forward to inspect their fighting holes. No use worrying. All he could do was what he could do.

“Cleavers,” he called over his radio. “Take your team up to the main

house and set up on the roof. It's the highest thing around. Let me know if anything gets within range. Your weapons are free. Take 'em out if you get a chance."

The young private nodded and tapped his teammates on the shoulder as they scrambled out of their hole and up the slope.

Dex watched them climb the hill. For a brief moment, he envied them. A simple mission and someone else to worry about the big picture.

Get over yourself, he thought as he shook his head and brought himself back to reality.

"Obamway, you got that inventory?"

"Yes sir," the corporal said as he ran up to him. Dex held his breath as he waited for the bad news.

"Full ammo load, full food, half the water is gone. Most of the claymores, I've got half of the ones left set out like you wanted. We've got some of the medical stuff but a bunch was lost with the corpsman."

Dex nodded, the corpsman always carried the good stuff with them during a drop. They didn't have time to go rooting around in the cargo bay for medical supplies.

Obamway looked at him hesitantly.

"Go on," Dex said.

"The heavy weapons are gone, the heavy machine gun and the mortars."

"What?" Dex exclaimed. "All of it?"

The young corporal slowly nodded. "All except one tube and four mortar rounds."

Dex's heart felt like someone was squeezing the life out of him. It was bad enough losing two-thirds of the battalion, but all the heavy weapons as well. It was like the universe was a cat playing with a mouse. Teasing the hell out of him but never giving them a real chance.

"Okay, thank you, corporal," Dex said as he laid a hand on his shoulder. He knew Obamway, being the bearer of bad news would have torn him up. "We'll have to make do. See that the medical supplies are given to Miss Miller. She's setting up an aid station back around the bend."

“Yes, Sir,” the corporal said as he started to salute, then remembering they were still in a combat zone, dropped his arm back to his side as his face turned beet red over the error.

Dex caught the mistake and smiled at the young man. “Listen, Corporal, I want you to know that before we left Taurus I’d recommended you for Platoon sergeant. I just wish it hadn’t come about this way.”

The young man’s eyes grew wide with shock as he waited.

“I know you can do this,” Dex continued. “Just remember, your men know their job, you know yours. Do the best you can and I’ll be satisfied.”

“Yes, Sir, Thank you, Sir, I won’t let you down. I promise.”

Dex smiled then patted him on the back before turning to address another of the thousand problems facing him.

**.oOo.**

Alicia sighed for the thousandth time. It was taking forever to get her people organized. It was like herding Valerian squirrels up a tree. No one wanted to go in the right direction. Some of them were still in shock, moving at a snail’s pace. Others were frantic, running about gathering everything except what they really needed.

Finally, after a long two hours of pure chaos, she had them all located back behind the bend. Supplied and bedded down. The children were assigned to adults. The supplies packed away.

“Keep them here,” she told Stephen. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hey, I want to go too,” he exclaimed. She could see that special glint in his eyes. The one that told her he was going to ignore her orders and do what he wanted to do.

“Listen, Stephen,” she said as she gripped his shoulder, praying that her words would sink into that thick skull of his. “We need to stay out of their way or that Marine Captain will force us to leave. It’s your job to stop anyone from bothering them. Do you understand?”

Her little brother looked up at her for a long moment, his eyes narrowing in concentration.

“How can I stop them? They’re adults. No one will listen to me.”

She had to bite her lip to stop herself from informing him that they'd stopped acting like adults long ago. Shrugging her shoulders she said, "If you have to, punch them. I don't care. No one goes around this bend without my permission, that includes you. Do you understand?"

His eyes grew as large as eggs when his sister gave him permission to punch an adult.

"Yes," she said, "I am that serious."

He gulped and nodded and she knew she could trust him. He might be rambunctious and carefree. But he wasn't dumb. He knew when things were important and right now, this might be the most important moment of their life.

Reaching over, she pulled him into a quick hug as she fought to hold back her tears. Maybe the last moment of their lives.

Stephen let her hug him for a few seconds then pulled away, quickly looking around to see if anyone had caught him being hugged by his big sister. Obviously, the worst thing that could happen to him.

"I'll be right back," she said as she left to find Captain Carter.

It didn't take long. He was standing by the shuttle watching as two Marines furiously dug a hole under the fuselage.

"You asked me to find you when I had everyone in place," she said as she came up to him.

He glanced at her, then held up a hand as he talked into his suit radio. "Okay, Cleavers, keep me informed."

Turning to her, he smiled slightly and Alicia caught a hint of what he must be like away from this death and destruction. What if they had met somewhere else, a friend's party, or a tavern. Would she have found him this interesting? Or was it the fear constantly coursing through her veins that made her feel this way?

"Come with me, Miss Miller," he said as he began walking back towards the Rift, .

Alicia swallowed hard and fought to bring herself back to reality. As she hurried to catch up, she noticed several other Marines break away and run to meet them at the Rift opening.

“This is Sergeants Smith and Daniels,” he said to her, “and Corporal Obamway. Gentlemen, this is Miss Miller, our new medical team.”

“Alicia,” she said as she reached out to shake their hands. Suddenly she felt like a little girl who had been invited to sit at the grown-ups table. This was a new universe, a new world that she had never expected to inhabit.

The men greeted her cordially then quickly focused on their captain. All business, she thought. That’s good, she reminded herself. The more business like they were, the better chance she and her people had of surviving this thing.

“Okay,” the captain began, “As you know, we’re on our own, no naval support, and we’ve been ordered to hold until relieved. No retreat. The mission is still the same. Nothing gets through the Rft to catch General Smyth from behind, got it?”

Each man nodded. Alicia felt her stomach drop about three feet. The look in their eyes let her know that they didn’t think they had a chance in hell, but they’d die trying.

“If anything happens to me, Smith is in charge. So ... report. Where are we at?”

Sergeant Smith began. He was a slight man, Alicia thought, not the normal towering Imperial Marine she had always assumed was a requirement. But he looked serious, competent, a man who knew his job.

“All fighting positions are ready and fully supplied. Everyone has eaten and they’ve got enough water for the next twenty-four hours. All suits are functioning correctly and the rest of the supplies, including the majority of the ammo, is back around the bend. Like you wanted.”

Captain Carter slowly nodded then looked at Daniels.

“The listening devices are set out at the half-mile mark.” The square-headed sergeant said with a voice that sounded as solid as a brick wall. “I didn’t want to go further because I didn’t want to tempt them.”

“Good. Besides, in this terrain, we shouldn’t have any problems seeing them approach,” Captain Carter added.

“The shuttle is rigged and I held back half the mines like you said,” Daniel continued.

“Good, Good. Corporal?”

Corporal Obamway looked at his fellow leaders and swallowed hard. “We’ve fully mapped all approaches, There’s a few dips and curves that could give them some protection, but not much and nothing close. When they come, we won’t be surprised.”

“Good,” the Captain said, “So, question? Why haven’t they come yet? I’ve seen commanders make a lot of dumb mistakes over the years. But giving us time to dig in like this is just plain stupid. Why?”

The three sergeants looked at each other. “Maybe they weren’t expecting us?” Smith said.

“Or, they’ve never come across someone who fights back,” Captain Carter added.

“When we were coming down., I got a glimpse of them,” Daniels interjected. “They were marching down the road like they were on parade, rifles on their shoulder, grouped up so tight a stiff breeze could have taken out a dozen. Then suddenly, they split up. Like it was each rat for himself.”

“A disciplined force that became a mob,” the captain said as he slowly nodded.

“Yeah, no fire and maneuver,” Smith added. “No covering each other. Like you said, it was as if they became a bunch of individual fighters.”

The captain thought about their words as his eyes looked off into the distance. Slowly he nodded and smiled slightly. “Well, a mob is a lot easier to kill than a disciplined army. Let’s hope they stay that way.”

Alicia caught a glint of harshness in his words and for the first time, she felt a glimmer of hope. Grabbing onto it, she held it tight and promised herself that she would share it with her people.

The Captain continued to stare across the valley then finally nodded.

“Okay, we need a trench here,” the Captain said as he pointed to the front of the Rift. “Slopping up the back so we can shoot into it if we have to fall back. I want two sandbag walls there, a hundred feet into the Rift. We’ll use it like a funnel.”

“Miss Miller, if any of your people can help with the digging, it would be appreciated. It’d be fewer men I have to pull off the line.”

Alicia quickly nodded, already mentally selecting who she could get to help.

“Obamway,” the Captain continued, “you rig the trench with the rest of the mines. Make sure Miss Miller and her people are well clear before you get started. Let me know when you’ve got them in place. Set them for remote operation only. No contact release.”

“Yes, Sir,” the corporal replied.

The Captain nodded. “Let’s get to it, there is no telling how long they are going to keep being stupid. So, the sooner we’re ready, the sooner I can relax.”

“Yes, Sir,” the three men said as they turned to carry out their assigned tasks.

Alicia stood there for a moment, studying the tall Marine.

“Do you think we have a chance?” she asked.

He looked back at her for a long moment. “Do you want the truth?”

She hesitated for a moment then nodded her head.

“It depends. If it was Imperial Marines we were facing, no, not a chance in hell. But, these rat-faced bastards. I don’t know. We won’t know until the end. But the truth is, probably not.”

Alicia’s stomach tightened up into a ball of pure fear. Why wasn’t he afraid? she wondered. He’d just informed her that they were probably going to die relatively soon. Yet he still seemed confident and sure of himself.

Men? she thought to herself. She would never understand men. Especially men like this.

## Chapter Eleven

Admiral McKenzie stared out the portal into the inky blackness, his mind reviewing a thousand details and possibilities. None of it really mattered, he thought, the die was cast. He had made his decisions. Going back and second-guessing himself wouldn't change things. But that didn't stop the doubt pulling at him.

His insides turned to stone when he thought about that young sergeant, he and his men alone on a strange planet, facing a horde of aliens bent on their destruction. Thousands of men just like that Marine were fighting and dying. Men following a plan he had helped devise. Dying because he put them there.

Not for the first time he reconsidered his decision to abandon the Marines to chase the alien fleet. Had it been the right decision?

"No," he mumbled to himself. "It was the only way."

The alien fleet was the true threat. Nothing must stop him from destroying it. Tying himself and his ships to the planet would trap him. Better that his fleet have the maneuverability he needed to succeed.

Forcing himself away from studying the sticky blackness outside the ship, Mac returned to his desk to finish the report he was preparing for the Emperor.

Really, there wasn't much to add since the last report. The Marines continued to fight for control of Intrepid, the Alien fleet continued to run. The humans were gaining on them, slowly. His forces remained intact. Now, it was just a matter of time.

Sighing, he closed the report and pulled up the intelligence report from the planet. He swallowed hard when he realized how little they knew. The Marines and Admiral Weber had been surprised by the aliens' anti-air capability. The alien soldiers seemed to fight as individuals more than you would expect. Strictly disciplined soldiers that became a raging mob until they'd destroyed their target and captured what they wanted. Then they returned to a disciplined force.

So counter to what you would expect.

He was rereading the casualty list when the Intercom interrupted him.



“Sir, this is Combat Central.”

“Go ahead,” he answered.

“Sir, they’re changing course, Slightly, but definitely.”

“I’ll be right there,” he snapped as he jumped up from his chair. This he had to see himself. If they were changing course, his decisions over the next few minutes might make all the difference.

When he stepped into Combat Central it seemed like half the Task Force staff was already there. His chief of staff Captain White along with Churchill’s skipper Captain Freeborn and his executive officer were all standing around the central console. Off to the side, Professor Sinclair gave him a small smile of encouragement. Janet, he reminded himself.

Smiling in return, he pulled his attention to the big monitor and studied the numbers. But his mind wandered back to the good professor. He had come to rely on her, he realized. And for more than her insight into aliens. He relied on her to let him explore possibilities and potential outcomes.

She pulled thoughts out of him. Allowed him to explore without judgment or condemnation. She never scoffed or rolled her eyes when he proposed some outrageous plan. Instead, she would quietly let him come to his own realization.

“Sir,” Captain White said, ripping him out of his daydream. “There is a definite course change. A long arc.”

“Let me guess,” Mac said as he took his command chair. “It will bring them to somewhere on the other side of the sun, to be exact.”

“Yes,” the captain said, “How’d you know?”

“Their starting point. The Mesquite’s initial report had them coming out from behind the system’s star.”

Captain White nodded his agreement.

“If so, we might get a chance to cross their T after all,” the Admiral said. “Wouldn’t that be something? The first time such a maneuver has been used in three hundred years.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Janet’s brow narrow in confusion.

He smiled at her and explained, “Crossing the T means cutting in front of

him. I can bring all my weapons to bear, he can only use the weapons facing forward.”

Still, she frowned.

“It’s an old trick from the days when ships were made of wood and the men made of Iron. Sailing ships,” he added, just in case she didn’t get the reference.

“Ships would spend days trying to outmaneuver the other just so they could use a larger number of cannon. It quite often came down to seamanship more than firepower.”

She nodded that she understood.

“Of course,” he continued, “it was a lot easier in a two-dimensional battlefield. A third dimension changes things significantly. Especially at these speeds. But it is a good starting point. We will adjust as necessary.

Again, she nodded in agreement. For some absolutely ridiculous reason, her small smile made him feel surer of his decision.

“Captain White,” he said with a firm voice, “Plot a course to intercept the alien fleet, once you have it laid in, have our fleet adjust their course. Let’s cut the bastard off before he can escape.”

The chief of staff smiled broadly, as did every man there. They had a plan. This was no longer a long stern chase. Now it became a game of cat and mouse, and they were planning on being champion mousers before this was through.

.oOo.

Marine Captain Dex Carter turned slowly as he examined the area. Everything they could do was done. Fighting pits dug, shuttle rigged, the trench across the front of the Rift looked excellent with the claymores placed. Even the sandbag redoubt, both walls were up and in place.

It wouldn’t be enough, but it would have to do. Shaking his head, he turned to go back and almost ran into Miss Miller.

“Oh,” she exclaimed as she stepped back out of his way. A middle-aged woman with crinkled bronze skin stood next to her, looking frightened and nervous. A farmer’s wife, he thought.

“Yes?” he asked, probably more forcefully than he should have, but his

mind was on a dozen different things and the last thing he needed was to be distracted by a pretty girl.

She smiled slightly and said, “We were wondering if your men would like some food?”

“They have what they need,” he said as he turned to look at his guys sitting in their holes. “We don’t need to take your food.”

She paused for a second before continuing. “Yes, well, we sort of cooked a lot more than we need. We had to do it before the meat spoiled.” Seeing him hesitate, she gently reached to pull him to the side of his arm and whispered, “Please, we want to do something. We owe you and your men so much. Let us do this.”

Dex found himself getting lost in the soft blue eyes pleading with him.

Realizing how ridiculous it was to object, he nodded. “But have your people ready to get out of there if I give the order.”

Miss Miller beamed and told the other woman to go ahead. The farmer’s wife smiled and hurried back to the civilians. Miss Miller, however, continued to stay there, looking out into the distance.

“Why haven’t they attacked?” she asked.

He laughed and shook his head, “Hell if I know.”

The two of them continued to stand there. He took a deep breath and caught a hint of her perfume. A mix of rose and some exotic flower. It made his heart skip a beat as he closed his eyes and drank it in.

“Where are you from?” she asked, pulling him out of the escape he had sunk into. “Before the Marines, that is,” she added.

Dex paused before answering, “Pyre.”

“Why the Marines?”

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, why the curiosity?

She blushed a little, her cheeks turning a pretty shade of pink. Shrugging her shoulders she said, “I just thought that if we’re going to go through this together, you know, the whole alien invasion thing, then we should know a little bit about each other.”

He nodded, it made perfect sense when you thought about it.

“I joined the Marines, to see the galaxy, you know, adventure, and new things. Anything was better than spending the rest of my life working in an office in Pyre. I had nightmares about waking up at forty doing the same thing day in and day out.”

She smiled at him and he knew she understood.

“I’ve never been anywhere,” she said with a sad frown. “What is it like? Going to new places?”

He smiled and paused for a second, “When we make landfall on a new planet that I’ve never been to before? I like to break away for a few days. Get out of the city and into the heartland. That’s how you really find out about a place. In fact, that is what I did the first time I came to Intrepid.”

“You’ve been here before?” she asked, “When?” He could tell that she was racking her brain trying to figure out if she’d ever run into him before.

“About five years ago. We were on a normal patrol and stopped for five days of liberty. After blowing off a bunch of steam at the ‘Riverside’, a couple of guys and I took off and went hunting. Most of the time we ended up sitting around a fire getting drunk.” His face cracked into a broad smile as he remembered. Good times.

“The Riverside?” she asked. “Isn’t that a brothel?”

He laughed. “It was the last time I was there,” he said then saw the disapproving frown she gave him. He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m a Marine, not a saint.”

She continued to look up at him for a long moment. Obviously, she wasn’t used to men like him. Men who enjoyed life while they could because they knew full well it could end at any moment.

Coming to some kind of internal decision she turned away from him to stare out at the distant aliens again.

Without looking at him, she said, “I’m glad, I think we need a Marine more than we need a saint. Don’t you agree?”

He laughed and nodded. You had to give it to this woman, she saw the truth and wasn’t afraid of it.

**.oOo.**

Alicia Miller was so confused. She had never met a man like this. Alone

even when surrounded by people. A man willing to sacrifice for people he didn't know. A man willing to take on a great burden, just because he was asked to. Just because it was his duty.

When you combined it with his calm confidence, the obvious respect of his men. It made her want to spend the rest of the day learning about him. Silently, she compared him to the boys she knew in college and almost laughed out loud. There was no comparison. While he might have a bit of that back-wood competence about him, he was obviously well educated, and there was something more. Something in his eyes that let her know he was a deep thinker.

What was it her father called such men? "A man for all seasons," he would say when he met a man he respected. A man comfortable fighting Yarks or talking to a rancher's daughter. A man who could prepare for an alien attack and still laugh at the funny things in life.

Shaking her head, she tried to push aside the flights of fancy dancing through her mind and said to him, "Thank you, I should probably go help serve the food."

All he did was nod his acceptance but she could see a little disappointment flash behind his eyes. A look that set her heart racing. The thought that he wanted to continue to spend time with her sent a warm thrill through her entire body.

But, really, she should go help. Pulling herself away, she quickly joined the villagers passing out food to the Marines in their foxholes.

At first, the young men seemed surprised, almost like they were trying to figure out if it was a trick. When they realized it wasn't, they would light up like someone had just invited them to an Imperial ball.

Each hole was at least four feet deep, situated with the long side facing the enemy. Long enough for three men to stand shoulder to shoulder. At each hole it was the same, surprise at the idea of someone bringing them food. Then one of the men jumped out of the hole to retrieve the food from us while the other two continued to maintain watch across the barren grassland.

"Thank you, Miss," they would say with a tone that made her aware at just how much they appreciated the food.

"No, thank you," she would say as she handed down the plates.

On one occasion, a young private frowned. “We’re just doing our jobs, Ma’am, like they trained us. You know. Besides, Sergeant Carter would kick our butts into next Tuesday if we didn’t.”

“That’s Captain Carter, you idiot,” another private said as he stuck a fork full of food into his mouth.

“In my mind, he’ll always be Sergeant Carter. They can put captain bars on him. But that don’t change the fact he is the toughest, meanest son of a bitch this side of Valeria. And those rat-faced freaks out there are going to find out soon enough.”

The other private laughed and shot Alicia an apologetic smile. “I’d waste my time trying to teach him manners. But the man ain’t wrong.”

“Captain Carter doesn’t seem mean to me,” Alicia said, feeling a need to defend the man.

The first private laughed. “You ain’t ever gone on a twenty-mile hike under full load with the man. He will walk you into the ground and then yell at you for leaving a stain in the dirt.”

“Of course,” the second private said, “It’s stuff like that that makes the Eagles the toughest, meanest bastards in the corps. And believe me, right now, you want that.”

All of them looked out over the grasslands at the vast enemy preparing to kill them.

It took Alicia a moment to realize that when they called Captain Carter tough and mean, they meant it as a compliment. One of the highest compliments they could give. To men like this, things like tough were to be admired. The ability to persevere, to shake off the pain and fatigue and carry on. This was what they valued.

It didn’t matter to them if they were abused and pushed to obscene standards. What mattered was that they were able to live up to the standards men like sergeant Carter set. If he could do it, then maybe, just maybe, they could do the same.

It was this attitude that gave them the ability to face overwhelming odds without flinching. It was this attitude that made her heart love them for who they were.

## Chapter Twelve

“Sir, movement out front,” Cheavers called over the radio.

Dex turned, dropping his faceplate to get a magnified view. Cheevers was right, groups of aliens were breaking off and marching forward.

“Miss Miller,” Dex yelled, “get your people back.”

Dex watched as her face grew white while she stared at the approaching hoard. But then, she did what he asked and rounded up her people. Shepherding them back into the Rift, throwing him a quick, questioning glance as she passed.

He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but in reality, his heart wasn't in it. The thought of losing these civilians, and failing General Smyth was eating at his soul.

“Sir, I've got about five hundred breaking away from the main line and marching forward in groups of eighty. The rest are just standing there.”

“I see, Cheavers,” he replied as he watched. A dozen different issues went around and around in his brain. Was there anything more he could do. No, not really. Not with the weapons they had. They were as ready as they could be.

“Sir,” Cheavers broke in again, “they're positioning something on top of the ridge.”

Dex studied the activity as his heart began to sink. This wasn't good. He had absolutely no idea what they were doing, but it couldn't be good.

Some kind of a machine, probably a weapon. A base on a track undercarriage. A half circle dome sitting on top of the base. A dozen aliens running around like they were trying to fix a spaceship. None of it made sense until a massive blue light flashed across the field and into the house located at the edge of the village.

For just a second, the light illuminated the wooden building in a sharp, cobalt blue color before a corner erupted in an explosion.

Dex ducked to avoid the falling debris. Okay, now he knew what was going on. And like he thought, it wasn't good.

A sharp crack from the main house on the hill drew his attention. Cheevers had taken a shot. Dex immediately looked down range to see if

he'd hit anything.

An alien was down on the ground next to the laser weapon.

"The triggerman," Cheevers said with a smile in his voice.

Dex confirmed that the private was correct. Besides being an excellent shot. The man was smart. He'd identified the man pulling the trigger and taken him out. No need wasting bullets on the machine itself. They'd be ineffective. But the bullets seemed to work just fine on the aliens themselves.

The Scraggs had reacted to the sniper fire by pulling the dead alien away and replacing him with another soldier. The approaching five hundred continued on as if nothing had happened.

"Let them get close," he told his company. "Hold your fire. Cheavers, keep taking shots. Daniels, take the mortar off to the left, see if you can get in range."

"Yes, Sir," the sergeant said as he grabbed a three man team and raced for a small gully to the left.

Dex held his breath. They only had four shots at this, and they needed to get them off before the team was overrun by the approaching hoard.

"We're ready," Daniels called, just as Cheevers took another shot. Dex smiled to himself. A second trigger guy was down. Then, a third shot rang out and one of their leaders fell. The larger green tinged alien spurted blood from his throat, dropping to a knee before falling face down.

"Good job, Cheavers," Dex said as he admired the man's work.

The horde continued approaching while Daniels and his team frantically scrambled to get the mortar tube set up.

Dex had just turned to get a better look at the aliens' weapon when a sharp blue light hit the house on the hill. Bathing it in death.

"Cheavers," Dex called desperately, his heart racing with fear.

"Sir..." Cheevers started to reply just as the house exploded in a cloud of timber and dust.

Dex's heart fell, the man was gone, his team was gone. Nothing could have survived that explosion.

"Daniels," he yelled.



“We’re ready, Sir,” the sergeant answered.

“Fire. I will walk you in.”

A quick woomp sound let Dex know the first round was on its way.

“Smith, open up, keep that horde of aliens off of Daniels.”

“Yes, Sir,” the sergeant said as twenty rifles started firing into the left side of the marching aliens. The sharp crack of rifles echoing off the walls of the valley.

Dex hadn’t taken his eyes off the aliens’ weapon. Only two seconds after launch the round fell. Sending up a column of fire and dirt.

“Fifty left twenty-five up,” Dex told his mortar team.

Woomp, the second round was on its way.

Dex held his breath, they didn’t have rounds to be messing up. And Daniels didn’t have time to be patient and thorough.

Biting his lip, he waited and could have sworn he saw the round drop out of the sky directly on top of the weapon. A huge yellow explosion rocked the area, killing dozens of aliens and tearing the machine into a crumpled mess.

“Put the last two rounds into the hoard and get out of there, leave the tube.”

Woomp, Woomp, reverberated through his bones as he watched Daniels and his team scramble out of the gully and race back towards their lines.

The first round fell, exploding, carving out a neat circle of dead Scraggs. The second round fell between two marching groups, doing a lot less damage.

Dex sighed, ten minutes into the battle and his mortars were gone.

The four men raced hunched over, their legs pumping. Dex held his breath again as blue laser lights from the hoard rifles started to hit his men.

Thankfully, their reflective armor protected them, refracting the light and sending it off into a thousand different directions.

Dex took a large breath, it looked like they would make it, but something went wrong. The second man on the right suddenly fell. Not a stumble or a trip, a full-on collapse.

Daniels and his team slid to a halt as they hurried back to retrieve their fallen comrade. Grabbing him under the arm, two men started dragging him back while the third fired his entire clip into the mass of aliens.

“Hurry, damn it,” Dex muttered under his breath. “Give them cover,” he told the rest of his company who immediately opened up on the alien horde.

At last, Daniels and his team made the lines, jumping into a fighting pit and gently lowering their teammate in with them.

A distant movement caught his eye, another five hundred of the rat-faced bastards were breaking off and starting towards them. Damn, how would they ever stop them?

Before his mind could wrestle with the problem. A blond blur raced past him towards Daniel’s team. Miss Miller and her brother, each carrying a bag of medical supplies.

“Get back,” he yelled into his radio only to remember the woman wasn’t equipped with a radio. Even if she had been, he was pretty sure she would have ignored him.

Bent over at the waist, she zigged and zagged until she came to the hole in the ground and dropped in. Her brother right behind her.

“Rhys is dead,” Daniel said as he stood up to lean over the face of the hole and open up on the approaching aliens.

“Tell her to get back, now,” Dex said with a little more anger than he should have. Why had she done such an idiotic thing? Shaking his head, he watched as the two civilians scrambled back up out of the hole and raced towards the Rift.

Dex couldn’t take his eye off them until they were safely back behind the sandbag walls. Sighing with relief, he turned his attention back to the approaching enemy.

His men were taking them down. Not as much as he had hoped, but some. The aliens’ armor seemed to offer some protection. A direct hit would knock them to the ground, but they’d slowly rise and keep on coming. Only a hit in one of the joints seemed to work.

At the neck, the hip, or shoulder. If the aliens were hit there, they stayed down. Otherwise, it was like shooting at tumbling rocks. They wouldn’t stop.

Dex's insides turned to mush as the aliens grew closer and closer. Soon, it would be hand to hand combat and his men didn't stand a chance against these numbers.

"Fall back," he said. It was the only choice. While they still had time. The men would be exposed. But if they didn't move now, they'd be overrun.

His heart swelled with pride. His men reacted as they had been trained. One staying, continuing to fire. Two leaping out of the hole to race back towards the trench. But then, both men would turn, fall to the ground and cover the remaining Marine as he scrambled out and joined them.

Dex continued to scan the line, then back out at the aliens. Over and over, the same maneuver was repeated. Men used what cover they could. The shuttle, the debris from the exploded building. But mostly they ran for the trench, praying that speed would save them.

Dex gasped as his men began to fall, just like Rhys had, they would collapse as they ran. And just as Daniel's team had done before them, two men would grab the fallen Marine and drag him forward.

"In the trench," Dex yelled.

"Sir," Obamway yelled, "Get down."

Dex dropped to the ground as Obamway fired over him, the bullets ripping through the airspace he had just been occupying. An alien rat-face freak fell next to Dex, his eyes open, staring off into death.

Dex swallowed hard and rolled over to drop into the trench.

"Thanks," Dex said to Obamway. The corporal smiled back, "Just because you're an officer now, doesn't mean you get to start being dumb. Keep your head on a swivel sir."

The big smile on the corporal's face sent a warm appreciation through Dex that made his heart swell.

Taking a deep breath, he forced his mind back to the battle raging around him.

His men were flowing into the trench. The flanks were covered. The aliens continued to approach. But they were a mob. Firing indiscriminately, getting in each other's way. The Marines fired over the edge of the trench. Firing, then dropping down to reload, then popping up to fire again.

“A little closer,” Dex said to himself. “Just a little closer.

Another marine fell back into the trench, his faceplate shattered, his skin burnt black.

Dex’s guts threatened to rebel, but he pushed the bile back down and focused on the approaching enemy.

“Almost,” he whispered, “almost.”

Now, he realized. Now was the time.

“Everyone down,” he yelled into the radio. And like a chorus line taking a bow. Each marine dropped below the edge of the trench.

Dex smiled to himself and pushed the button as he dropped down to join his men.

If he had stayed upright, he would have seen the charges under the shuttles fuel tanks go off. He would have seen the explosion pushing the volatile gases out of the tank, and the beautiful orange flame igniting those gases.

As it was, the WOOOOMP of the charges was followed by an even louder BAAAAANG of the fuel going off. The ground shook, and the air was sucked from his lungs to feed the fire.

Smiling to himself, he gingerly raised his head above the trench line.

“Yes,” he said to no one and to everyone at the same time. The explosion had taken out hundreds and hundreds of the rat-faced bastards. Parts and pieces of gore littered the village. An alien arm was stuck into the side of a building. A burnt head rolled down a roof to fall onto the ground with a hollow thump.

A cloud of oily smoke hung over the area and even through his faceplate he caught the sharp tang of burnt meat and partially burned shuttle fuel. A smell that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life.

At the far edge of the village, the aliens that had survived the blast were milling around in a daze. Unable to believe what had just happened.

They don’t know what to do, he realized. No one is giving them directions. Fall back? Attack? Nothing.

Fall back, he prayed. Leave, please.

But they refused. Instead, they started taking up positions in the abandoned firing pits.

Dex's insides relaxed. They weren't leaving. But at least they weren't attacking. Swallowing hard he realized just how dry his mouth was and how much adrenaline was pumping through his system.

"Report," he said into the radio, forcing his mind to focus on the job that needed to get done.

"First Platoon, seven dead, three injured, that includes Cheavers team," Obamway said."

"Second Platoon, two dead.

"Third Platoon, three down, three injured," Sergeant Daniels said.

"How?" Dex demanded through gritted teeth. Their armor should protect them against lasers.

A silence hung in the air for a long second when Smith finally said. "I think, if our armor has any chink, any scratch. And the laser finds the flaw. Basically, it breaks through and cooks the guy inside."

Dex swallowed hard. That was what he had been afraid of. The longer they were in battle, the more flaws and scratches their armor would pick up. The faster they would die.

"Okay," he said, "make sure your men are resupplied. I've got a feeling it's going to be a long night."

The sergeants took over control of their men and Dex leaned back against the trench wall and tried to get a handle on the thousand thoughts racing through his mind. Should he have done something different? Twelve men were dead because of him. Surely, he could have done something to prevent it.

His heart twisted in pain at the loss. Good men. Fine men. Jenkins was married. Cheevers would have made a great top sergeant one day. Rhys and Tomas were both good Marines. So many down. So heavy a loss.

Biting his lip, he forced himself to move on. Sighing, he watched as they removed the dead men from the trench and helped the wounded back behind the sandbag walls to Miss Miler.

Yes, it was going to be a long night. And it would be a miracle if they

saw the morning sun.

## Chapter Thirteen

Professor Janet Sinclair stepped onto the weapons deck. She had to know what was going on. Had to know how they would defeat these aliens. Everyone else onboard knew the ship, knew every valve, junction box, and spare part. She was the only one completely in the dark.

She was clueless. The Imperial Navy had never been her field of study. In fact, they were as far from her field of study as it was possible to get. And one thing that Janet knew about herself. She would never be able to relax until she had the facts in front of her. Knowledge was what would help her maintain a calm pretense.

Oh sure, she knew about the concept of the Higgs engine. She understood the basics about wormholes and intragalactic travel. Every school child learned those things at an early age. But her knowledge of the inner workings of an Imperial cruiser was as foreign to her as the inner working of an old-fashioned internal combustion engine. Not something she'd ever really thought about.

Besides, how could she be asked to pontificate on the mind of the alien warriors when she knew so little about their own spacers. Why did they do what they did? What did they think? And most of all. How could they hope to survive the upcoming battle, let alone win?

The young spacer working on a piece of electronics caught sight of her, his eyes bugged out for a moment, then, in a flash, he immediately jumped up, yelling, "Attention on deck."

The three other spacers in the compartment immediately followed suit, coming to full attention, backs braced, arms stiff, eyes locked on a distant point.

Janet turned to look over her shoulder wondering who had followed her into the compartment. Only to realize they were standing at attention because of her. The poor dears didn't realize she was a civilian. All they knew was that she worked with the Admiral. That meant she was important enough to come to attention for.

"Carry on," she said, "no need for formalities. I just had a few questions."

The young spacer's face grew pale, a third class petty officer she saw by

the chevron on his arm. He looked as if someone had asked him to save the universe single-handedly.

“Chief,” he yelled from the corner of his mouth as he swallowed hard.

An older spacer, with a touch of silver in his black hair, stepped into the compartment from the door on the opposite bulkhead. Heavysset, with a look of competence and a been there, done that, attitude.

“Ma’am?” the Chief asked.

“Chief Kennedy?” she asked. “Lieutenant Weaver said I could talk to you about the weapons?”

“Yes Ma’am,” the chief said with a serious frown. Janet could tell right away that the man was not pleased. They were getting ready to go into battle and this strange, civilian woman was interfering.

“I promise it won’t take long,” she said. “I realize how busy you must all be. Just a few questions and I will be out of your way. But I was told that the entire battle might depend on you and your men. And I just need to know a few things.”

The Chief’s chest swelled a little when she mentioned how much depended upon them. She imagined that these men, working down in the bowels of the ship, might feel forgotten at times.

He smiled. “That’s all right Ma’am, we were told at jump-off that we were to help you with whatever you needed. Besides, maybe you can fill us in on what’s going on topside. We’re like mushrooms around here. Kept in the dark and fed sh.... Uh, manure.”

She had to fight to hide her smile. Even after all this time, the crew still treated her like she was a delicate flower that might break if she heard the wrong word.

“I will try. But I can’t tell you much, only because I don’t know a lot.”

“It’s got to be more than we know,” the young spacer said.

“That’s enough Tinker,” the Chief said with a heavy scowl. “You get that motor switch fixed, then we can talk about your future. If I decide to let you have one.”

The young spacer looked chagrined. Janet shot him a quick smile to try and ease the humiliation. The young man returned the smile, shrugged his



shoulders and returned to working on the piece of equipment sitting on the workbench.

“Now then, Ms. Sinclair, what would you like to know?” Chief Kenned asked.

“Everything,” she replied. “Assume I am a dumb civilian and totally clueless. Because you would be right.”

The Chief smiled. “Let’s start back here, with the cannon. They are the heart of the matter, and sort of the point of the whole thing.

Janet followed him into the next compartment. He stopped and pointed to a long, eighteen inches wide, nondescript metal tube pointing out the side of the ship. The tube was attached to a large square machine that she couldn’t make any sense of. Tubes, and hoses, wires, and a control panel that left her baffled. But then, she’d never been close to being an engineer, a toaster confused her.

There were three more such ‘Cannons’ laid out in the compartment.

“The Mark-26 Cannon,” the chief said with obvious pride. “The fastest, most accurate weapon in the fleet. It shoots Twenty-four-pound projectiles at over Mach-five. A good crew can reach three per minute as long as the ammunition lasts. No combustion. All electrical magnetic. No friction, the barrel never gets too hot. Not at that rate of fire.”

Opening the breach, he pulled out a round metal sphere the size of a bowling ball. Janet was surprised at how shiny and polished it was. There appeared to be words handwritten in black, ‘Best regards,’ they said.

The chief saw her questioning expression and smiled. “I have the men polish them up. It keeps them busy and I let them write a message for the Scraggs. You know, things like ‘Happy birthday’, or “Die mother f...’,” the chief paused for a second, shooting her a quick look to see if he’d gone too far. When she smiled encouragingly back at him, he continued. “Of course, the Scraggs will never get a chance to read them. If they’re close enough to one of these things, that means they’re dead.”

Janet’s stomach clenched up at the chief’s obvious joy in causing death and destructions.

“How many guns?” she asked

He smiled. "The Churchill has forty, ten batteries of four, sixteen guns to a side, four up forward, and four aft. Each gun has a two-man crew, each battery of four guns is overseen by a chief. This is Battery B," he said with obvious pride, "My battery, the best onboard. Each battery is responsible for the maintenance of their own weapons and their operation during battle. They can be controlled by Combat central, by the weapons officer, or by the gun crews themselves."

Janet nodded. It made sense, and now she understood why Admiral McKenzie wanted to attack the aliens from the side.

"Why electric rail guns? Why not missiles?"

The chief scoffed, "Missiles don't work ma'am. Not real well, not in space."

"Why not?" she asked.

The chief looked at her for a second and she could have sworn he was fighting to not roll his eyes at such a stupid question.

"Because Ma'am, missiles have to hit their target to be any good. There is almost no shock wave in space, so close proximity is no good."

"But don't these projectiles have to hit their target also?" she asked.

"Yes, but these can't be stopped. A missile has both electronics for flight control and fuel for thrust. Both of those can make them easier to destroy with either laser or another missile. Our babies here," he said as he patted the metal ball, "nothing can stop them. It'd take a week to melt them, and there is no fuel to ignite. Nope, once these things are launched, nothing stops them. Not until they tear through anything in their way and out the other side."

"What about lasers?" Janet asked. "The Lieutenant said we have two of them."

"Yes, Ma'am. One up front, one aft. They can transverse three hundred and sixty degrees. Hit anything. But lasers won't work against an Imperial cruiser. Oh, they might punch a couple of holes in us, but not many. They'd have to find a chink in our reflective coating and then burn through the armor. Not going to happen easily."

"The Mesquite though, it was destroyed," she said, thinking back to that awful video she had been shown in the Emperor's meeting.

The chief's eyes grew misty for a second as he took on a faraway look. "I was stationed on the Mesquite right out of boot camp. That ship was old even then. She was a tender, thin-skinned with more bumps and bruises than a Valerian tavern bouncer. A ton of weak points for a laser to punch through. Believe me, we won't be so easy."

"What if they have rail guns like us?" she asked as her stomach turned over. She could well imagine the carnage one of these projectiles could cause at Mach-five. It'd rip through the ship, leaving a wake of twisted metal, deadly splinters, and horrible deaths in its path.

The Chief shrugged his shoulders. "Hit them before they hit us. Isn't that always what it comes down to Ma'am. Kill them before they kill us."

She studied the man for a quick second. Kill or be killed. It was that simple to him and his men. They had a job to do, if they did it well they would survive. If not, they would die and the empire might very well fall. But these men would be dead and never see the results of their failure.

"Thank you, Chief Kennedy," she said with a sad smile. "I will leave you to it then. I just wanted to say thank you to you and your men. I know how important you are and someday, the entire galaxy will know what you men did to save them."

The spacers around her smiled from ear to ear. She imagined it was rare for someone outside their fraternity to recognize their contribution.

"Yes Ma'am, thank you, Ma'am."

Janet smiled, "I have a meeting with Admiral McKenzie in a few minutes. Is there anything he needs to know? Any problem that needs to be fixed? Supplies you need and aren't getting?"

The chief looked back at her for a long second and slowly shook his head, "No Ma'am. We don't need nothing but targets, Ma'am. You can tell the Admiral that Battery B has all it needs and will do whatever he asks. He can rely on that."

She smiled, it was nice to see someone so sure of himself and his men. "Thank you again, chief. I will tell him. In the meantime, I will let you get back to your work. I am sorry for interrupting."

"No problem Ma'am," the chief said. "And when this is over, back on Taurus, if you ever get to the Blue Bird, it's a small bar in old town. Tell

them Chief Kennedy and his boys sent you. They will treat you to a round on us. It's the least we can do for a fellow shipmate."

Janet had to bite back a quick tear. These men meant it and she realized they had just given her the highest compliment they could. Shipmate.

"Thank you, chief, gentleman," she said as she turned to hurry out of the compartment. It wouldn't do for them to see their shipmate with a tear in her eye.

By the time she had made it back to the command center, she had composed herself and was ready for the meeting.

Admiral McKenzie, Mac, she reminded herself, stood before the wall of monitors. Almost every screen held a ship's captain staring back, waiting for the meeting to start. She noticed that several were blank and realized that Admiral Weber and his transport captains were not there. And on the Marine screen, a colonel that she did not recognize looked as if he'd walked into a hornet's nest.

The man was in full armor, his faceplate up, a nasty scorch mark across his forehead. A distant grassland behind him told her he was on the planet Intrepid.

She felt her brow furrow in confusion. What was happening on the planet? she wondered.

"General Smyth is dead," Commander Evans said as he slipped up next to her. "As is General Brady. That's Colonel Stevenson, third in command, chief of staff."

Janet's stomach clenched up into a tight ball. People were dying, people she knew personally. This was no longer some abstract study. This was real.

"Gentleman," Admiral McKenzie said, "and Ms. Sinclair," he added with a small nod of his head, just for her. "As you all know, the Marines on Intrepid are having a rough go of it. The Scraggs were better equipped than we thought. Especially with anti-air capability. We could very well lose the planet, or at least everything worth saving on it. We need to end this damn chase and get back to them."

The faces on the monitors stared back with stony silence. She knew that those on the distant Intrepid were waiting for the signal to arrive. But the captains of the fleet had certainly heard almost instantly. Yet, they simply

stared. Waiting for the word.

Taking a deep breath, Mac continued. “On my mark, we will increase speed and move in alongside them. I had hoped to cross their T. But they aren’t going to give us the opportunity. Besides, to do so would add a full day to the return trip to Intrepid. Instead, we will come in alongside them. It is imperative we finish them off before they reach their jump point.”

Janet’s stomach tightened up. This was it. There would be no turning back, once they engaged. It would be a fight to the death. Mac had repeatedly told her that he could not retreat. This battle could only result in success or death.

“I believe they will have to slow down before they get there,” Mac continued. “They are going too fast at the moment. The risk of missing their mark is too great. We will have to slow down as well if we hope to have any accuracy with our guns. We need to match their speed when we open fire.”

“Sir,” one of the captains said. “Won’t that end up putting strength against strength? Wouldn’t it make more sense to outmaneuver them? Try again for that T crossing.”

“We don’t have the time,” the Admiral said. “We are only going to get one chance at this. If they jump, we lose them and we don’t have any idea where they will end up, or when they will be back. We can’t follow them. At least I don’t believe we can. Not yet. So, we’ve got to finish them off now before they escape. If we don’t, they might very well show up in orbit around Taurus next week.”

Most of the captains nodded their agreement.

“So, we’ve laid out the course corrections and speed reductions we will need to take. Your crews have the details. My estimates are that we will fire our first shot within the hour. Are there any questions.”

Janet’s insides fluttered with fear. An hour, this would all start within the hour. Suddenly the world seemed strange, fuzzy, her heart began to pound and her mind reeled. She looked at Mac for a long second. The man looked as solid as a rock. Not an ounce of doubt, not an iota of worry. But she knew otherwise. He might appear stoic and confident. But she knew the man, too many late night discussions about tactics, strategy, and logistics.

No, the man was worried. He had to be. Who wouldn’t be nervous? The

fate of the entire empire rested on his shoulders.

## Chapter Fourteen

Admiral McKenzie studied the screen one last time. The fleets were coming together just as he had planned. The Imperial Navy had cut them off and his ships were coming up alongside of them. Of course, it was all relative. Right now, they were separated by thousands of miles. But that would steadily decrease to hundreds.

Studying his own fleet, he had to smile. Twenty-two ships. Three cruisers, the Churchill in the van; the Roosevelt, in the middle; and, the Chow next to last, each with forty guns. Eighteen destroyers, sixteen guns each, plus their dart ships. And the Pine bringing up the rear. Ready to swoop in and pick up survivors if necessary.

He thought about the dart ships on the destroyers. They had worked well in phase two. But he couldn't use them here. It'd take too long to pick them up. Better to keep them in reserve. Buried in the bellies of their host destroyers. He'd use them if he got the chance, but not yet.

The twenty-five alien ships looked sleek and menacing. Their giant battleship up front leading the way, trailed by twenty-four identical, much smaller vessels. What did they have? What were their capabilities?

He sighed heavily. In a few minutes, his part in this story would come to an end. His staff, the captains and their crews, they would be the ones who determined if the fleet succeeded or not.

He glanced over at Janet. She smiled back at him, silently encouraging him.

This was it. Nodding to her, he returned her smile, then switched on the fleet broadcast channel.

"Servicemen of the fleet," he began, "we are about to enter the third phase of this battle. I know you will perform well. We have trained and practiced. We have the strongest weapons and you are the best crews in the galaxy. Do your job, and all will be well. Good luck, and happy hunting."

Signing off, he turned to his command staff, "Gentlemen, prepare to execute phase three on my command."

Every face in the room turned to watch their Admiral, their fingers hovering over their computer to start the battle once he gave the word.

Taking a deep breath, he paused, then said, "Execute."

Looking down at the sensor screen showing the fleet, he knew very well what was happening. Weapons were being run out, loaded, and sightings being taken. Ships were closing with each other. Bunching up, to provide more concentrated firepower. Men were nervously checking and rechecking their sensors. Doctors were preparing their surgeries. And there wasn't a thing he could do to make any of it go easier.

Men were going to die today, he realized. Die because of the orders he had given. But, it was either that, or the enemy would enslave his people. Those they did not kill right away would live in fear and pain. This must not be allowed to happen. And if every man under him died today, if they defeated the enemy, then it would have been worth it.

"Evans," he yelled across the room, "any change?"

"No, Sir," the commander said. "They should have seen our latest course correction. I think they are going to let us do it."

"I don't think they have a choice. It's their only chance to make their jump point."

"Yes, Sir, and you've put us in just the right spot, we should have enough time to finish them off before they get there."

Unless they finish us off instead, he thought to himself. What were they like? He still had absolutely no idea how they would react. The thought was nagging at him. Punching and pulling at him. Would they scatter, or stay steady? Their soldiers on the ground scattered into a mob. Would their ships act the same way? And what weapons did they have? The lasers obviously. But what else?

Things could go so wrong so fast. The doubt inside of him was almost overwhelming. Did he have the right to risk everything? What if he was wrong?

He studied the screen before him. Two long trails of ships coming together in a curved V. If they continued, they would meet at the point and then sale side by side. He had cut inside their wide arching circle and put his fleet in the best position possible.

At the end, they would straighten out the Scraggs to hit their jump point. The humans to hit the Scraggs with the most murderous fire possible. The



longer they could keep together the more damage he could inflict.

And, the more damage they could dish out to him and his men, he thought.

“Sir,” Commander Evans said, “we are in range.”

“Hold off,” the admiral replied. “The closer we get, the more of a surprise. I don’t want them getting spooked. Not yet.”

The clock in his head ticked. Slowly, the fleets drew closer and closer. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. His mouth felt dry and he could have sworn that time was slowing down.

Finally, he couldn’t take it any longer. The sooner this started the better.

Taking a deep breath, he prepared to tell the fleet to open up. At that exact moment, his video screen external shot was bathed in a deep blue light. Obviously, the distant commander was as impatient as he was.

“Captain Freeborn,” he said to the Churchill’s captain. “You may maneuver as necessary, but remain within the published parameters. I don’t want my fleet breaking up into a dozen different parts because of a blue light.”

“Yes, Sir,” the captain said as he turned back to his staff.

“Captain White,” he said to his chief of staff. “You may inform the fleet that they may fire if they so desire.”

Captain White smiled as he turned to the command console and gave the order. Almost immediately, a hundred balls of pure , traveling at astronomical speeds, hurled towards the enemy.

Mac watched the path of the projectiles and nodded. His gunners knew their job.

“What is the report on that laser?” he asked Evans.

“Sir, it is more powerful than we expected.”

“I can’t shake her,” Captain Freeborn said. “No matter how I maneuver, it holds steady on our nose.”

Admiral McKenzie nodded. “She’s trying to burn out our sensors. That must be where she has hers. Tell our gun crews to focus forward. Maybe we can return the favor.” What the aliens didn’t know was that Imperial Naval

vessels were fitted with dozens of different sensors located all over the outer hull. Hitting the Churchill's nose was a waste of time.

"Sir," Evans interrupted, "the enemy fleet is shifting, same course, but they've maneuvered 'up' away from our shot. I think they learned their lesson with our first encounter."

Mac nodded, he had expected that. They would have to get closer. But if they were lucky, some of that first round would hit.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes so he could see the order of battle. The screens showed it to him. But he needed to move the pieces around inside his head so he could try different scenarios.

"Sir, the laser has shifted off the nose and is raking down our side. It looks like all of his ships are firing at the same spot, sir. Moving together down our side."

Mac swallowed hard. Twenty-five lasers, focused on one point, could burn through a lot of things.

"No missiles? No railguns?"

"No, Sir, not yet," Evans said as he slowly shook his head.

"I don't think they have them, Sir, not railguns." Janet said to him. "That is why their ships are shaped like they are. Streamlined. No creases, no corners. They've only ever thought about facing other lasers."

Admiral McKenzie nodded his head. "I think you are right, Professor. I think you are right. Let's hope so."

She smiled back at him. Obviously happy to have contributed, but behind her eyes, he could see a hint of fear. Good, he thought. Heaven knew he had more than enough himself.

"Sir, the first round should be arriving soon."

Every man in the room turned to look at the big screen. Pulling their attention away from their own duties to witness what would happen.

Each and every man there was disappointed. The alien fleet had maneuvered away. Only three shots out of a hundred actually reached their target. One caught the giant battleship aft. Two more hit the second alien vessel amidships. Each time, a small yellow explosion was the only external trace.

Mac well knew though, that the internal destruction had to be significant. It just had to be if they were to have any chance.

“Third round,” Commander Evans stated. Mac glanced at the corner of his screen. One minute. It had seemed like half an hour at least.

“Tell the fleet to widen their spread,” he told his chief of staff. They wouldn’t be able to get the concentrated kill shot he had hoped for. Not until they got closer and or the enemy stopped jumping around.

Shifting from the video display, he glanced at the sensor display that showed his fleet and all of their statistics. They looked good. Holding position. Two damaging hits so far. Well within expectations.

Suddenly, the Churchill shuddered and the aliens’ ships displayed on the video screen started to shift to the right.

“Sir,” Captain Freeborn reported. “We’ve taken a hit in a forward oxygen tank. We’re exhausting into space, but we’re bringing it under control.”

Slowly, the screen brought the ships back into alignment as the captain maneuvered his vessel.

“Very well,” the admiral said, having to bite down on his lip to stop himself from giving instructions. He needed to let the captain fight his own battle with his ship and remained focused on the fleet.

“Sixth round away,” Commander Evans stated a few seconds later.

Less than two minutes, his crews were firing faster than ever before. He had to smile to himself. He could well imagine the frantic mayhem going on in each ship’s battery as they raced to outdo each other and to kill as many aliens as they could. God how he loved these men.

Focusing between the sensor screen and the live video feed he watched the rounds as they raced towards their targets.

“Hits, Sir,” Commander Evans said with glee. “Lots of them.” Small explosions occurred along the sides of almost each of the alien ships.

Admiral McKenzie began to remind the commander that he was staring at the very same display as he was. But he held his tongue. No need to dampen enthusiasm. They might need it before the day was over.

Reviewing the hits, he shook his head. The big bastard was just so huge,

it would take hundreds of hits to hurt her, he thought.

Then, without warning, the Churchill rocked to the side, almost throwing him from his chair. Grabbing the armrest, he held himself in place until the ship steadied herself. His heart jumped and his breath stopped for a moment as he waited for the reports.

“Sir,” Captain Freeborn finally said, his face pale with shock. “A hit on our port side. Their lasers breached through and then tore into us, hitting a fuel tank. One of the ones used for the backup railgun generators.”

Admiral McKenzie acknowledged the report with a sharp nod. It was to be expected he reminded himself. The aliens’ weapons were proving more powerful than they had thought they would be. Especially when they concentrated their fire. But they couldn’t last. Not as long as he kept pouring rounds into them.

“We’ve lost five guns,” Captain Freeborn said. “I don’t know if it was the laser or the internal explosion. But they are offline and won’t be coming back.”

The admiral nodded.

“Which guns?” Professor Sinclair asked, her eyes silently pleading with Captain Freeborn.

“Battery B,” the captain said, “and the last gun of Battery C.”

Mac watched as Janet’s eyes grew very big as all the color drained from her face. Her sad expression pleading with him. This was going on throughout the fleet, he reminded himself. Men dying in either the flames and heat of explosions or in the vacuum of space. Either way, dead, and never returning.

Turning away from her, he checked his fleet again. Damage reports were coming in. Like the Churchill, ships were taking a beating. Hits, where the lasers had punched through. But they were registering hits as well, continuing to fire into the alien ships.

A sharp beep gave him enough warning to grab his chair. He had no sooner secured himself when the gravity dropped for just a brief moment. As if he were in an old-fashioned elevator. But, almost immediately, it returned.

Both the sensor screen and the video feed confirmed what he had

suspected. As he watched, the ships rolled up and off the screen, then flickered and were once more in place.

“What happened?” Professor Sinclair asked.

“Captain Freeborn just rolled over, to bring his starboard guns into play,” he told her. “Remember there is no up or down in space.”

She slowly nodded as she grasped what had happened.

“Round Twenty-Four,” Commander Evans said.

Admiral McKenzie nodded. It was time, he thought. Time to change things up.

“Roosevelt,” he said to his second largest ship stationed in the middle of his fleet. “Task Group Thirty- Two Point Four is established. Execute phase four.”

“Yes, sir,” the Roosevelt’s captain said. No one hearing the joy in his voice would ever have believed he was in the middle of a fight to the death.

Admiral McKenzie silently watched as the Roosevelt and three destroyers broke ranks from the long line of ships and turned towards the enemy fleet. He smiled to himself, it was working. The aliens didn’t realize what was coming.

Within two minutes, the Roosevelt passed through the alien fleet, bringing all of her guns to bear on the vessels on either side of her. She was crossing their T, pouring shot after shot into them.

“Chow, take the van and close up with TG Point Five.”

“Yes, Sir,” the Chow’s skipper said.

Returning to the Roosevelt’s gambit, he watched as the two alien ships shuddered under the constant impact of highspeed kinetic weapons. Nothing could survive that onslaught. And as if his thoughts were an order, both alien ships fell out of line, drifting, no longer maneuverable.

“Good job, Roosevelt,” he said.

“Thank you, Sir,” the captain replied, “With your permission, I will divert the Dauntless and Diligence to the ships forward of these two. No need to waste their chance.”

“Yes, of course,” Admiral McKenzie replied.

“Sir,” the Captain of the York started, pulling him back to reality. “I’ve lost my Higgs engines and will lose steerage in a minute. I’ve got to break off.”

Admiral McKenzie immediately shifted to a view from the Venturous behind the York. His insides tightened up. It appeared as if the old destroyer had lost half its aft end. Debris and smoke swirled around the vessel like a forgotten junkyard.

“Yes, of course,” Mac said. “Pine, stand by the York in case you have to take off the crew.”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” the young skipper of the Pine said.

As he watched, the old destroyer pulled out of line and the tender Pine moved in alongside, ready if needed. He glanced at the clock on the corner of his screen. Fourteen minutes. It had taken only fourteen minutes and he’d already lost one vessel.

Swallowing hard, he checked the damage reports from the fleet. Every ship had taken hits of one kind or another. Some worse than others. The Steadfast appeared to be in the worse shape after York. Barely holding it together, but still firing into its target.

“Sir,” Commander Evans said, interrupting his train of thought. “It looks like they’re breaking up. Scattering.” The tone of his voice held a touch of disbelief. A burst of adrenaline shot through Mac’s body. Had they done it? Had they stopped the Scraggs from reaching their jump point?

He watched as the enemy ships began to change course. Each taking off in a different direction. Each trying desperately to get away from the human ship pounding shots into them. Yes, this was the moment. The moment that he had been praying for.

“Take them,” he said to his fleet. “Stick to them. Don’t let them slip away. Hound them, pound them, and finish them,” he said through gritted teeth.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sergeant Dex Carter peeked over the edge of the trench to study the Scraggs just as the distant sun kissed the top of the west ridge. Like his men, they were keeping their heads down. Stuffed in the fighting holes his men had dug.

On the far hill, the aliens continued to stare and wait. Thousands of them.

Why? he wondered for the hundredth time. Why hadn't they attacked in force? He and his men would be dead by now if they had.

Turning, he slowly slid down the wall of the trench to contemplate once again everything that had happened and every possible way things played out in the future.

Shaking his head, he couldn't see a way the Marines held them off. Not if they attacked in force. And with the loss of the shuttle and their command frequencies being jammed. There was no one to tell. And no one to know how much they needed help.

A quick flash at the sandbag wall caught his attention. Miss Miller, bent over at the waist, was running for the trench. What was she doing? Why couldn't she stay back in relative safety where she belonged? He knew his heart would be a lot happier if she did.

But, not this woman. She was like an ancient war horse he had read about. Always eager to get in the middle of the action.

Jumping into the trench, she slid down the rear slope to come to rest directly across from him. Her quick smile letting him know that she thought she had it all under control.

"Ms. Miller," he began.

"Alicia," she replied.

"Alicia," he said with a sigh. "What could possibly be important enough to risk exposing yourself like that? This is not exactly the best place for you, you know."

Her smile dropped into a slight pout. She reminded him of a little girl who had worked hard on a project only to be criticized. His stomach turned over with shame. He shouldn't criticize her. She was doing so much to help them.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just that I worry about you. You don’t have armor like us. If you get hit, it will be bad.”

She nodded slowly, accepting his apology. “I came to tell you that your injured men are doing better. All three will recover. Two of them want to return here. But I told them to wait until you sent for them. For some reason, they can’t communicate with you.”

His brow furrowed for a second. “The reflective properties of the sandbag wall. No light or electronic signals can get through them. Plus, I think your Rift walls are heavy with iron. They act like a Faraday cage.”

She nodded her understanding then moved to stand up and look over the lip of the trench.

He immediately reached over, grabbed her around the waist and pulled her down next to him.

“They will pick you off in a heartbeat. Please keep your head down.”

She looked chagrined for a moment then settled down next to him, her back leaning against the trench wall just like him.

“When will they attack?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. But if you ever figure these guys out. Please fill me in.”

Smiling slightly, she stared off into nothing for a moment.

“What is so funny?” he asked her.

Shaking her head, she continued to smile. “I was just thinking. A few weeks ago, I was complaining about never having any adventures. About never doing anything important. I guess the old adage ‘Be careful what you wish for’ means something after all. I always thought it was the dumbest thing I ever heard. But today, maybe not so much.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

The two of them settled into a comfortable silence, both of them watching the shadows creep up the canyon walls and turn into dusk. A gray, colorless dusk that washed away the day.

“Are you married?” she asked suddenly, shocking him with the abruptness and personal nature of her questions.



His brow narrowed into a deep frown as he shook his head. “No,” he answered. Why was he having this conversation? Because you both may be dead within the next few hours, he thought to himself. If you’re going to die, best to spend it talking to a pretty girl about whatever she wants to talk about.

She nodded slowly. “I just wondered what it must be like for a wife, sitting home on some distant planet, not knowing what was happening to her husband. Knowing that he might be dead and she wouldn’t get the word for weeks.”

Dex shrugged his shoulders. “If too many of us die, and the aliens win, she might get the word when their starships start dropping Scragg warriors in the middle of her town.”

The girl next to him nodded slowly. “I know, it’s just the idea of sitting around and waiting. I don’t know if I could do that. Is that why you never married? You didn’t want someone sitting around worrying about you?”

He laughed and slowly shook his head. “Honestly, until recently, I didn’t see the compulsion to get married. I mean, the Corps was my life.”

Alicia nodded, “And with places like the Riverside, female companionship was never an issue.”

He chuckled, how right she was.

“What made you change your mind?” she continued. “You said, until recently?”

“I don’t know,” he said as he shifted to a more comfortable position. He’d been in this armor for a day and it was starting to chafe. “I guess I was beginning to see how it would be sort of nice, you know, sharing things with another person. Starting a family.”

She nodded, but kept quiet while his mind wandered.

“Once, on Valeria,” he said, “I was on leave, I took off on a long hike through the Atlas mountains. I was way back, as deep into them as you can get. I came around a bend and saw the most beautiful valley ever. It just took my breath away. I mean literally.”

“More beautiful than Drake’s Rift,” she said with a teasing smile.

“This is pretty, but this valley up in the Atlas mountains was unbelievable. A solid blanket of wildflowers from end to end. Every color,

every shape. Like someone had spilled a thousand paint buckets down the walls of the valley. You know?"

She nodded slowly.

"I saw it and knew it wouldn't last, a frost would come, or a drought. The seasons would turn, and it would disappear forever. At that moment, I wished there was someone I could have shared it with. Someone that would have seen what I had seen."

An awkward pause fell over the both of them as she turned to look him in the eye.

"I wish I could have seen it with you," she said, her eyes sending a sharp message.

He sighed and looked away. "Maybe, if we get out of this, I could show it to you sometime."

She smiled and nodded. "I'd like that," she said as she turned to lean against the trench wall again. But this time, her shoulder rested next to his.

Yes, he'd like to show this woman his valley someday. Smiling to himself at the sweetness of the idea, he reached over and draped his arm around her shoulders. A bittersweet thought that would never happen, he realized. But there were worse ways to spend your time than dreaming about a happy future.

**.oOo.**

The changing of the watch woke him. Men scrambling to relieve each other, taking up positions or slipping off to grab a few hours of sleep.

He shifted and felt the comfortable weight of Alicia resting against him, her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. Shifting slightly, he tried to free his arm, he needed to be up and checking things. Not sitting around with a beautiful woman in his arms.

"I'm awake," she said as she slowly pulled away from him. Glancing up, her eyes caught his and a pretty shade of pink flashed through her cheeks. Even in the moonlight, he could see that she was embarrassed for some reason.

Reaching over he took her hand, "Stay here, I'll be right back. Then, you've got to get back to your people. But don't leave until I've returned,

okay?” She nodded. Making his insides relax just enough for him to leave her.

Sighing, he left her to check on his men. Bent over to keep his head below the edge of the trench, he weaved back and forth between the Marines lying at the bottom of the trench, stepping over long legs and around snoring guys to slowly make his way to the far end. Giving those that were awake a quick smile and a soft slap on the back.

They looked back at him with full confidence. He would keep them alive, their eyes seemed to say.

Each time he saw such a look, his stomach would clench up into a tight ball as he fought to hide the fear inside of him. If they saw the truth, they would never be able to fight like he needed them to.

By the time he got back to Alicia he’d come up with a plan to get her back.

“I’ll follow you,” he said. “Keep close, my armor should get us through. Keep your arms tight to your side, and run like the wind.”

She frowned at him, “I made it here.”

“You were lucky. Now hurry up. It will be daylight soon. No reason to make it easier for them.”

She looked at him strangely for a second. He knew he was sounding like a jerk, but he needed to get her out of there so he could concentrate on the things he needed to do.

Sighing heavily, she pushed up off the ground and got ready to run up the slope. He could tell that she was nervous, but there was something about the set of her chin and the determined look in her eye that made him proud of her. She was a Valerian lioness, he realized. Pure courage and all tough.

“You ready?” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. Giving him a quick smile and a challenging stare.

He nodded, and she was off. Up the slope and running for the wall. He followed, only inches from her back, spreading himself out, trying to make himself as big as possible to cover her.

Immediately, the darkness was pierced by bright blue lasers seeking a victim. If one caught her it’d burn through her like a hot knife through butter.

Holding his breath, he shifted to keep her in front of him. A laser caught him at the waist joint, his suit beeped at him, telling him something he could already feel. The burning felt like a red-hot poker in his back. Shifting a little, he threw the Scraggs aim off enough to move the laser impact up to his armored back. Just enough to render it ineffective.

And they were there. Around the edge of the wall and behind its protection. Alicia slid to a halt, dropping to a knee as she sucked in large chunks of air.

“Are you okay?” she asked with obvious concern.

“I’m fine,” he said as he knelt down next to her. Being careful to not wince in front of her.

“Then why do you smell like a seared steak?” she asked, her eyes studying him intently.

He laughed. “I’m fine, I promise.”

Her frown let him know she didn’t believe him. She was pretty when she frowned like that, he realized. But then she was pretty all the time.

Giving her a quick smile he said, “tell my men to man the wall, I don’t need them in the trench.” She stared back at him and nodded. He gave her a quick smile and turned to get back to his men before he made a fool of himself.

“Stop,” she said, as she reached out and held his shoulder. Turning back to her he cocked an eyebrow, trying to figure out what she wanted.

She held his gaze for a long second then leaned forward and kissed him. Surprising him to his very core. A quick kiss, but not too quick. He had not expected that. Not in a million years. And just as fast as it started, it was over as she drew away, looking at him from beneath her brow as if unsure how he would react.

“Just in case,” she said with that little girl pout.

He smiled at her and took her hand. “I’m going to show you that valley. I promise.”

She smiled back at him, a tear threatening to fall from the corner of her eye. Biting her lip, she nodded and turned to go back to her people.

Dex watched her go, the curve of her hip and the lingering scent of

jasmine pulling at him. Damn it, he thought. Why now? Why here? Why couldn't he have met her somewhere else at some other time? This was a woman to face the galaxy with. A partner that a man could be proud of and rely upon.

Shaking his head to try and clear the thoughts dancing through his brain, he quickly examined the sandbag walls. His men had done a good job. Two bags thick. The first wall was five feet high. Perfect for shooting over the top of. The bags were set to fully reflective. If a laser broke through the outer layer. It'd just turn the sand to glass and increase the reflectiveness.

He smiled to himself. They might just hold up. The Scraggs hadn't shown any use of explosives. These just might be enough. Turning, he inspected the openings of the first wall. One on each side, just wide enough for a man to squeeze in between the wall and the Rift stone cliff. The opening for the second wall was located in the center of the wall. This wall was seven feet tall with a bench to stand on. More than enough height to shoot over the top of the men in front of them.

He grinned to himself again. To get through, the Scraggs would have to come in at the edge, work their way to the center. Not going to happen, he swore to himself as a picture of Alicia Miller and her people jumped to his mind. Nope. Not going to happen.

Sighing, he sprinted back to his men, fighting to pull his mind away from the temptation that was Miss Alicia Miller and back to the responsibilities in front of him. But no matter how hard he tried, she was always there. Always hovering in the back of his mind. A presence that constantly reminded him of what they were fighting for.

## Chapter Sixteen

Admiral McKenzie studied the screen and slowly shook his head. All his plans, all his preparations were useless now. Instead, he had twenty separate battles going on. The alien fleet had scattered to the four corners of the solar system. His ships in hot pursuit of almost every one of them.

“Steadfast,” he said into the command channel. “Break off and make for their jump point. I want you sitting there, stopping anything from getting through.”

“Sir,” the Steadfast’s captain began. “We can still fight, I’ve got six working guns. We can take these bastards.”

Admiral McKenzie took a deep breath, he didn’t like his orders being questioned. Even if it was because the skipper wanted to keep fighting. But this was the heat of battle and this was one of his best men. Sighing, he said, “Jim, put your ship where I told you to. I’m more worried about something getting through and warning their home planet. The last thing we need is another fleet jumping in on us.”

There was a momentary pause before the skipper responded. “Aye, aye, Sir. We will make sure nothing gets through.”

“Good,” the admiral said. “Let me know when you are in position.” Turning, he ignored the man’s response and focused on the fleet.

“Sir,” the York’s captain said. Mac glanced up at his wall of monitors and scanned until he got to the York screen. The captain looked disheveled, his hair was singed and his clothes had been ripped.

“We’ve got to abandon ship,” the captain said with a sad frown. “We’ve got more holes than we can fix and we’re leaking like a sieve. Ten minutes and we’ll be on suit air only. We’re done.”

The admiral nodded slowly, as his heart went out to his men. He knew very well the love a spacer had for their ship. The thought of abandoning her to the blackness of space would tear at their souls.

“Roger, understand,” he said. “Pine, move in and take the York’s crew off. Captain Silver, see if you can get your ship headed for Intrepid, maybe we can pick her up later and fix the old girl up.”

The captain nodded slowly as he turned to start issuing the necessary

orders.

“Admiral,” the Pine’s young commander interjected. “We might have a problem. An alien ship has broken off engagement with the Durable and is headed straight for us and the York. I’ll try to hold her off while we pick up survivors. But I thought you should know.”

“Durable?” the admiral said through gritted teeth.

“Sir,” the destroyer’s skipper began, “he outmaneuvered us. Caught us when we jagged, he jugged. I’m turning now, but I don’t think I’ll get there in time.”

Mac’s heart jumped. His men would be exposed during the transfer. And the Pine was limited to one gun. She wasn’t built for this kind of battle.

“Sir,” another captain interrupted, “we’ve finished off our target. Now we’re just punching holes in a colander. I can break off and be there in time.”

“Which vessel?” he asked, upset at the lack of communication protocol.

“Sorry, Venturous, Sir.”

“Roger, permission granted.”

Biting down at his rising anger, he took a deep calming breath. The battle was getting away from him. Captains and crews were fighting with damaged ships. The aliens continued to hit them, their lasers finding weak points.

But, we’re killing more of them than they are of us, he reminded himself. He just wished that he could use his fleet as one entity instead of twenty separate battles.

Shaking off his anger, he focused on the large battleship the Churchill continued to chase. The ship was making a long, turning arch, probably headed back towards the jump point for another try while trying to get away from the pesky humans.

“That’s not going to happen,” the admiral mumbled under his breath.

Sitting back, he watched as the number in the corner of the screen steadily decreased the number of guns throughout the fleet. That was the key. They needed to keep enough guns to finish these monsters off. But at some point, if that number got too low, the aliens would be able to approach close enough to do some real damage to his ships.

His eyes tracked the number and his heart winced every time it dropped. It had been an hour and a half so far. An eternity. But could they finish the job?

Glancing over, he caught Janet giving him a concerned look. He gave her a quick smile to try and reassure her, then turned back to his monitors. He'd just reoriented himself when a quick yellow explosion lit up the screen. The bright stabbing color wiped everything else off the screen. Leaving him momentarily blind.

He knew that color. That unique mixture of yellow and a deep purple. That was a Higgs engine exploding. The color most hated by every spacer in the universe.

"Evans," he called out. His screen was still blank, the sensors overwhelmed by the explosion.

"The Durable," the commander said. "It was the only vessel in the area."

His heart fell. All those men. Wiped out in an instant. Probably before they even knew they were in danger. Gritting his teeth, he nodded.

"Pine, when you're done taking off the York crew, make a pass through the area just in case there are any survivors."

"Aye, Aye, Sir," the Pine's skipper said with a touch of sadness. Admiral McKenzie knew in his heart that it was a useless gesture. But he also knew that every man in the fleet would appreciate it. And one thing he knew for sure, his men deserved everything he could give them.

Biting down on his lip to stop himself from saying something stupid, he turned back to his screens with a heavy heart.

"Sir," Captain White said, stepping up next to his shoulder. "Both the Reliance and the Dauntless have destroyed their targets. They are quite a ways off, in the opposite direction. I was thinking, maybe we could divert them to Intrepid, help Admiral Webber and the Marines. They still don't have any air support."

Admiral McKenzie studied his chief of staff for a second, as he considered the suggestion. He should have thought of it himself. What was wrong with him that he hadn't seen the opportunity? Sighing, he tried to forgive himself. He couldn't be perfect, no matter how hard he tried.



“Yes, Captain, that is a good idea. But only those two. Everyone else, if they finish off their target, are to assist the next closest Imperial ship.”

“Yes, Sir,” the captain said, smiling, obviously pleased that his recommendation had been accepted.

“And Scott,” Admiral McKenzie said. “get word to Webber. I don’t want him thinking he is being attacked. Let him know the two destroyers are on their way.”

“Aye, Aye, Sir,” the captain said as he stepped back over to his station to relay the orders.

Admiral McKenzie sat back and folded his arms across his chest. What else was he missing? he wondered. What should he be doing that he wasn’t? This and a thousand other thoughts flashed through his mind as he reran the events of the last two hours.

“We’re winning,” he said to no one in particular. “But things could still change.”

Everyone in the command room looked at their leader. They quickly realized the old man was talking to himself. But they just as quickly forgave him. He was right after all.

**.o0o.**

Onboard the Imperial Tender Pine, Lieutenant Commander Frank Marks glanced over at the two Merchant Captains sitting in the corner of his bridge. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had picked them up from their vessel hurdling towards the alien ships orbiting Intrepid.

He gave them a quick nod of acknowledgment and refocused at the task on hand.

“You’re getting awful close,” One of the captains said with a raised eyebrow. Frank had to fight from rolling his eyes. These men were used to piloting vessels thousands of feet long. It took a week of Sundays to get them to turn. Well, now they were going to see what an Imperial tender could do.

“We’re not getting close. We’re docking,” he said as he turned to study the numbers on his screen.

The second merchant captain raised both eyebrows. “All that damage,” he said, pointing at the York on his screen. “This isn’t a shuttle. You’ll never

get close enough to lock on.”

Frank ignored them as he put his hand on his helmsman’s shoulder. “Steady,” he whispered. The young spacer nodded as both of them watched the giant destroyer slowly come closer. Filling up the screen.

“Okay, hold it there,” the young skipper said, then turned to check his clearance both port and starboard.

“Now, slowly engage the forward port and aft starboard thrusters.”

Again, the helmsman nodded, his hands moving the joystick the smallest fraction.

“Hold it,” the skipper said. “Right there. Bring us down.”

Slowly, on the screen, the York grew bigger and bigger as the Pine lowered herself. A nasty screech told the universe that they’d scraped something. Oh well, it wouldn’t be her first bruise, he thought to himself.

He remained focused on the screen and the merging ships until the view was blocked by the shadows. A heavy clank and slight shake echoed through the ship as she made contact. Frank smiled to himself and said. “Lock her down, run the tests and report.”

Within seconds, a voice reported, “Tight lock.”

He turned and gave the two merchant captains a quick smile. They both dipped their heads in acknowledgment of his skills. Smiling, he grabbed a microphone and informed the York’s skipper they were ready to start taking off his men.

The York’s captain said, “I thought that was you knocking. Open up. We’ve still got pressure in that section of the ship. It’s one of the few areas left. We’ll load our wounded and dead first.”

Frank’s stomach tightened. Here he’d been showing off. In the meantime. Men were dying. Shaking his head, he told the executive officer to take the con. He’d meet the York’s crew and her Captain.

When the first stretcher was carried through, he had to push back the bile rising in his throat. The smell of burnt flesh mixed with charred electronics and scorched mechanical oil was one of the most disgusting smells ever imagined.

“Seavers, Bush, take them to sickbay. Use the wardroom if you have to,

for the overflow. Tell Doc there are more coming.”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” both young spacers said, eyeing the crewmen carrying the stretchers. Frank studied the men coming through the hatch. Burns, singed uniforms, several of them coughing, probably from smoke inhalation. The bloodshot eyes and burst capillaries on the nose from the sudden loss of atmosphere.

These men had been through hell and back. But they kept their heads up and silently carried out the grim task of abandoning their ship.

His chest swelled with pride at his fellow servicemen. He could only pray that he would perform as well in their place.

The wounded were followed by the black body bags. Fourteen of them, each carried by two men.

“Take them down to the forward hold,” he said quietly to his chief. Chief Robbins nodded and Frank could have sworn he saw a tear in the old man’s eye. A thought that would have seemed impossible before today.

“Captain Marks,” a senior officer called out from onboard the York.

Frank nodded and made his way through the throng of crewmen to the senior officer.

“Moncrief,” the commander said, holding out his hand, “the XO. Captain Wilson will be down in a minute. He’s gathering the logs.”

Frank nodded. How it must hurt to abandon your ship. He couldn’t imagine abandoning the Pine, they’ have to tear him away, clawing and scraping.

“Are you going to have enough room for us?” the commander asked with a sad smile.

“I hope so,” Frank responded. “Because I have a feeling that you guys aren’t going to be the last. Not by a long shot.”

The commander nodded slowly as he looked around his dying ship.

“She was older than dirt and her pipes shook every time we changed speed. But I loved her. I really did.”

Frank grimaced and nodded. What could he say? Nothing would make it right.

## Chapter Seventeen

Dex watched as the shadows fell away. The sun was cresting the eastern ridge and would be up in a few minutes. He swallowed hard, the Scraggs had held back all night. Why? Because they were waiting for the sun, he knew it in the bottom of his soul. There could be no other explanation.

Taking a deep breath, he fought to calm his racing heart. Casting his senses on a wide arch, he took in the morning. The distant call of some strange bird. The dusty, grass smell that would always remind him of this valley. The solid feel of gravity under him. No chance of it going away. No vacuum sitting on the other side of a thin piece of metal.

There could be worse places to die, he thought as he glanced back towards the redoubt and the absent Alicia. But not today.

The burn on his back was irritating. The damn Scraggs had left a mark, that was for sure. Twisting he tried to get into a better position but the wound was located in a spot that just couldn't be ignored.

Instead, he concentrated on the immediate future. So much would depend upon the next few minutes. So much would depend on him doing his job correctly. General Smyth, Alicia, his men. Their very continued existence depended upon the decisions he would make.

The thought sent a wave a crushing depression through him to be followed almost immediately by a rising anxiety.

Pull yourself together, he said to himself. Shake it off and do your best.

He'd no sooner regained control of his emotions when a lone voice called out from the far end of the trench. "Here they come."

Dex gulped, then pushed himself up to peek over the lip of the trench.

It looked like a wave of giant rats swarming out of a sewer. Hundreds of aliens jumping from the fighting holes. Running as a mass down the village street. Their shiny armor reflecting the sunlight. They passed between the buildings, past the still smoldering shuttle, firing as they ran, their blue lasers seeking and searching for a target.

"Open fire," Dex yelled into his radio and sixty rifles exploded, sending lethal rounds down range. Dex watched the aliens get hit. They took a serious pounding, as slugs slammed into their armor. A square shot would knock

them down, but within moments, they were up and running forward. Most of the shots were glancing blows. Enough to slow them down but not enough to stop them.

He saw a laser rifle get smashed, the human slug tearing it into three parts. The Scragg just dropped it and kept on charging. A few steps later, the Scragg reached down and grabbed a weapon from a fallen comrade.

In another instance, a shot caught an alien at the shoulder joint and removed his arm as clean as if it had been cut by a surgeon. Red blood spurted. The alien twisted in a circle, spraying blood all over his comrades. But as Dex watched, the alien's suit adjusted, squeezing around the stump, shutting off the blood loss. The rat-faced alien stumbled, pulled himself together, then continued charging, shooting his rifle from the hip with one hand.

Damn, how were they going to stop them? It was like a wave of death, a continuous onslaught. A sick feeling of despair fought with the fear rising inside of him. They had to stop them.

Dex brought his own rifle to his shoulder and slowly sifted his sight to an alien's neck. Pulling the trigger, he watched as the monster's neck exploded, the beast kept running, then fell face first into the dirt. Shaking off the image, Dex sighted on his next victim. Cool and calm, he reminded himself. One shot at a time.

But there were too many of them he realized. Hundreds, maybe as many as a thousand. They must have brought up reinforcements during the night. Squeezing the trigger, he moved to his next target. Not wasting time to see if his shot had been effective.

"Sir," Sergeant Smith called as he duck-walked towards him. "We're running low on ammunition."

Dex took another shot, then nodded to his sergeant. He'd purposely not restocked last night. He didn't want to evacuate the trench and leave anything behind. It was time anyway. The Scraggs had gotten to within forty yards. Much closer and his men wouldn't have time.

"Okay, take third platoon back to the wall. Check with Daniels and Obamway. take their wounded with you. We'll give you cover."

Sergeant Smith nodded that he understood and returned to his men

without a word.

Dex returned to firing. The smell of cordite and burnt flesh hung in the air. Men were calling out to each other, some were screaming in pain. His stomach clenched up when he thought about what was happening to them.

Dropping down below the lip of the trench, he kneeled and quickly changed magazines. Hundreds of years of technology. And we're facing aliens with rifles. It just didn't make sense, he thought as he stood up and began firing again. Where was the damn Navy? Military doctrine called for him to request air support. In situations like this, the Navy was supposed to pound them into oblivion.

Swallowing hard, he continued to fire. There would be no Navy. It was him and his men. That was all he could rely on.

Third platoon gathered on the back slope, each of them looking at their sergeant, waiting for the word to go. Several Marines were being helped by their teammates. Two of them were on stretchers. Dex's insides turned to stone when he saw the heavy bandages holding a face together.

Sergeant Smith shot him a quick look. Dex gave a quick nod in return, then yelled into his radio, "Full Auto, give them cover."

Where before, fifty slugs were being sent down range, now thousands streaked through the air. A wall of lead screaming through the air. They couldn't keep it up, the ammo shortage was a serious handicap.

Once his clip was empty, he turned to watch as Third Platoon raced for the redoubt. His heart stopped as he silently counted the seconds. Marines joined together to carry wounded. Others twisted to shoot, emptying their clips and then sprinting for the cover of the sandbag walls.

His heart soared with admiration, a textbook example of moving under fire. Smith and his men were to be commended. At last, they made the wall. Every one of them slipping behind the protective cover and immediately taking up position to continue fighting.

"Okay, Obamway, your next."

The young corporal looked back at him and nodded grimly.

Every time Dex dropped to change his magazine, he'd watch as the young corporal gathered his men and got them ready. His platoon, Dex

thought. No longer mine. A sadness washed through him as he saw missing team members. The wounded and dead gathered together. My men, he thought to himself. The men he'd yelled at and cared for over the last two years. The men he'd trained, and brought here to die. Biting down a scream, he told Obamway to go and then stood up to kill aliens.

The men at the redoubt opened up, firing over their brother's heads as second platoon raced into the Rift.

"Get your men ready," Dex called to Daniels as he took another shot.

"You first," Daniels called back as he continued to put slugs down range.

Dex swallowed hard and realized his sergeant was right. The thought of leaving before his men sent a bolt of shame through him. But he was right, his place was at the redoubt now.

"We'll go together," he said.

Daniels nodded and continued to fire. "Now might be a good time," he responded, glancing over with a quick smile.

The aliens were within twenty yards. They'd make the trench before his men made the redoubt.

"Go. Go." Dex called out as he ran up the back slope of the trench and towards the wall of stacked sandbags. Bullets whistled over his head in one direction. Hundreds of blue lasers whizzed past him in the other direction, as he ducked and zigzagged back and forth, desperately trying to keep any alien solder from holding his aim on him long enough to do damage.

The men around him did the same, pulling and helping each other as they ran.

A Marine in front of him stumbled, a puff of black smoke rising from the back of his neck. Sliding to a quick stop, Dex bent and lifted the man over his shoulder and then turned for the redoubt again.

His back screamed in pain as he stumbled forward. His lips moved in a silent prayer, let me get him to safety, he prayed. Please. Just let me get him to safety.

Forever it seemed, he ran. Bent under the weight it felt as if his feet were trapped in a swamp. As if something refused to let him move fast enough. Pushing away the rising fear inside of him, he, at last, slipped through the

opening and into the protection of the first wall.

“Here,” Alicia said, pointing to her feet.

Dex bent and slowly lowered the man to the ground. Taking deep breaths of air, he watched as Alicia gently lifted the man’s faceplate.

Two stark eyes stared out of the armor. Eyes that would never see again. Private Bill Tomlinson was dead and nothing in this world would ever bring him back. Dex swallowed a scream of frustration.

Alicia looked up at him, the sadness in her eyes confirming what he saw.

Raising his own faceplate he stared at her in disbelief. “What are you doing here?” he hissed. “Get back to your aid station.”

She ignored him and moved to another fallen Marine, “This is where the wounded are,” she said without looking at him. “When they get back to the aid station, then I’ll go too.”

Dex shook his head as he fought to gain control of his anger.

“Smith,” he yelled. “Get the wounded back. Make sure Miss Miller goes with them.”

“Yes, Sir,” the sergeant said as he started delegating men as stretcher bearers.

Dex turned away and punched the sandbag wall. His fist pounding into it over and over as he tried to hurt something. Anything. He needed to feel like he was actually accomplishing something. The dead look of the young private tore at his soul. Pushing everything else away to rip and gnaw at him.

At last, he pulled himself together and took a deep breath. He peeked over the sandbag wall and froze. Hundreds and hundreds of rat-faced Scraggs in their shiny armor continued to pour down the village street towards them. Not a lot had changed. All that, and still they came.

A hundred, maybe a hundred and a half lay dead and dying in the dirt. But their fellow soldiers stepped over them as they continued to attack. His stomach turned over. There was just so many of them.

A quick scan confirmed that no Marine had been left behind. Dex released a long breath with relief. At least they’d accomplished that.

Lining up a shot, he pulled the trigger. Returning to that familiar activity



calmed him. Find the target, line up the shot, fire. Repeat. Over and over.

But still, they came, slowly spilling over into the trench the Marines had just abandoned. But Dex had anticipated this. The back slope was cut so that his men could fire into the trench from the redoubt. The aliens were trapped like sitting ducks on a pond.

His men knew what to do. Like him, they found their target and eliminated them. The problem was that there was just too many targets.

Seeing that for the moment, things were slowing down, he ducked behind the second wall to find Obamway.

“You ready?” he asked.

The corporal smiled back and vigorously nodded.

“I’ll let you know when.”

Turning away from the corporal, Dex glanced around as he tried to take a brief break. Just enough to gather himself again before he returned to the battle.

Miss Miller was working over a fallen Marine she hadn’t left like he had ordered. This Marine was alive as evidenced by the screaming, his face charred, the skin around his eyes curling into ash.

She administered something to him and the man relaxed, drifting off into a drug-induced sleep. She turned and saw him watching her. Giving him a sad smile, she scooted over to the next man.

Why wasn’t she back where she belonged? he wondered. Because this is where she is needed he realized. Wounded were piling up faster than they could get them back to the aid station. So, she had moved the station here.

Taking a deep breath, he thought this has gone on long enough. Time to end it. At least for a while.

Taking a step up onto the wall’s bench, he rose up to look over the redoubt wall. As he suspected, the trench was full of Scraggs. Well over two hundred of them. More on the top, waiting to get through. Each and every one of them firing at his men.

“Okay, Obamway, you set them, you get to do it,” he said.

Smiling wildly, the corporal yelled, “Down,” as he pushed the button.

A quick silence descended over the battlefield as his men stopped shooting and dropped down behind the redoubt wall. Dex didn't follow them. He wanted to see this. His soul demanded that he watch these bastard die.

The claymore mine is an ancient technology. Not really improved upon in hundreds of years. For one simple reason. It works. Two dozen, half-inch ball bearings packed in front of a shaped charge. Against a man, they were lethal. Against two hundred aliens, they were devastating.

At the very beginning, Dex had instructed Obamway to line the inside of the trench, both front and rear slope with claymore mines. The one weapon besides their rifles to make the landing with them. He had known this moment would come.

The explosion was glorious as ninety-two mines went off at the same time. Small metal spheres ripped through the alien armor. Pieces of dirt and skin and bone flew into the air. Dex fought to not smile too widely. A creature was dying, but it was glorious because every one of theirs that died was one less of his.

The Scraggs standing on the lip of the trench were thrown into the air. Those behind them fell back. The attack halted for a moment as the concussion wave washed over them.

"Now," he begged. "Fall back," he mumbled to himself as he held his breath while waiting to see how the aliens would react.

Without being told, his men rose as one and started firing into the aliens still standing. Their slugs seemed to finally turn the tide, as Scraggs began to fall back.

Dex watched intently. Unable to believe what he was seeing. But slowly at first, then in ones and twos, the Scraggs began to turn and run away.

His men continued to fire until there was nothing left to fire at.

Slowly, the sound of the Marine rifles grew to a halt. They had been trained well. They knew to conserve their ammo without having to be told.

Dex looked out at the carnage in front of him. The burnt buildings, smoke still rising into the air. The dead and dying lying in the dirt. Blood, bone, gore, and bile, all of it mixed into a sickening mess.

Fighting to push the sickness in his own throat back down, he turned and

dropped back below the edge. They'd done it. They'd stopped them somehow.

It might not last. But they'd bought General Smyth some time.

Turning, he looked at his men. They were raising their faceplates. Their faces covered in sweat and tears. Their red-rimmed eyes looking at him as if unable to believe they had done it.

He smiled back and nodded. They had done it. His Marines had held the line. At least for now.

## Chapter Eighteen

The alien battleship grew bigger and bigger on the screen as the Churchill slowly overtook the larger vessel. Admiral McKenzie smiled to himself. Soon, he thought. Soon, and this would be over. Most of the other ships were standing by their destroyed targets. Waiting for instructions. They had almost won.

It was just this battleship and the Churchill left.

Should he have the destroyers break off and come to him? Or, rejoin the Roosevelt?

He glanced at the screen again and shook his head. Should he call in the other ships to help?

No, they were too far away. It would take them too long. Better to leave them there, a reserve, in case Captain Freeborn and his crew were not successful.

“Confidence,” he called. “Send a boarding party. It looks like your target is somewhat still intact.

“Sir, she’s turning,” Evans interrupted referring to the alien battleship in front of them.

“Thank you, Commander,” he replied. Keep calm, he reminded himself. No one must see the anxiety and fear bubbling away inside of him.

“Aye, aye, Sir,” the Confidence’s skipper replied to the previous order.

This was the point, he realized. If this ship broke free she could destroy any one of his. Easily destroy the Steadfast and escape through the jump point. Only to return later with a larger, more deadly fleet. No, they had to end this now.

The blue laser beams continued to rake the side of the Churchill, it’s intensity growing as the two ships grew closer.

“Captain Freeborn,” the admiral said. “Please instruct your gun crews to focus on their lasers. Maybe we will get lucky.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the Churchill’s captain replied without looking away from his own screen.

Admiral McKenzie sat back in his chair. He probably shouldn’t be

giving orders to his captains on where to focus their guns. But that was one of the hassles of being a flagship, you had the admiral looking over your shoulder.

Deciding it would be better if he spent his time focused on the rest of the fleet, he glanced at the Marine monitor and Admiral Webber's feed. Both were blank.

"Any word from Intrepid," he asked the room.

"No, Sir," Commander Evans said. "Every ship in the fleet has lost their high gain antenna. I think it must be a design flaw. Something that let those lasers take out the electronics. We've lost all contact with both the landing force and Admiral Webber.

Admiral McKenzie nodded. An item for the after-action report, he thought. If he was ever able to produce one, of course.

"Sir," Commander Evans said, his voice rising a small octave, "I think she's going to try and ram us." Obviously referring to the alien battleship. "The turn radius is very short. She's bleeding speed to get around. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"I see it," Captain Freeborn said.

Suddenly, the Churchill shuddered, a tremble that radiated up from the deck plates. Admiral McKenzie's stomach turned over. A spaceship shouldn't shudder like that. It couldn't be good.

No sooner had the vibration stopped, when every light, monitor, and cooling fan shut down.

The Admiral held his breath as a deep, dark silence fell over the command center. Where was the emergency back up? Why wasn't it kicking in?

Slowly, a green glow began to dimly light the room as his men pulled out their portable tablets, searching for information.

Again, a sharp vibration rocked the ship, followed by a distant explosion and a brief loss of gravity. At least here the backups took over and he felt himself settle back down into his chair. But the silence remained. No fans, no beeps of computers. Men talked in hushed tones, as if afraid of disturbing the quiet.

Biting his tongue, he stopped himself from pestering the ship's captain. Let the man do his job, he reminded himself. Instead, he glanced over at Professor Sinclair. The woman was watching everything at the same time. He could see the gears turning in her head as she cataloged and tracked their actions. He wondered if she'd use any of this in her future research. He could see it now, the paper would be titled something like, 'The Habits and Tendencies of an Imperial Navy Crew In Times Of Stress.'

Or, would the rest of her life be dedicated to figuring out the Scraggs? The later, he thought. Heaven knew someone was going to have to.

"Professor," he called over to her. "When we get power back, start figuring out a way to convince these bastards to surrender. Some message that will get them to stop fighting."

She looked back at him as if he'd lost his mind, then nodded and turned to her tablet.

"Sir," Captain Freeborn said, pulling him away from the Professor, "we've lost power feed from both Higgs Engine. A lucky shot cut the cable. The failover tripped, but didn't work. My men are trying to fix it now."

"Very good, Captain," the Admiral responded, frustrated at having absolutely nothing to do.

"Sir," his chief of staff Captain White said, "Perhaps you should shift your flag to the Roosevelt?"

Admiral McKenzie's stomach dropped. Shift his flag? Abandon the Churchill? Abandon these men? No, he couldn't. Not now. Not like this.

"They are too far away," he replied. "This will be over before they could get here."

Captain White nodded and stepped back. He'd done his job, presented options. But this had to end now.

Slowly, he could feel the frustration rising inside of him. Like a pot ready to bubble over. The frustration pulled up his anger and a little of his fear. They were sitting there helpless. Like a huge target hanging in space, waiting for something to tear it to shreds. And to make it worse, without the power from the Higgs engines, the guns were nothing more than long tubes. Useless.

And the last thing they had known was that the enemy ship was turning towards them.

“There,” Captain Freeborn exclaimed with a smile on his green-lit face. The word was no sooner out of his mouth when the lights and computers began to re-energize.

McKenzie felt a wave of relief flow through him until he saw his screen. The alien battleship had turned and was headed right for them.

“Captain ...”

“I see it, Sir,” the captain replied as he frantically issued orders.

The Churchill was slow to respond. Not all of her systems were fully restored. The boot process taking longer than it should have.

As the Scragg’s ship drew closer, the blue laser light bathed them in its evil glow.

A soft whoomp, whoomp, let Admiral McKenzie know that at least their guns were back online. Leaning forward, he watched the electronic track of the rounds as they raced towards their enemy. Within moments, small explosions started peppering the side of the large alien ship.

It wouldn’t matter though, not unless Captain Freeborn could maneuver his ship. They could pound the alien all week, but its mass would destroy the Churchill if they collided.

Swallowing hard, he watched the ship grow bigger on the screen. He moved to reduce the magnification and realized he was already at the lowest setting. Swallowing hard, he watched, unable to take his eyes away from the looming menace.

Without warning, the collision alarm went off. The repeated pattern of annoying beeping letting every spacer know they were in a bad situation that was about to get worse.

Gripping his armrests, McKenzie gritted his teeth and waited.

“Got It,” Captain Freeborn said as he leaned over his helmsman’s shoulder and pressed a button. Immediately, the gravity adjusted and the ship shook, as every thruster onboard was pushed to the max. He’d gotten control just in time.

Slowly, the Churchill rose as the alien ship on the screen sank beneath

them, their laser tearing into the command ship's underbelly.

Captain Freeborn checked the readings then leaned forward to issue an order. Slowly, the Churchill rolled on its side, keeping its guns focused on the ship passing beneath her.

McKenzie nodded to himself, a good move, he thought. See what can happen when you stay out of the man's way.

Slowly, the two ships passed each other. Close enough that you could have hit it with a rock, he thought. Only, instead of rocks, they were throwing twenty-four pound steel shot. Surely, they couldn't last forever under that barrage.

Of course, the Churchill was taking her share of damage as well. The explosions and breaches had exposed her guts to the laser. It really was going to come down to who could last longer.

Unable to pull his eyes away, McKenzie watched as the ship passed beneath them and out the other side. Captain Freeborn kept with his roll, his guns never leaving the ship.

"Sir," Commander Evan whispered, obviously worried about breaking everyone's concentration.

"Yes?"

"Um, we are below forty percent of ammunition."

Admiral McKenzie whipped around to study the Intelligence Commander. Below forty percent? He had to laugh to himself. When they built this ship, they stocked her with enough ammunition to last the entire lifetime of the ship. Instead, they'd gone through over half of it in two days. Another thing for the after-action report.

"Don't worry about it, Commander. One of us will be dead long before we run out of ammunition."

The commander nodded and returned to his screen.

The Admiral returned to watching the alien ship only to have Professor Sinclair walk over to him, holding out her tablet.

"Sir, I thought we could send this on all frequencies. I don't know that it will do any good. I don't know what kind of radio equipment they have. Do they even process data? I just don't know, there are too many variables.



“I understand,” the admiral replied. “I know it probably won’t work. But at least this way, history will say we tried. What do you have?”

Professor Sinclair looked at him strangely for a moment then seemed to mentally shrug her shoulders and showed him the animation she had created. It was a Scragg soldier laying down his rifle and then backing away. Over and over until the message was driven home.

“It’s all I’ve got. We still don’t know their language, moral values, nothing. It’s like trying to convince a spider to stop spinning a web. How do you do that?”

“By repeatedly destroying his web. Eventually, he’ll learn.”

She grew pale for a second then nodded.

He smiled back weakly, “Have Commander Evans send it out to the fleet, have them broadcast it over and over. Maybe the Confidence will learn something when they send a boarding team over.”

She nodded and started to say something else but changed her mind and gave him a quick smile before taking her tablet to the Commander.

A small cheer from the Churchill’s command staff drew his attention. He froze as he tried to figure out what had happened. Then it sank in. No laser. One of the guns had finally taken it out.

“YES!” he exclaimed.

“We’ve still got to stop her somehow,” Captain Freeborn said. “She could get it fixed. And if she ever got to their jump point, I don’t think anything could stop her once she had up a head of steam.”

Admiral McKenzie nodded.

“She’s increasing speed and turning, Sir,” Commander Evans reported.

Admiral McKenzie studied the alien ship for a long moment. He might not know what propelled her. He might not know anything about the ship, but one thing he did know was that the laws of Newton were in force. A body in motion tended to stay in motion. That meant, if she was turning, stress was being applied. Her front wanted to go one way, her back wanted her to keep going forward.

“Captain Freeborn,” he said. “Have your men focus amidships. Pound everything you have into her middle.”

The Captain frowned for a quick moment, then turned and issued the order. Admiral McKenzie held his breath while he watched the Churchill's rounds sink into the alien ship. Small yellow clusters of light letting him know they were hitting her with everything they had.

Then, slowly, a small jagged yellow ribbon began to snake across the middle of the ship. Nothing more than a hint of a crack at first. But as he watched, the crack widened. Slowly opening up.

"Yes!" he whispered to himself.

The crack seemed to hold for a second. A yellow ring around the ship, like a golden wedding band. Then, without warning, it ripped apart. The mighty ship was tearing itself into two parts.

Everyone on the command deck froze in place as they watched the ship slowly come apart on the screen. Dividing itself into two distinct sections. McKenzie noted that the Churchill's guns continued to pour shots into the vessel. Both front and back. The guns crews knew their job.

As he watched, the front section broke away. The aft section continued driving forward until it had nudged the forward section out of the way and passed it.

For just a brief moment, he wondered if the aft end would just continue on forever. But the sleek section seemed to pulse for a moment, bulging like a Mylar balloon, then everything turned white.

McKenzie threw an arm up while he squeezed his eyes shut for protection against the fierce glow. A collective gasp erupted in the room as every person there turned away to shield themselves from the burning light. It was like a mini-sun had come into existence right in front of them.

A wave hit the Churchill, lifting her and tilting her to one side. Captain Freeborn scrambled to bring her back under control.

Then it was gone. Both the wave and the intense white light. The glow didn't fade. At one moment it was there. Then it disappeared, leaving fuzzy retinas throughout the fleet. He knew that it would be one of the many questions their scientist would explore.

Scrunching his brow, he tried to understand what had happened. Then it hit him. The aft section was gone. A cloud of expanding debris in its place. The forward section was spinning, end over end. No sign of life, no

indication of power. Just a hunk of technology twisting out of control.

She was done.

They had won.

The Empire was saved. Humanity itself would continue to exist.

A sense of disbelief and fatigue washed over him as his muscles finally relaxed for the first time since entering the system. They had done it.

Every person on the command deck turned to look at him. It was as if they were waiting for him to confirm what their own eyes were telling them. They refused to believe until he said they could.

Smiling slightly, he turned to Captain Freeborn, "Well done, Sir. I do believe that should be enough. You can have your gun crews stand down. I think this means we have won."

A brief pause hung in the air. Then the men erupted with a cheer. Slapping each other on the back. Hugging, and punching each other as a month of tension was finally let loose.

"Captain Freeborn, a damage report if you would," he said, pulling the men back down to reality. He wished he could let them celebrate, heaven knew they deserved it. But their mission wasn't complete, not yet.

Captain Freeborn, pulled up a new screen, "Sir, we were breached in our belly. Opened up like a can of soup. Luckily, that is mostly berthing areas. Lightly manned during battle stations. Plus, the hit to the electrical systems, but that has already been repaired."

Admiral McKenzie nodded, grimly holding his jaw tight while he waited for the rest of the report.

"Thirty-eight dead," the Captain said with a sudden somberness that set aside the brief demonstrations. "Forty-seven wounded. Enough to be taken to sickbay."

"How soon until you can make way for Intrepid?" Admiral McKenzie asked. "I believe the Marines may be in need of our assistance."

They had done it. They had won. At least this part of the battle, he thought as he turned to the two monitors for the Marines on Intrepid and Admiral Weber. They'd won this part, he reminded himself. But, now the hard part.

## Chapter Nineteen

Alicia Miller's fingers shook as she pulled back the bandage to check on the young Marine. Her hands were covered in other men's blood, but they didn't have the time or the water to do things right. They didn't have the medicine, bandages, or skill that these men deserved.

Nothing but cut cloth for bandages. Mrs. Jensen's salve that she made herself for the burns. And over the counter pills for the pain. And yet, the men looked at her like she was a guardian angel. Smiling through burnt lips, their eyes thanking her for her kindness.

It was enough to bring a tear to her eye again and again. But she refused to let the tears fall. Now was not the time. When this was over. Then she would cry, and probably never stop crying, she thought.

Putting the bandage gently back into place, she gave the Marine a reassuring smile. He smiled with his eyes then turned away. Her stomach fell, he knew how bad it was and nothing she could do or say was going to make it better.

Standing, she pressed her hands into the small of her back to work out the kinks. Everyone was as taken care of as they could be. Most of the adult civilians had been drafted in to help. Passing out water, holding a hand, mopping a brow. It was all they could do, but it had to be enough.

Sighing heavily, she turned and started for the sandbag wall. Now she could do what she had wanted to do for the last two hours. Check on Captain Carter, on Dex, she thought to herself. She would call him Dex from now on. They had been through too much together to be so formal. Besides, she liked his name.

Grabbing a wet rag, she quickly tried to wipe off her bloody hands. The men on the wall didn't need to see that, she thought.

Coming around the bend in the Rift, she immediately found him, standing behind the second wall. Up on the bench, leaning forward as he scanned the battlefield. His men lined the walls on either side of him. Some resting, their backs against the sandbags, their faceplates up. Many of them were cleaning their weapons, or grabbing a quick bite to eat. Other, simply stared off into space. Their eyes lost in another world, another time.

Alicia took a deep breath and made her way forward. Thankful for the

quiet. The last two hours of silence had been a blessing. How long would it last? she wondered. Please have it last forever, she prayed.

“Dex,” she called as she came up to him. Several of the men glanced at her with raised eyebrows. Surprised to hear their leader called by his first name. She shrugged off the worry and stared up at him with her hands on her hips.

He turned to look back at her, giving her a smile that made her day whole again.

He looks tired, she thought. His face was covered in sweat and dirt, his eyes were more bloodshot than not, and his mouth was set in a firmly determined clench even when he smiled.

“Do you have a moment?” she asked.

He raised a questioning eyebrow then turned to check the battlefield again. Seeing that nothing had changed in the last five seconds, he nodded and gingerly stepped back down off the bench. Alicia caught the hidden pain as he tried to hide his condition from her.

Her heart went out to him, more than he would ever know, but she needed to get this next part out of the way before she could continue.

“Yes?” he asked.

Taking a deep breath, she looked away so he wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes.

“I wanted to tell you the numbers. I thought you might want to know. One of the men said you were not receiving automated updates from their suits.”

He nodded grimly. She could tell he was holding his breath waiting for the final tally.

Taking a deep breath, she said, “Sixteen dead, nine wounded too badly to return to you. Mostly due to blindness. Although Corporal Peele broke his leg in two places. And no one knows how.”

Letting his breath out slowly, he nodded and said, “Thank you, Alicia, I know it would have been so much worse without you and your people. My men will always be indebted to you.”

Her heart swelled as a tear slowly spilled over and ran down her cheek.

Damn, she thought, she had been doing so good.

“I think most of the wounded can be fixed,” she said as she hurriedly wiped the tear away. “If we ever get them back to a real doctor. There is not much I can do for them here but try and make them comfortable.” The frustration in her voice was obvious, even to her. She felt so inadequate. Maybe if she had learned more from her mother. Maybe if they had thought ahead and prepared better. There were a thousand things she could have done if she had known what was going to happen. If she had known the true realities she and these men would face.

Again, he nodded. “Thank you,” he said simply and she could tell from his eyes that he meant it. He really believed she had been helpful.

“Now then,” she said, setting her jaw, changing the subject, “it’s your turn.”

“What?”

“I saw the way you’re moving. You can barely stand. Take off your armor and let me check you out.”

He laughed, “That might be the best proposition I have ever heard, but now is not the time. Maybe later, somewhere more private.” The smirk he gave her made her insides turn over. He was teasing, but there was also a serious tone that made her want so much more.

Instead, she put her hands on her hips and stared up at him as she fought to keep from blushing.

“I’m serious, Dex.”

He stared back at her for a long moment then finally relented. She could see that he could tell there was no way he was winning this argument.

Sighing heavily, he whispered a command into his helmet and it immediately slid down into the ring around his neck. Once it was securely in place, the armor plate on his back cracked a little, a long seam opened from top to bottom.

Dex wiggled his shoulders while he twisted the rings around his wrists. Letting out a long, thankful sigh, he slowly pulled his arms back while peeling himself out of the armor.

Alicia stood back, unable to stop herself from admiring the broad

shoulders and thick chest. Like she had always thought ‘Pure Hero.’

His mouth set into a firm line as he closed his eyes, twisting one last time to finish removing the heavy armor. Alicia caught sight of the bead of sweat forming on his forehead and could just imagine the pain he was going through.

Once he had lowered the armor to the ground, he stood up and immediately began frantically scratching through his undershirt.

“God, I’ve wanted to do that for the last two days,” he said as he groaned with pleasure.

She smiled and let him get it out of the way.

At last, he stopped, and slowly turned around, he knew what she wanted to see.

The sight made her want to throw up. Burnt flesh and red blisters where the laser had punched through his waist joint.

Closing her eyes, she had to take a steadying breath so she didn’t let him know how it made her feel to see this man she cared for so seriously hurt. And he had gotten this by protecting her. By putting his body between the enemy and her.

“How bad is it?” he asked, looking over his shoulder.

“I’ve seen worse,” she said as she began to remove a can of salve and some bandages from her bag. Swallowing hard, she loaded up two fingers with the salve and gently brought them to the wound.

He winced and stepped away. “God, woman, that hurts.”

“I know,” she said without taking her eyes off his injury. “But it’s all we have and it will feel better in a few minutes.”

He took a couple of quick breaths then nodded for her to continue.

She gently applied the salve, making sure that the wound was fully covered. She really should wash it first. But this was just maintenance. Enough to keep him going until they could get somewhere that it could be fixed for good.

“The Nanos will take care of it in a few days. If we can keep it from getting infected.”

He nodded, unable to talk while he fought the pain.

Once the salve was on, she placed a large bandage over the wound. “Can you hold this in place?” she asked, as she guided his hand to the bandage. Once it was secure, she bent and grabbed a long strip of cloth from her bag.

“I’ll use this to keep it in place and to provide some padding for when you put your armor back on.”

He nodded as he looked over his shoulder trying to see what she was doing.

Now the difficult part, she thought as she started to wrap him up. Her arms had to reach around his stomach, almost pulling him into a hug. Her heart began to race as she fought to keep her mind on what she was supposed to be doing. But she was so close. He smelled of burnt flesh, machine oil, and all man.

Swallowing hard. She finished tying off the bandage and stepped back to inspect her work.

“There, that should hold you. Do you want me to help you get your armor back on?”

He looked at the breastplate on the ground next to his feet. “Not yet,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “I’ll hold off for a bit.”

Her brow narrowed in concern. Wasn’t he worried about being attacked again?

Dex saw the concerned expression on her face and smiled. “We’ll have enough warning. They fell back all the way to the fighting holes. When they hit us again, we’ll know about it in enough time for me to get back into my gear.

Her shoulders slumped with relief. He wasn’t going to do something stupid.

Suddenly, an awkward silence fell between them. She really didn’t have any reason to stay, but she hated the idea of leaving him. This was where she belonged. Near him.

“Sit,” he said, indicating the bench behind the wall.

Alicia noticed that the other Marines had moved off a little, to give them room and an illusion of privacy. Ten feet seemed to mean that no one could



hear or see them. She almost laughed at the absurdity of the idea.

“Have you eaten?” she asked as she sat down.

He nodded, “I grabbed something earlier. Please tell Mrs. Jensen thank you for the stew, it was excellent.”

“She also made the salve I’ve been using. I think she made the stew out of the parts she didn’t use for the salve.”

He laughed, and her heart relaxed. This was Dex, she thought, the man she had come to care for so much. A few thousand aliens bent on destroying him and he was laughing at her stupid jokes.

The two of them sat there in silence for a long moment. Just enjoying being in the presence of the other. Alicia wondered how long that quiet moment of peace might have lasted. But, unfortunately, there was a war on and it didn’t take long for them to be interrupted.

Sergeant Smith approached, giving her a quick smile, then turned to Dex.

“I thought I’d break out the bayonets?” he said, more of a question than a statement.

Dex nodded with a slight chuckle. “The mortars and the machines guns didn’t make it, but the bayonets did. Don’t tell me the universe isn’t out to get us.”

Sergeant Smith laughed and turned to leave.

“Bayonets?” Alicia asked.

“Yeah, don’t forget, the Marines are mostly used for minor warlords, gang stuff, rebellions, and protests. Things the local police can’t handle. If it gets too big, the Navy takes care of it. Well, with protests, we’ve found that when the protesters start marching towards us. We just fix bayonets and suddenly, they lose all interest.

“They know we don’t want to shoot, bad publicity, but they aren’t going to throw themselves onto our cold steel. That would be suicidal, and the Marines wouldn’t get blamed. If they hesitate, we start marching towards them. You’d be amazed how quickly some people find somewhere else they would rather be.

She smiled. It made perfect sense.

Again, she leaned back and rested against the wall. He sat there, his leg leaning on hers.

“How about you?” he asked, his brow furrowing with concern. “How you holding up?”

She shrugged her shoulders. What could she say? That she would have nightmares about this day for the rest of her life. That she was terrified for her brother Stephan? That having no word from her mother and her other two brothers was eating at her soul. And oh, yeah, they might all be killed and eaten within the next few hours.

But how could she complain? She’d held too many Marines as they slipped off into death. She’d washed and worked on too many wounds. These men were dying for her and her people. It seemed churlish to whine about her problems.

“I’m hanging in there,” she replied.

He studied her for a long moment and she could tell he saw the doubt and fear just below the surface.

She tried to stare back at him but was unable to meet his look. He saw too much, he could read her too well.

“Listen,” he said as he drew close to whisper into her ear. “If I give you the word, you grab Stephan and run. Leave the wounded. Leave the old and sick, you run.”

She felt the color drain from her face, how could he say that to her? She couldn’t leave her people.

He stared back at her, trying to use his force of will to get her to do what he wanted.

“I’d send you now, but I don’t think you’d go.”

“You’re darn right we won’t go,” she hissed back at him, being careful to keep her voice down.

He nodded. “I understand, but If I give you the word, you go. Period. No arguments, no hesitation. It will be the only chance you have. If you get around the second bend in the Rift without being seen, there is a chance the Scraggs won’t know you’re gone. Run like the wind, get out of the Rift the first chance you get. There might be an opening at the other end. The Scraggs

might not be in the way. Or, General Smyth may have already won.”

“We can’t leave,” she said. “I can’t leave the older ones.”

He grimaced and said, “You’re the only chance the children will have. If you don’t get them out, then this was all a waste. We will have died for nothing. Do you understand?”

She froze in place, he was sure he and his men would not survive. She could see it in his eyes.

“We’re not leaving,” she said as forcibly as she could. “I am not leaving you,” she added to make sure he understood.

He looked back at her, his eyes growing misty for a brief moment before he pulled himself back to reality.

“You will if you care about me at all,” he said. “If you care about me as much as I care about you. Then you will do this.”

She stared at him, unable to believe what she had heard. Continuing to stare, she saw the silent pleading in his eyes. A long quiet moment passed between them, then, at last, she nodded her head. She couldn’t fail him, she realized. He needed this if he was going to be able to do what he needed to do in the upcoming battle. He and his men would hold this position. There would be no more retreat.

He and his men would die. The least she could give him was the illusion that she and the children had gotten away.

Sighing, she nodded, then leaned forward to rest her head on his shoulder. It might be her last moment with this man. She would not fight him on this, not make his job harder. Instead, she would soak up the memories. He deserved that and so much more, she thought as she pondered the future without him.

## Chapter Twenty

Admiral McKenzie leaned forward and let the hot water rush over him. They'd done it, he thought to himself over and over. They had actually done it. The Empire was saved. At least for now.

Turning, he let the hot shower pound into his shoulders, massaging away the tension and anxiety that had built up ever since he had seen that first video over a month earlier. So many things could have gone wrong.

What if the Scraggs hadn't left orbit, instead insisting they fight inside the gravity well of the planet? What if they had chosen to attack instead of running? Or if his tactics hadn't worked, or the men hadn't been so proficient with the guns? So many things had to go right to get to this point.

Sighing, he tried to push the worry and doubt away. They had won, enjoy it. Revel in it. Heaven knew his men were.

Smiling to himself, he turned the water off and stepped out of the shower, wrapping himself in a towel. They'd won, but there was still so much to do. Professor Sinclair was badgering him about letting her go on one of the boarding parties. She insisted on seeing the Scraggs in their own environment. And speaking of the Scraggs, the boarding parties were returning with hundreds of prisoners. What was he to do with them?

They couldn't communicate. Their ships were useless junk floating in space. Unable to move, in many cases having difficulty providing life support. He couldn't let them just die. Well, he could. But it wouldn't be right.

Pulling on a fresh uniform, he paused and thought about the problems before him. One, he needed to make sure nothing came through their jump point. And if it did, it needed to be destroyed immediately. Two, he needed to get these prisoners to Intrepid. Three, once the planet was secure, he needed to help the civilians recover, make sure they were taken care of. And deal with all the new prisoners from the ground combat.

His stomach turned over. Intrepid? They still hadn't had any word from the planet. For all he knew, the entire landing force could have been wiped out. All of the civilians dead, and eaten by these monsters. He just didn't know. It'd be hours before they were close enough to pick up their signal.

It seemed like the list of problems was growing by the minute. He

needed to get his fleet fixed, the dead buried, and the wounded taken care of and save a planet. A thousand things all needed to be solved immediately.

Sighing, he finished dressing. That was the thing they never told you when you were a junior officer. The higher you went in the Navy, the more problems you had to solve. And you never got ahead of the game. Once one thing was finished, two more showed up.

Once he was fully dressed and presentable again, he left his stateroom and headed for the combat command center. He'd slept, eaten a full meal at a table instead of while sitting in his command chair. And showered. He felt like a new man ready to take on the day.

Stepping into the command center, he made a quick scan. Most of the seats were empty. Men were rotating through a sleep cycle. He'd had to force his staff away from their monitors and data feeds. He knew in his gut that things were done. But he knew he would need them again when they got to Intrepid.

As he slowly made sure that no one was there that shouldn't be, his shoulders relaxed. His men had followed his orders. Of course, Professor Sinclair had not. She sat behind her monitor pouring over feeds from the other ships. Everything she could find about the Scraggs.

"Professor Sinclair?" he said as he came up behind her.

She whipped around to stare blankly back at him, her mind obviously lost in the information she was processing. "Yes, Sir?"

He smiled to himself. At least she'd taken time to grab a shower and if appearances could be trusted, a quick nap.

"Have you learned anything useful?" he asked.

Her shoulders slumped in defeat as she slowly shook her head, "No, not really. They are surrendering. No last minute holdouts. No sabotage. It's like a complete collapse. When the boarding parties arrive, the Scraggs lay down on their backs. Like dogs submitting to the alpha."

He nodded, her analogy made sense.

"What else?"

"Not much else. We can't talk to them. We can't decipher their writing. The boarding parties have been unable to figure out their propulsion system

or really anything. It's going to take us quite some time to learn what we need to know."

He nodded, it was what he had feared.

"Well, that is one thing we are not going to have a lot of. At some point, their home planet is going to wonder what happened and is going to send someone to find out. My biggest worry is that the someone is stronger and more powerful than the last expedition."

She smiled weakly, "We'll find something, Sir, I am sure of it."

"I'm sure you will," he said with a comforting smile. "But do not run yourself into the ground. We need to be fresh and fully functioning. Don't push yourself so hard."

She studied him for a moment and then said, "Does that apply to you as well, Admiral?"

He laughed. "The difference is that I'm an Admiral. Everyone knows that we never get tired or worn down. It's not part of the job description."

She shot him a quick grin and then turned back to her reports.

"Commander Evans," he said as he took his command chair. "I see that you have ignored my orders about getting some rest. Have you even left your station?"

"Sir," the commander said as he stood up. "Yes sir, I have left it."

Admiral McKenzie slowly shook his head, he noticed that the commander had not mentioned for how long. And the stale sandwich sitting to the side of his station let the admiral know that the man hadn't even gone to the wardroom to eat.

Shaking his head, the Admiral said, "Finish up what you are working on, then go grab some rest. You are banished from the command center for the next twelve hours. That also means you can't spend that time in the communication room, reading reports before they get here? Do you understand? You will go to your stateroom and sleep."

The commander's shoulders slumped as he nodded. "Aye, aye, Sir."

The admiral smiled at his staff member. "Tony, this isn't over. I need you rested for the next phase."

“Yes, Sir,” he replied. “It’s just that we should be regaining communications with Intrepid in a few minutes and I wanted to be here when the reports came in.

Admiral McKenzie frowned. “I thought we wouldn’t be close enough for several more hours.”

The commander smiled. “Captain Freeborn has his men repairing the high gain antennas. He thought you might need them, Sir. They report they should have them up any time now.”

The admiral nodded, he needed that information. The Captain had made a wise decision.

“Very well, you can wait for the reports, then grab some sleep.”

The commander smiled and sat back down.

Admiral McKenzie twisted to watch the two monitors from Intrepid, silently pushing for some kind of connection. He needed to know. His jaw slowly grew tighter and tighter while he waited. At last, the monitor on the left flickered for a moment then settled on the face of Captain Woods.

“Captain,” the admiral said, “Sorry for the disconnect. Things have been rather hectic.”

The captain nodded, his face set in a sad frown. “I’m sorry to report, Sir, Admiral Webber has died. A heart attack.”

Admiral McKenzie gasped with surprise. Admiral Webber was a good friend and a fit, robust man. The thought that he could be taken down by his own body at a time like this was shocking.

Taking a deep breath, the admiral nodded. “I am sorry,” he said, “Please report. We need to finish this so that all of our fallen will not have died in vain. Have the Reliance and Dauntless arrived?”

“Yes, Sir,” Captain Wood replied. “Just a few minutes ago. I’ve ordered them to take up position above the main landing force and provide fire as directed by Colonel Stevenson.”

The admiral looked over at the Monitor for the landing force. Still no signal.

“Sir,” the Captain began to report, “the Marines have been hit hard. We’ve lost two transports due to fire from the planet, plus almost all of the

dart ships you sent us. I've had to back off to high orbit. But, the Reliance and Dauntless are going to have to get closer if they are going to be effective."

Admiral McKenzie held his breath for a moment. This wasn't over, he reminded himself. Once again, his ships, his men were going in harm's way.

"I concur," he said, indicating the captain should continue his report.

"Once the Reliance and Dauntless are in place, I think we can end this. It's been close, but their firepower should tip the balance. Unless these bastards have something more up their sleeve."

Admiral McKenzie nodded. "Any word from Drakes Rift, ?" he asked, thinking back to the young Marine he had talked to earlier. He had abandoned them. He abandoned all of them. Just so he could finish off the Alien fleet.

"No, Sir," the captain said. "We've had no communication with them. And I've lost almost every shuttle I have. I couldn't send them help even if we had any reserves. It is going to be a while before we can stop the main force. I can't break off the destroyers to check on them. I have to focus on protecting Colonel Stevenson and the civilians of Tannerville."

The admiral nodded, his stomach felt sick at the thought of not rescuing the men at the Rift, but the priorities had to stand. Defeat the main alien force, protect the civilians.

"Very well," he said, "Carry on, we should be there as soon as we can." The response seemed so inadequate, he thought. Men were dying, he needed to be there stopping it.

Turning back to Commander Evans, he smiled gently. "There you have it, Commander,. There is nothing either you or I can do about it until we get there. Go grab some rest."

The commander's shoulders slumped. "Aye, aye, Sir," he said as he started to shut down his station. The commander had almost completed his work when he suddenly froze, as his brow narrowed in confusion.

"Sir," he said with a hesitant voice while he stared at his screen.

Admiral McKenzie's stomach clenched into a tight ball. He knew bad news was coming. Glancing over, he checked the Steadfast's monitor. But



the captain seemed content. Their ship was burning circles in the space around the aliens jump point. They didn't seem to be having any problems. No alarm. No panic.

"Yes, commander," he asked, noticing that the man was re-energizing his workstation.

There was a long pause. The admiral noticed that Janet, Professor Sinclair, turned from her own workstation to see what was going on.

"Sir," the commander said again, then paused and shook his head as if unable to believe what he was seeing.

"Spit it out," the Admiral barked as the tension began to get to him.

"A ship, Sir. A ship just came through the wormhole."

"Our wormhole? Not the aliens jump point?"

"Yes Sir," the commander responded.

Admiral McKenzie frowned in confusion. Had some stupid merchant not gotten the word and wandered into the middle of a combat zone?

"Sir, it's the Imperial Flagship, Viceroy." The commander said, his voice rising with disbelief.

Admiral McKenzie's heart jumped to his throat. This was impossible. The Viceroy never went anywhere without the Emperor. And no way would Admiral Jacobs let him anywhere near a combat zone.

Swallowing hard, he pulled up the data and confirmed what Commander Evans was telling him.

"Crap, what now?" he mumbled to himself.

Commander Evan's raised an eyebrow, the admiral shook his head and pointed for the man to sit back down and get to work. More problems. There were always more problems.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Captain Dex Carter's insides turned to mush. The Scraggs were forming up on the other side of the fighting pits. All of them. Every last rat-faced bastard in the valley. Coming together for one final push. It was enough to make a man wish he could go back to just being a sergeant again.

Three thousand of them, he thought. At least. All of them getting ready to charge. Swallowing hard, he desperately tried to figure out what to do next. They'd come pouring down the road like a flash flood through a New Kansas canyon. Nothing would stop them.

He racked his brain for some kind of plan. But there was nothing. No more tricks up his sleeve. No explosives, no hidden traps. All he had left was his men and their rifles. Oh yeah, and their bayonets, he added. As if that was going to make any difference.

His company had been whittled down to little more than a reinforced platoon. Fifty-one men between the aliens and General Smyth's backside. Even if the initial alien force hadn't been beefed up, they probably couldn't have stopped them. But these numbers made the outcome a foregone conclusion. The Marines were going to be overrun.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to come to some kind of acceptance of what was going to happen.

Glancing at the men standing behind the first wall, he slowly shook his head. The morning light glinted off their faceplates and bayonets. He had to smile when he thought about it. Would there be any of them left by the time the Scraggs got to the wall? Would his men get a chance to use the sharpened steel? And if they did, then it was over. Because there would be no coming back from that point.

His men, he thought, and he had failed them.

They would hold, he knew. There was no doubt in his mind. They would hold until they died. Sighing, he arranged his magazines on the top of the wall and waited. Every spare magazine had been loaded. Every clip collected from the fallen men. But it wouldn't be enough. His heart pounded in his chest as he thought of all the things he would never see again.

He'd never again feel the cool wind on a summer's night. He'd never get a chance to take Alicia to that valley or drink a beer after a long march. So

much he'd never get to do.

Finally, by some unspoken agreement, the aliens began to move forward. Single soldiers at first, then the dam burst and the mass of Scraggs began to charge towards them. No visceral screams, no bugle, no rebel yell of charge. Just the eerie thud of thousands of alien feet thumping the dirt.

Sighing, he turned to his men and yelled. "Give them hell."

Immediately, his men began to fire. Taking their time, trying to make sure every shot counted.

Dex held his fire, watching. At first, there was little impact, but then slowly, aliens began to fall. A few at first, but then more as his men found the range. But it wasn't going to be enough. There was just too damn many of them.

Gritting his teeth, he shouldered his rifle and joined them.

Blue laser beams sought targets, burning into the sandbag wall or whizzing by over their head.

The first of his targets fell. Shot through the neck. Dex twisted to the side, searching for any kind of leader. But they all looked the same to him. Sighing, he pulled the trigger and another Scragg died.

The Marines, his Marines, had slowed the advance. Not enough, but a little. Too many aliens were falling, tripping up their comrades coming up behind them. But the advance moved ever forward.

He continued to fire until he emptied the clip. Ducking down, he swapped magazines, dropping the empty one, rising up and firing. A beam caught him square in the faceplate. He shifted before the light could do any damage.

Dex quickly finished his second, and then his third clip. Slamming his fourth magazine home, he drew a bead on the first Alien to reach the trench. Letting out a bit of breath, he squeezed and the monster fell. But he was immediately replaced by another, and then another.

The trench was filled with Scragg bodies. The new ones would be able to walk across them like stepping on a log flow.

Sighing, he continued to fire. A small scream next to him told him that Private Hart had fallen. Shifting, he didn't take time to check on him. They

couldn't afford to stop. The slightest hesitation and the aliens would break through.

Finishing another clip, he dropped to start refilling magazines. It seemed that within minutes, he'd gone through all he had and needed to refill them.

Ammunition cans had been placed along the wall for just this eventuality. Each packed with spare rounds.

As he reached for the individual bullets, a slight hand shoved a full magazine into his.

Alicia, her eyes as big as a Montlake moon looked up at him before she quickly grabbed another magazine and started pushing spare rounds into it.

Dex glanced down the wall. All of the civilians were kneeling behind the Marines, frantically filling magazines. Middle-aged women kneeling in the dirt. Young boys frantically trying to shove bullets into black magazines. Handing out the prizes to the Marines so they could keep fighting.

His men weren't having to stop firing, they could keep up a steady rate. He rose up and glanced over the front of his wall. The same was happening there.

Reaching out he grabbed Alicia's shoulder. "It's time," he said. "You need to go."

She looked back at him for just a brief second and shook her head. "Not yet," she said.

He let out a long breath and shook his head. Damn it, he thought as he rose up and began firing.

Still, they came forward towards him. But the constant resupply of ammunition was making a difference. The Scraggs were having problems getting past the trench. Firing, he smiled to himself. His men were making them pay. Every dead alien was one less alien to attack General Smyth. It wouldn't be enough to stop them. But it was something.

Reaching down without taking his eyes from the field, he let Alicia slip him another magazine. He shoved it into his rifle and took aim.

A loud gasp from the woman next to him drew his attention. Stephan had grabbed a rifle and was aiming it down range. Her brother had to stand on the tips of his toes to see over the wall. His young face set in concentration.

“Get down,” Dex yelled as he reached over and pushed the kids below the wall just as a blue laser beam streaked through the space he had just been occupying.

The boy looked up at him, furious at being pulled out of the fight.

“You don’t have armor,” Dex yelled. “You’re no good to me dead. Help your sister.”

Dex could see the boy fighting with himself, but at last, he nodded and started loading magazines.

Before returning to firing, Dex took a moment to examine his lines. The front wall was getting hurt bad. Eleven or twelve of his men were down. Only ten more were up and firing. The back wall was little better. Thirteen or fourteen men were still fighting.

Smith had grabbed a second rifle and was firing them both at the same time. Just sending slugs down range. Anything to try and stop the bastards.

Shaking his head, Dex began to tell Alicia to leave, when a sudden alien surge broke through the massive fire and reached the front wall.

Screaming at the top of his lungs, Dex shifted to full auto as he tried to stop them. But it was too much. As the monsters died, the Scraggs stepped onto their dead comrades, using them as stools to reach over the wall and try to grab his Marines.

Bayonets flashed, rifle stocks bashed alien heads, but still they came.

This was it, he thought as two of the beasts finally got over the first wall and started wrestling with his men. As Dex dropped one, two more slithered over the top.

Swallowing hard, he continued to fire, but the wave was just too big, it couldn’t be stopped.

Amidst the yelling and cursing and screams of pain, a distant boom caught his attention but he pushed it aside and continued to fire. His heart raced, his eyes stung with sweat and his mind whirled with the fear of defeat.

A second, third, and fourth boom echoed off the canyon walls. Where had he heard that before? he wondered as he dropped another Scragg trying to pull the rifle out of Corporal Obamway’s hands.

Sonic booms, he thought, as he took aim. That was where he heard it

before. Then, as if out of nowhere, the village street exploded. Followed almost immediately by three more explosions.

A mixture of dirt, Scraggs, and wood was tossed into the air with each explosion. What the hell? His brow narrowed as he stopped firing to figure out what was going on.

Within ten seconds, another four more explosions erupted. Each of them leaving a twenty-foot circle in the middle of the street and dozens of dead Scraggs in their wake. That was the thing about tossing a creature twenty-feet into the air. It didn't matter if you had armor or not. If the concussion didn't kill you. The fall would. It'd turn your insides into jelly.

"The Navy," he whispered to himself, unable to believe what he was seeing. The Navy had arrived. He would know what their rounds looked like in his sleep. Twenty-four-pound shots hitting the ground at thousands of miles per hour. Hitting with such force that everything was ripped into small pieces. A permanent meteor shower focused on the main street of Drake's Rift.

Another four shots struck in the middle of the Scraggs.

"Yes!" he yelled as he watched his enemies die.

Still, the Scraggs in front continued to try and get over the wall. Some made it. But there was no longer the push behind them.

Dex quickly scanned the battlefield. Four more rounds hit the mob. The Navy was firing so fast that the dirt and body parts couldn't come to rest before they were thrown back up into the air with the next explosion.

He was drawn to a distant Scragg standing in the far back, his face tilted up, looking into the sky.

"That's right, you bastard," Dex yelled. "That's the Imperial Navy up there. And you are dead, you just don't know it yet."

The distant Scragg turned to run. Dex felt a great sense of victory. Finally, they were ...

His thoughts were interrupted as a Scragg who had gotten over the first wall, ran, and ducked through the middle opening of the second wall. Dex's heart stopped as he watched the monster reach for Alicia, grabbing her by the hair, pulling her back.

The world stopped, as his worst nightmare began. Taking a quick breath to calm himself. He held his rifle barrel to the beast's head and pulled the trigger. The soldier's head exploded, showering Alicia and himself with blood and bone.

Dex quickly threw up his faceplate and gave her a look, silently asking if she was alright. She stared back at him, her eyes big and frightened. But underneath, he saw a steely determination as she wiggled to get out from beneath her dead captor. Giving him a reassuring smile.

Grinning from ear to ear, he looked out over the field and froze. They were falling back. At first, a slow retreat as they backed up, still firing, then, as more explosion occurred, the monsters turned and ran.

Dex sighed heavily as he laid his forehead on the wall in front of him. They had done it. They had survived.

His men froze for a moment. They too were in as much shock as the Scraggs. To go from certain death to victory was overwhelming. Then the new reality sank in and the men began to fire down range at the fleeing enemy.

Their anger and bloodlust taking over as they viciously tried to kill every last Scragg they could before the bastards changed their mind and returned.

Dex held his fire, instead, he watched his men take out the fleeing monsters. Slowly, his body began to shake as the adrenaline took over and had nowhere left to go. Grabbing the top of the wall, he held on and let the fear and joy and pain and terror and anger wash through him.

Pulling himself back to his responsibility, he watched as over a thousand Scraggs made it out of the village and out of range of his men. The Navy shots continued to follow them, pushing them further and further away. The Navy and his men had eliminated two-thirds of the attacking force. Bodies and body parts littered the ground. Half the village buildings had been demolished. Perfect round twenty-foot holes pocketed the main street. In fact, none of the original flat dirt road remained. There were only holes and dead Scraggs.

Reaching down, he pulled Alicia and Stephan up to the wall so they could see. They deserved to see this. Looking down the line of his men, he saw the other civilians stepping up onto the bench so that they could watch

the destruction of their enemy.

Turning back to the front, he watched the Scraggs continue to run. A mob fleeing a riot. His heart fell when he thought about them regrouping and making another attack. If the Navy pulled out, he and his men would still be destroyed.

The Navy though, being the Navy, had a plan.

The mob of Scraggs had reached the crest of the far hill when four rounds exploded across the top. As if saying, this far, and no farther. Every Scragg slid to a stop, the mob becoming one entity as it frantically searched for a safe exit.

The Navy gunners refused to provide such an exit. They started laying down projectiles around the mob. Each one throwing up a geyser of dirt and bushes. Each one telling them, you are surrounded, don't go this way.

The mob churned and pushed at each other, but they refused to venture beyond the ring of death established by the Navy.

Dex took a deep breath, holding it as he watched. Would it work? Would these bastards be smart enough to surrender?

And then it happened. A lone Scragg soldier figured it out. Twisting, he threw his rifle as far away from himself as he could. The other soldiers looked at him, then at the next eruption of ground forty feet away and followed suit.

It was like a school of fish coming to the same decision at the same time, it rippled through the crowd until ever last weapon had been discarded out of the ring.

Dex shivered with relief. The Navy, the damn, beautiful Navy.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Admiral McKenzie chewed the inside of his mouth as he waited. A habit he had conquered years before only to return at the apex of his life. Holding his breath, he waited for the report.

“Sir,” the captain of the Reliance began, “the attack at Drake’s Rift has been stopped. That’s it. That’s the last of them.”

A cheer erupted in the Command Center. Admiral McKenzie slumped into his chair. He glanced over at Janet who shot him a big smile. Smiling back, he nodded and told the Reliance skipper job well done.

Turning away from the destroyer’s commander, he started going down the list in his mind. What next.

“Commander Evans,” he said, “any word from the Viceroy?”

“Yes, Sir, we’re just now establishing a link. It should be connected in just a second.”

The admiral nodded as he studied his screen and waited. At last it flickered and Admiral Jacob’s old, craggy, wrinkled, face appeared.

“Mac,” the old man said. “You’ve done it. Great work.”

Admiral McKenzie’s shoulders slumped with relief. If the old man was smiling then life couldn’t be bad. He was a natural curmudgeon, if he was pleased, then life was truly good.

“Sir,” Admiral McKenzie replied, “thank you. What are you doing here?”

No use beating around the bush. Jacobs didn’t go in for small talk.

It took a second for the signal to get to the ship and their reply back to the Churchill. McKenzie held his breath while he waited.

Admiral Jacob’s face dropped his smile and turned very serious. “I tried to stop him. But he insisted. Said he’d fire me if I didn’t let him come.”

“Hello, Admiral McKenzie,” the Emperor said as he came on a second screen. “I wish to echo Admiral Jacobs’ compliments. You have done it. A thousand years from now, they will be talking about this battle.”

Admiral McKenzie took a deep breath. This was what he had feared. It wasn’t like he didn’t have enough problems already, but the Emperor was

here. Frantically, he juggled a dozen different issues in his mind trying to foresee any way that the Emperor's safety could be put in danger.

"Sir ..." he began, careful he reminded himself. The Emperor might be willing to hear harsh truths. But he was still the Emperor.

"Sir," he began again, "this is still an active combat zone. We have not secured all of the Scragg ships. One of them might be able to reconstitute itself and attack."

The Emperor slowly shook his head. "I am willing to live with the risk. Besides, we received the report from the Reliance, the last of them are surrendering. You've done it. You've won."

Admiral McKenzie sighed heavily. This was a battle he was not going to win.

"Besides," the Emperor said with a big smile, "we are bringing you a present. You can tell Professor Sinclair we've got a translator. Well, sort of a pair of translators. An Eundai who can talk to the Scraggs. And a Professor Robinson who can translate what the Eundai tells him. It's a hodgepodge, but I think it will work."

Admiral McKenzie quickly glanced over at Janet, she was smiling from ear to ear, vigorously nodding. "I know him, he's a top linguist."

He could see that she was overjoyed at the prospect of communicating with the Scraggs. Her curiosity was eating at her, so many questions that needed to be answered.

Turning back to the screen, he nodded slowly, "I understand. But, Sir, it can wait, really."

The Emperor shook his head, "I disagree, we don't know what we are dealing with. Where are they from? How many of them are there? Do they have another fleet ready? How'd they created their own jump point? Can they do that anywhere? Is the rest of the Empire in danger? No Admiral, we can't wait."

Admiral McKenzie nodded. "Very well sir, I understand. But I must insist you give us time to organize, to make sure things are secure."

The Emperor slowly shook his head. "We will be at Intrepid within twelve hours or so. That should be more than enough time. "

Admiral McKenzie ground his teeth in frustration. He'd just defeated an alien fleet, the most critical battle in the last two thousand years. Saved the human race. And now he was being ordered around like a midshipman. Damn, life wasn't fair.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded and said, "Aye, aye, Sir." His clipped voice letting the Emperor know that he wasn't pleased.

The Emperor nodded his head, he didn't care if the Admiral was pleased or not. He didn't pay him to be pleased.

"We'll sign off for now, let you get back to your job," the Emperor said. "And again, you've done wonderfully, Admiral. You and your men have performed admirably, you should all be very proud."

"Thank you, Sir," Admiral McKenzie said, still not willing to admit that the Emperor was right about being there.

The Emperor smiled, Admiral Jacobs gave him a quick nod, then the screen flickered off as the connection was shut down.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he re-juggled his list of priorities, reviewing and re-analyzing things. Sighing, he called Commander Evans and Professor to his side.

"Jake," he said to the commander, "I want you and the Professor to be in charge of the interrogations. I don't want headquarters running the show. You two know more about these creatures than anyone in the galaxy, you take the lead."

"Yes, Sir," the commander said with a big smile.

"And Professor Sinclair, it looks like you will get your wish as well, but I think we'll hold off until we get to Intrepid. I don't want to stop and investigate the enemy ships. We'll leave some destroyers to do that."

She nodded, smiling as much as the commander.

He frowned as he thought of the hill in front of them. More like a mountain, really. So much to do.

Professor Sinclair, Janet, he reminded himself, reached out and gently touched his arm. "You did it, Mac. Sure, there are problems in front of us. But nothing like we faced just a few hours ago. Enjoy it. You deserve it."

He smiled back at her and nodded. She was right, they had come so far,

but at such a cost. Sighing, he nodded and turned back to his monitors. No need for them to see the sense of loss in his eyes. The legend of Admirals not having emotions must be maintained.

.oOo.

Captain Dex Carter sighed for the thousandth time. Three days since the last shot was fired and everything was still screwed up.

The Dauntless had sent down a shuttle with communication equipment and two dozen Navy spacers to help with prisoner control.

His stomach turned over as he thought about that shuttle leaving with his wounded and dead. The picture of those body bags being loaded would not leave his mind. No matter how he tried, he couldn't stop wondering what he might have done differently that might have saved some of his men.

Sighing again, he looked up the hill at the ring of barbed wire surrounding the Scraggs and the humans walking patrol around the ring. The aliens sat in the middle, their long arms wrapped around their knees, staring off into nothing.

They'd used the farm equipment to dig the mass graves, but they'd used the prisoners to fill it with the dead Scraggs. His guards standing over them ready if necessary. A scene that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Just like so many others.

The guards really weren't needed he thought. Once the Scraggs had submitted, they became meek and mild. The former, vicious monsters, became as tame as newborn kittens. Dex shook his head as he tried to wrap his mind around the juxtaposition of personalities.

"Oh, well," he mumbled to himself. His men were fed, the civilians were trying to figure out how to rebuild. Alicia had learned that her mother and two brothers were still alive. Life could be so much worse, he told himself.

Yet, the weight of the world still rested on his shoulders. Where was his relief? Why wasn't someone more senior on the ground? Didn't they remember he was only a sergeant in real life? He needed someone who could take responsibility for the thousands of decisions to be made.

More and more questions continued to tumble through his mind. Where were the replacements for the men he had lost? When would his men be allowed to stand down? They needed time to recover and recoup. It wasn't

right, he felt like he was sitting out here all alone.

He'd repeatedly radioed in these questions and been gently reminded to be patient. That there were bigger problems to deal with.

Shaking his head, he tried to not think of how bad things must have been for the primary landing force if they still couldn't send him any help.

"Are you still worried?" Alicia asked as she came up behind him.

He turned and gave her a quick smile. The woman would always know the perfect thing to say.

Laughing, he shrugged his shoulders, no use trying to fool her. She could see through him like a screen door.

Slipping an arm through his, she reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

"You are a hero," she said. "I thought that was what every man wanted to be. You will always be the hero of Drake's Rift. "

He frowned and slowly shook his head. "The heroes were loaded on that shuttle in body bags," he said grimly.

She sighed and said, "I know, but just think how many more people would have died if you hadn't stopped them. One of the Navy spacers was telling me that the entire fleet was talking about it. That if you hadn't held them off. If they had hit the main Marine force from behind, they would have collapsed, and the Scraggs would have overrun their positions."

He shrugged, while he was glad that he had done his job, that didn't take away the sting of what he had lost. The men who would never know what they had accomplished.

The two of them stood there, neither speaking. Dex was surprised at how not awkward it was. They didn't need to speak to know that things were right between them.

After a few minutes, Alicia pulled at his arm. "Come on," she said, "it's time for dinner, Mrs. Jensen has organized a Bar-B-Q, one of the men shot a Kairn this morning. She's made her famous potato salad. It will be great."

He smiled down at her, loving the way she was trying to pull him out of his funk. Nodding, he started back towards the village, arm in arm.

They hadn't gone five feet when a roaring rush overhead drew him to an

instant stop.

A Navy shuttle was coming in. He frowned to himself. They weren't expecting a resupply until tomorrow.

Both he and Alicia came to a stop and watched the shuttle hover, shift a little, then settle down for a smooth landing. Dex smiled to himself as he admired the skill of the pilot. Something struck him as odd, he thought as his brow narrowed in confusion. The side of the shuttle had some kind of logo he had never seen before. Scrunching his eyes, he tried to make it out.

"Oh, my God," Alicia exclaimed as she dropped his arm to bring a hand to her mouth.

"What?" he asked, but all she could do was shake her head with disbelief.

Dex looked again. It was an Imperial Navy shuttle. Of that, there was no doubt. This was not a new attack from the Scraggs. Not unless they'd taken over the fleet and he was pretty sure that hadn't happened.

Before he could press her on what was wrong, the shuttle doors opened and eight Marines quickly rushed out to take up a security perimeter. Dex frowned as he studied them. Their armor was spotless, no burns, no rips or tears. They looked like they'd just stepped off the parade ground back on Taurus.

Following quickly after the Marines, a contingent of Navy officers stepped down from the shuttle. Dex's insides turned over when he saw all the brass. This could not be good, he thought as he swallowed hard.

Without thinking, he adjusted his uniform and stood up straighter. Too many years of habit took over.

The officers approached, the Marine guard moving smoothly with them. Always keeping the officers in the center, protected, like sheepdogs with a small flock. Dex studied their performance and had to admit to himself that they were good. The sergeant inside of him could admire professionalism when he saw it.

As the group approached, Dex felt Alicia starting to slip away. Reaching out he gently grabbed her shoulder and shook his head. "No you don't. I'm not going through this alone."

She swallowed hard, looking back up at him with big eyes and a look of terror that he had hoped to never see again.

“It’s the Emperor,” she whispered as if saying those words might conjure up the unknown.

He whipped around to check and see what she was talking about. His stomach fell to the ground. She was right, it had to be. Admiral McKenzie and Admiral Jacobs were both walking behind the man. No way would they do that except for someone senior. And that meant the Emperor.

The man was dressed in a plain Navy gray officer’s uniform. No special markings. But, it was the Emperor, of that there was no doubt in Dex’s mind.

The markings on the side of the shuttle made sense. That was the Emperor’s family crest. Crap. What was going on? Just when he thought life might be good again. This happens. One of the things he had learned early in his career, things never went well when the brass was around. They were paid to find problems to be solved.

And it didn’t get any bigger than the Emperor. This was so not good.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Dex quickly scanned the distant prisoners. The Emperor arriving completely made him readjust his estimation on how many guards he needed.

Thankfully, there was no activity in the alien camp. Not even curiosity about the new shuttle. Swallowing hard, he looked back at his men. Those not on guard duty were sitting around eating, joking. Sergeant Smith had his uniform shirt off while he tried to sew up a rip. Obamway was laid out flat on the ground, half naked, trying to soak up some rays.

Dex shook his head. Why hadn't he been informed? Why hadn't he been given a chance to get ready?

Grinding his teeth, he wondered if he should yell back at his men to form up. To be ready to render honors.

Seeing that he had no time. He snapped to attention and rendered a salute.

The Emperor smiled as he and both Admirals returned his salute with a quick snap.

"Your Highness," Admiral McKenzie began, "this is Captain Dex Carter, commander of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, of the Taurus regiment."

Dex's heart raced in his chest. How long would he hold that title? he wondered. Surely, he'd get kicked back down to sergeant when this was all over.

"Captain," the Emperor said, his voice sounding just like the thousands of vids Dex had seen over the years. "You and your men are to be commended. Truly remarkable, what you have accomplished. It is so nice to finally meet you. I've read all of your initial reports. Truly remarkable."

The Emperor then did something that breached every protocol Dex had ever heard about. He held out his hand.

Dex swallowed hard as he shook the Emperor's hand while his mind raced a million miles a minute. What was he supposed to do now? They didn't teach stuff like this to sergeants. This was more the senior officer stuff he had heard about.

Then, remembering who stood next to him, and the possibility of shifting some of the limelight, he said, "Sir, ... I mean Your Highness. May I



introduce Miss Alicia Miller of Drake's Rift, ? She and her people were instrumental in our success. Without them. We couldn't have done it."

Alicia looked up at him, then back at the Emperor. Dex could tell that she didn't know whether to bow or curtsy. Hell, she was probably wanting to strangle him for pulling her into this. He could well imagine how much she hated greeting the Emperor of the galaxy dressed in ripped jeans and a dusty shirt, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail.

"Miss Miller," the Emperor said with a soft smile, holding his hand out to her as well. "I am so sorry for all that you and your people have suffered. I promise, we will do everything in our power to help you rebuild."

"Your Highness," she said as she shook his hand, "Captain Carter is being modest. His men saved us. Without them, we would have been taken within minutes of the Scraggs arriving. We will never be able to repay them for what they did for us."

The Emperor nodded, then glanced back and forth between the two people standing before him. His brow wrinkled as he considered what he was seeing, then he smiled to himself and Dex just knew that the man could see how he felt about Alicia. It must be written all over his face.

"We would like a briefing," Admiral McKenzie said, "Can you walk us through what happened here?"

Dex swallowed hard as he glanced back towards his men. Thankfully, Sergeant Smith had seen what was going on and had the men up and in formation. They might look like a ragtag group of misfits. But they were standing proud.

", Sir," Dex said as he let out a deep breath and started explaining about the drop from the transports and the loss of two-thirds of the battalion and all the senior staff.

As they made their way over the battlefield, he pointed out each encounter, each maneuver, and counter-maneuver. The Emperor nodded, occasionally asking a question. Dex was surprised at the sharp insight the questions indicated. It was obvious the man was an expert on military tactics. He would make a good sergeant, Dex thought to himself.

As they moved down the main street, the Emperor made a point of stopping and talking to each person. Shaking their hand. Thanking them.

Praising them for what they had done. The young Marines looked at Dex, terrified of doing or saying the wrong thing. The civilians stood there in frozen wonderment. Unable to believe what was happening to them.

Once he was done with greetings and small talk, the Emperor would turn back to Dex and nod for him to continue with his explanations.

When they reached the first wall, the Emperor stopped for a moment to examine the damage. Furrowing his brow, he reached up and removed a glob of amber glass.

The Scraggs' lasers transformed large sections of the wall to a yellow, pasty glass. "One lesson learned, Sir. It was like the books said. Sandbags are great against lasers. The sand turns to glass and reflects even more."

The Emperor nodded. "If it is all right, I'd like to keep this," he said, indicating the fist-size piece of glass.

Dex almost laughed. What was he going to say? No, the Emperor couldn't have it?

"Of course, Sir, we'd be honored," he was able to say, rather proud of himself for not making a snide response.

The Emperor nodded, as he wove his way through the walls. Stopping, he stood up on the bench and looked out over the wall, back over the battlefield.

Both Admirals joined him on either side.

"Five thousand," the Emperor said as he slowly shook his head in disbelief, "against seventy-six. It doesn't seem possible." Turning, he looked down the Rift. "And this would lead to Tannerville? The aliens would have poured down on the landing force like lava on a grass field.

Admiral Jacobs nodded. "Yes, Sir, they wouldn't have had any warning."

Again, the Emperor turned back to look out over the battlefield. Dex could have sworn he saw a tear forming in the corner of the Emperor's eye. But that was impossible to even think of.

"See that these people are taken care of," he said to his aide. "I want a weekly report until every building is restored, until every person is accounted for and returned to their family. I want this valley fixed and I want to return

to dedicate a memorial to the people who died here. The Empire needs to know about this.”

“Yes, Sir,” the aide said as he made a note on his tablet.

“Admiral Jacobs,” the Emperor continued without taking his eyes off the street in front of him. “I want the awarding of the Imperial Cross to happen here on Intrepid, not back at Taurus.”

Dex’s mouth ran dry, were they talking about him?

“Yes, Sir,” the old Admiral said with a smile.

“Now then,” the Emperor said, turning to Captain Carter. “What else can we do for you?”

Dex tried to swallow but his mouth refused to work right. His mind frantically tried to come up with an appropriate answer.

“Nothing, Sir,. My men are being taken care of. We need to be relieved. But I realize that is going to take some time.”

The Emperor nodded but continued to stare at him, as if waiting for more. Dex realized that the man was not used to having people not ask for things. Especially when he went out of his way to offer.

“There is one thing,” he said, holding his breath. “When the new company commander is assigned, I’d like to remain with the company. I was scheduled for a transfer in six months. But, I think we’re going to need more time to reconstitute. They are going to need an experienced sergeant.”

The Emperor and the two Admirals looked at him like he’d lost his mind. Then, Admiral Jacobs laughed, “Son, your days of being a sergeant are long over.”

Admiral McKenzie slowly shook his head. “And as a newly commissioned officer, you can’t remain with the same unit. It just doesn’t work. You will be assigned to another company. Believe me, we have more than enough openings.”

Dex’s stomach fell at the thought of leaving his men, he tried hard not to let his disappointment show on his face. “Sir, it’s not like I have enough men left. Seventy percent are gone. It will be all new people. Almost like a whole new unit.”

Admiral McKenzie studied him for a moment. Dex knew that he’d

overstepped the line, but he had to try.

An awkward pause in the conversation settled over the group until the Emperor broke in.

“I think we can make an exception, Mac, don’t you?”

Admiral McKenzie thought for a moment then nodded. Dex could see a smile behind the man’s eyes. He wasn’t upset, not really.

Letting out a deep breath, Dex turned to Alicia and smiled. She, however, frowned up at him. As if unable to believe that was the one thing he wanted.

“Sir, Your Highness,” she said, her eyes narrowing with focus. “May I make a request?”

The Emperor smiled, “Of course.”

She hesitated for a moment, then shot Dex a quick look of apology.

“Sir,” she began, “can I request that Captain Carter’s company remain here on Intrepid. At least for a while. I know that my people will feel so much more secure knowing that he and his men are here.”

Dex leaned back in shock. That was the last thing he had expected. Asking something of the Emperor was already beyond normal. But to ask for a specific military unit to be assigned somewhere. It was unheard of.

The Emperor looked at her for a long moment, then at the captain and smiled. Turning to Admiral Jacobs he said, “We hadn’t decided which of the Taurus divisions to move to Intrepid. I guess this sort of makes the decision for us.”

Admiral Jacobs nodded. “As good a reason as any, Sir,” he said, but Dex could tell the man desperately wanted to roll his eyes.

The Emperor nodded, obviously pleased that was all settled, then looked out over the battlefield one last time.

“You know, Captain,” he said wistfully, “a thousand years from now, people will not know my name. I will just be another in a long list of Emperors. But they will never forget yours. They will never forget Drake’s Rift. It will be studied and admired. Dissected and discussed. Torn apart and put back together a hundred different ways. But they won’t forget. Because it was here, in this valley, that the Empire saw it’s finest hour.

## Epilogue

Major Dex Carter turned back to give his wife a hand up the last bit of trail. His heart leaped when she smiled up at him. That was one of the many things he loved about her. The way she made his world feel special.

Three years, he thought. And the woman still shook his world with a simple smile. Taking her hand, he guided her around the outcrop of rocks.

“There it is,” he said as he pointed to the remote Valerian valley. Finally, after all this time he could share this with her.

Alicia gasped and squeezed his arm. “It is as beautiful as you said.”

He smiled to himself. She was right, the mix of blues and reds, the bright oranges, and subtle yellows. All of it ruffling back and forth in the cool summer breeze.

“It’s like a painter’s pallet,” she said with a whisper. “Unbelievable.”

“A mixed up, crazy painter who couldn’t make up his mind,” he said as he wrapped an arm around her.

She smiled back up at him and squeezed him in a tight hug.

“I checked,” he said. “It hasn’t been claimed. With the double land-grant I’ve got as a veteran and your allotment, we could claim four hundred and eighty acres. More than enough to own the valley.”

She looked up at him, unsure of what he was saying.

“But of course, we’d have to move onto it, build a house,” he continued.

Her brow narrowed in confusion. “But what about the Marines?” she asked. “You’d have to resign.”

He nodded slowly, “If you wanted, I would. It’s either that or take those orders to Montlake.”

She continued to frown up at him. “I thought you wanted a Battalion. That is what you’ve worked so hard for these last few years.”

He shrugged his shoulders. Yes, he wanted that, but he wanted her to be happy more.

“If I take those orders, then they’ve got me for six more years. We’d do two on Montlake with the Battalion, and then have to move to Taurus. Admiral McKenzie has let me know that the Emperor want’s me on his staff

now, but is willing to let me have my Battalion first. He knows I have to have that command if I want to make Colonel.”

“The Emperors staff?” she asked with disbelief. “What does that mean?”

He sighed heavily. “I’d be overseeing his security. It’d mean we’d have to live at the Palace. You’d have to attend the Palace balls, you know, stuff like that. It’s sort of expected of military wives. If the Empress traveled somewhere, she might ask you to go with her, especially if I am going with the Emperor.”

She pulled away from him to study his face.

“Let me see if I’ve understood this correctly. You are telling me, you are taking me to Montlake, all the way on the other side of the galaxy, a strange and new place, where I will spend two years in domestic bliss. Then I will have to live in the Palace and become friends with the Empress. To top it off, I will have to attend parties on the arm of the most handsome hero in all of the galaxy. And you are afraid I might not be happy?”

Dex shrugged his shoulders. The idea sounded preposterous to him. That was why he had wanted to show her the valley. To give her an out.

She smiled up at him and slapped his shoulder. “You idiot, you do realize that you’ve just described every woman’s dream. Add a couple of kids, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

He studied her for a moment, trying to decipher if she was being truthful or not. He well knew she would deny her own feelings to please him. He didn’t want that, especially not now. They were mapping out the rest of their lives.

She looked back up at him and slowly shook her head. “Honey, your valley is truly beautiful. I thank you for bringing me here. But it is not what I want. Besides, if we lived here, we’d destroy its beauty. No, leave it as it is so we can always come back for a visit.”

“But the constant moving,” he asked with a frown. “The never knowing where we will be next. The pomp and ceremony. I can’t ask you to put up with all of that.”

She laughed and said, “Honey, I always dreamt of adventure. Of seeing new things and going new places. One thing about being married to you, it will never be boring. For that, I thank you.”

Dex took a deep breath and nodded. The Marines it is then, he thought as he smiled to himself. Why not? With this woman by his side, he could do anything.

Turning, he looked out over the valley. Maybe he would claim it anyway. Keep it like it is. Pristine, pure, perfect.

Life was good he thought as he draped an arm around his wife's shoulders. Yes, life was good.

**The End**

## Author Notes

I would like to thank you for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. As always, I would like to thank my family and friends. No author is an island. We absorb experiences from the people around us and twist them into what we need for the story.

I want to thank fellow authors Anya Monroe, Eryn Scott, Chris White, and Kim Loraine. Their help has been immeasurable.

If you enjoyed this book, I thought you might enjoy my book, [‘Intrepid’](#) I’ve put the first two chapters here for you to try. Check it out. If you need to contact me. Email me at [AuthorNateJo@gmail.com](mailto:AuthorNateJo@gmail.com). Or follow me on [facebook.com/authorNateJo](https://facebook.com/authorNateJo). I am always interested in hearing from my readers.

As an additional note, I wish to thank Ms. Sheryl Turner for her assistance. As always, I couldn’t have done it without her. Any mistakes are mine, all the good things are due to her help.

As many of you may have noticed. This story was inspired by the battle of Roark’s Drift in Africa during the Zulu wars. But I also took elements from naval action at Trafalgar and the U.S. Marines at the Battle of Guadalcanal.

During my military career I worked with many Marines and Sailor and was always impressed with their dedication, can do attitude, and the fact that they were just do darn good at what they did. I hope I was able to capture some of that on these pages.

And last, I also wanted to comment on the dedication. Mr. Harold Snodgrass was one of the smartest men I ever knew. He spent his youth walking barefoot behind a mule on a central Texas farm. Twenty years later he was maintaining communication equipment for the Apollo Space program. He left poverty behind him and lifted his family up into the middle class. Through out his life, he sacrificed for others. And I loved him dearly.



# Intrepid

## Chapter One

Petty Officer Second Class, Erik Tanner, hated briefcases. He hated everything about them. The way they looked, their leathery smell, the cold plastic handles. Most of all, he hated the people who used them.

The only people worse were farmers.

I mean, come on, he thought. Everyone has their own data flex embedded in their hip containing all of the known recorded information in the universe. Why would anyone need a briefcase? The pretentious little twits.

Standing at the bottom of the shuttle's staircase, he tried to ignore his pounding headache and shoulders that screamed every time he moved. That last night of liberty was always the worst, or the best, depending on how you looked at it.

Scanning the people entering the terminal, he shook his head, and then winced at the movement. Most of them carrying useless briefcases, all of them rushing to be someplace else. None of it really important.

God, how he hated being stuck here waiting. Way too much brass, too many people running around wasting their lives on unimportant things. Planet-side was great, but he preferred the brothels and bars of downtown, at least there they were honest about the screwing they were going to give you.

A person broke from the crowd and headed his way. Uh-oh. The Captain was pissed. Erik could see it in his walk across the tarmac. That infamous scowl burned at full strength.

Ship's coxswain and unofficial bodyguard, Erik Tanner, lowered his head and tried not to smile, relieved to know that scowl wasn't directed at him.

Slamming his gloves into his hand, the senior military officer looked like he wanted to launch somebody into the sun.

"Get the XO on the line," he barked at Tanner.

Erik jumped up the stairs into the shuttle and began flipping switches and turning dials to bring up the Intrepid. The Captain could have done it with his

personal communicator, but the shuttle's comms were better.

"Intrepid, this is Intrepid One. Capt'n requests to speak to Commander Tompkins," the young coxswain said into the console.

"Intrepid One, this is Intrepid. Roger. He's right here," the distant watchstander said, as he stepped out of the way for the XO to move onto the screen.

Erik got up and let Captain Freeborn get into the pilot's seat. He looks like he wants to strangle someone, the coxswain thought. Tanner desperately wanted to hang out and listen in, but this probably was one of those times when discretion was the better part of valor, he decided.

Turning to leave his Commanding Officer some privacy, he started for the exit, but the Captain held his arm and shook his head, indicating he should stay.

"No need, the whole crew is going to know in a minute."

"Captain?" Commander Tompkins said.

"It's true Tom, they were serious," Captain Freeborn said through gritted teeth. "We are now official babysitters. Please have the crew start making preparations. We'll be another couple of hours, then bring 'em up."

The XO's jaw dropped before he could catch himself. "Yes, Sir," the second in command said shaking his head in disbelief. "Did they say why?"

The Captain chuckled and said, "Admiral Harris was not in the mood to explain himself. I do believe that he expects us to follow orders, just as he is."

The XO gasped, everyone knew that only two men could give orders to Admiral Harris. Either Duke Lexington, the Minister of Defense, or the Emperor, himself. Captain Freeborn nodded at the XO's shocked face and said, "That's right, and I happen to know that Lexington is on the other side of the galaxy."

The XO came to attention, his face a little paler than normal.

"Yes, Sir, we will make all of the necessary preparations. I assume that extra rations will be coming up?"

"Yes, and you're going to have to find some place to stow it all. Good luck," the Captain said to the stunned officer.

“Okay, I’ll let you go, for now, you’ve got enough to keep you busy. Intrepid One, OUT,” Captain Freeborn said, then reached over and pulled the connection.

He turned to Petty Officer Tanner and shook his head, then laughed at the young man’s shocked expression.

“Not much we can do about it, Tanner. Orders are orders,” he said, looking up at the ceiling, as if trying to fathom the idiocy of senior officers. “Go ahead and refigure the trip back for an additional fifteen passengers. I’ve got some errands to run and will return with our young guests in about an hour.

“Yes, Sir,” the young petty officer said, swallowing at the thought of what the Captain had just told the XO. What kind of idiot would do this to a starship, in fact, the best starship? It didn’t make any sense.

Captain Freeborn walked back towards the terminal without another word, leaving Tanner to take care of things.

He started working the computer to adjust times and weights, and wondered if they’d be bringing their bags, or if that stuff would be coming up later. Deciding it was better to be safe, than sorry, he punched in the numbers for every possible scenario he could think of.

Making another sweep of the gig, he made sure everything was in place and ready. A sense of pride washed over him, as he placed each seat belt in place. The ship’s gig, or shuttle, was his responsibility. He was young to be assigned such an important job, but hell, he’d earned it. It didn’t hurt that he’d been working for the Captain since he jumped out of boot camp.

First four years on the ISS Svenson off of New Terra, then for two years on the Intrepid. Wetting his finger, he rubbed at a spot on one of the rear seats.

A feeling of intense satisfaction coursed through his bones. It was a long way from the fields of New Kansas. He almost had to pinch himself to believe it was true.

You had to love the Imperial Navy. Where else could a twenty-three-year-old farmer, who barely graduated high school, be given the responsibility of piloting a multi-million credit spacecraft? In fact, they paid him. Laughing to himself, and shaking his head at life in general, he gave the

craft one last look and sighed in approval.

If a man could love a cold hard machine, Erik loved his shuttle.

Like all of the crew, he had a lot of different jobs. Lead deck hand, Number one fireman during GQ, and senior watch stander for the 3rd watch. But, coxswain had to be the best. Granted, the computer did all the work, but still, he had to be ready to take over if necessary.

Climbing down the stairs, he placed himself at parade rest. Folding his hands behind his back and setting his feet apart, he stood at the entryway and waited.

After a short period, the far terminal door opened, and Captain Freeborn stepped out and held it open. A gaggle of people exited and started towards the shuttle. The group was made up of three adults and twelve teenagers, all of them dressed in orange temp suits.

“Civilians,” Tanner cursed under his breath.

Their eyes shined with anticipation, whispering behind their hands, they jumped around like a group of Valerian flounders.

They were all in the seventeen to twenty-year-old range. High school seniors to college freshmen type. Young, perky, and privileged, the kind of kids who probably expected to be waited on hand and foot.

Suppressing a shudder, he came to attention and saluted the Captain, his eyebrows rising in question. Were they really going on a glorified field trip?

The Captain smiled, then turned and addressed the group.

“This is Petty Officer Tanner and our shuttle pilot, please listen to him.” Then, turning back towards the junior enlisted man, the Captain raised his eyebrow and said, “Tanner?” failing to hide a smile at his subordinate’s displeasure.

The Petty Officer’s stomach rolled over, as he realized that he and the rest of the crew were going to be locked up in an iron tube with these idiots for the next six months.

The group was made up of six boys, six girls, two male teachers, and one female teacher. Boy, was this going to be different? It was bad enough having civilians aboard, but women! He had to fight to stop his eyes from rolling back into his head, already imagining the problems they were going to cause.

Erik looked out over the crowd.

“If you’ll step aboard, take a seat, we will get you situated.” He stood at the bottom of the stairs as each passenger walked pass. Eyeing them and mentally adding up their weight. Satisfied that one of his projections would be usable for the trip.

A young brunette, prettier than a New Kansas kitten, took her first step onto the stairs. A breath of wind brought him a brief scent of her tantalizing perfume, and his knees almost buckled.

It reminded him of the high meadows in the Blue Mountains on a spring day. Pure, innocent, and full of potential. He had to swallow to regain his composure.

The Captain cocked an eyebrow, as if to say, ‘don’t even think about it, spaceman.’ Erik chuckled to himself and shook his head. This was going to be a long trip.

When they were all aboard, he bound up the stairs and stepped into his shuttle. The passengers were milling about looking for seats. How hard could it be? There were thirty-six chairs. To top it off, some idiot was sitting in the first chair of the first row.

Looking down at the young man, Erik bent over and whispered, “That’s the Captain’s seat. You need to move.”

The young boy looked at him like he was speaking some unknown language, something without nouns and verbs.

“Now!” Erik barked, and the kid cringed like he’d been shot. He looked like a tall skinny rabbit ready to jump out of his own skin.

The boy leaped up, scooted over one seat, then looked back at the Petty Officer, silently asking if this was okay.

Erik nodded in approval, then turned to watch the rest of them get seated. Once they had finally settled in, he ran them through the safety procedures, making sure they could locate their oxygen hookups, having them test their soft globes, etc.

God, I’ve become a glorified flight attendant, he thought to himself. Once complete, he walked down the aisle and made sure everyone was strapped in.

“The barf bags are in the pocket in front of your chair. It’s tradition that everyone cleans up their own puke. I don’t open the door to let you out until everything is squared away,” he said, scowling at them all to make sure they got the message.

Seeing that they were as ready as they were going to get, he stepped to the door and nodded to his commanding officer. It was another one of those silly traditions; the Captain didn’t get onto the shuttle until everyone was settled in.

Captain Freeborn ducked his head through the door and sat in his seat, while Erik pulled the door shut, slamming the handle into the lock, and made his way to the pilot’s seat.

A gasp went up from someone in the back.

“Aren’t you going to pilot the vessel, Captain?” For some reason, Erik was sure it was the pretty brunette.

The Captain laughed, as he buckled his belt, “I’m not qualified, Miss Johnson.”

“But Captain, isn’t he a little young?” the older male teacher asked.

Erik had to hide the shock he felt. The Captain had answered the first question, a surprise in and of itself. But, to be questioned on the same subject a second time was unthinkable. It was like saying you didn’t trust him or something.

“I assure you, that while Tanner may appear few in years, he is more than ancient when it comes to experience. Besides, it’s not like this is a starship,” the Captain said, then pulled out his data device and started on his reports.

Erik ignored the comments from the back and finished making preparations.

The takeoff and trip were uneventful. It was almost like he knew what he was doing or something. A few sick passengers, but not many. He did notice that the brunette wasn’t one of the sick ones, making him smile inside. Yep, most definitely, a long trip.

.o0o.

Miss. Nora Johnson stared out the portal at the starship hanging in

darkness. Her home for the next six months. One step closer to breaking away, she thought. While it was doubtful her father would even notice she was gone, eventually, he would find out. By then, it would be too late. Besides, they'd never think to look for her on a starship bound for an exploratory mission. Not Miss Nora, never Miss Nora. A lifetime of good grades and following their silly rule would make this their last consideration.

She squiggled back and forth in her seat with excitement; it was hard to believe this wasn't all some kind of dream.

The sparkling ship glistened with the reflected sunlight. It was surprisingly small. A long metal tube hanging in space. She knew all the details and dimensions. A hundred and eighty feet long, forty-two feet wide. Three decks separated into Operations, Living, and Engineering.

She'd studied every book she could find, once she figured out how to get included in the trip.

Her hands instinctively loosened her straps so she could get a better look. The weightlessness didn't bother her. The inability to get a better look was frustrating the hell out of her, though.

A section of the distant ship slowly turned black exposing the docking bay. The shuttle twisted, confirming her observation and she lost sight of her new home.

Within minutes the shuttle passed through the opening, and she felt gravity slowly return. The vessel gently settled, and the curved wall behind them closed up. Their trip to the stars was about to begin, she squeezed down hard to stop a girlish squeal from spilling out.

That Petty Officer Tanner jumped out of his seat and scrutinized the passenger area. He probably thinks we're a bunch of idiots, she thought. God, I hate arrogant know it alls, even if they are hotter than a man should be allowed to be. His short rusty brown hair and gray eyes were disconcerting. His nose looked like it had been broken years before, and the small scar on his chin added to the mystery.

Didn't he know they could fix those things now? But, it was the tattoo that made the back of her head tingle. Some kind of strange bird, running down his neck from just behind his left ear to under his collar. Her hand drifted to the back of her head and rubbed at the faint tingle there.

While he looked only a few years older than her peers, the way he stood, the way he talked, it was nothing like the boys she knew.

She stood up, anxious to explore her new home, and was surprised when the other kids didn't move out of the way. They don't know who you are, Nora, she said to herself and settled back down to wait her turn.

Shaking her thoughts away, she glanced back at the pilot to find him looking at her, and quickly shifted her eyes to look back out the window at the docking bay. It was going to be a long trip.



## Chapter Two

Erik looked out over his crewmates as they gathered on the recreation deck. Twenty-four men, everyone from seventeen-year-old cook's helper, Billy Catherson, to the fifty-year-old Engineering Officer, Ian Clark. The entire crew was here, waiting...

"Attention on Deck!" the XO barked, as the Captain walked into the room, followed by the dumpy older teacher. Every man jumped to attention. Backs ramrod straight and arms braced against their sides.

"At ease, take your seats," the Captain said, as he made his way to the front of the crowd.

Turning, he looked them over and then said, "As you know, we have fifteen civilians onboard." The Captain nodded at the dumpy guy next to him. "Professor Breat, two other teachers, and twelve students. The Imperial Navy staff has decided to conduct an experiment. These students are the best and brightest young people in the Empire and will someday move up into leadership roles in business and government, both Imperial and local. They are our future, and the Navy wants them to have a good impression of what we do and how we operate."

The Captain paused for a moment letting his words sink in, his eyes narrowing to pierce any resistance.

"As such, you will treat them with respect. They are not crew, but they are not passengers, either. They will be taking classes and working with Professor Breat and his staff to finish their freshman college courses over these six months. But mostly, they will be observing us and learning about the Navy."

Erik could feel the tension in the room rise a notch or two. They were serious; it wasn't going to be a week long familiarization tour, but a full-blown mission. Crap, what were they thinking?

The Captain looked out over the crowd. "As a reminder, all civilians are off limits!"

Someone groaned in the back, and everyone laughed. Even the Captain smiled, but then his face got very stern as he said. "Just so we are clear on this. If I find out that any of my men is involved with a student, and you know what I mean by involved, male or female, I will keelhaul them and then

park them on the first asteroid I can find until their bones turn to dust. Are we clear on this?" he asked looking each man in the eye.

Everybody nodded, each person knew that an Imperial Captain was God on his ship, especially once they jumped into new space. It was one of the last jobs in the galaxy that wasn't micromanaged from some higher headquarters. He could do pretty much whatever he thought necessary to accomplish his mission.

Giving everybody one last look, "This isn't the love boat, and I'm not returning these girls to their parents pregnant and alone." Seeing everyone nod affirmatively he turned to the man next to him. "Do you have anything to add Professor," he asked.

"A... No... I ... a ... think that covers everything, Captain," Professor Breat said, looking like a Pekinese puppy meeting its first German shepherd.

"Okay, then. XO make ready to get underway, I want to leave orbit within the hour, our first jump tomorrow morning, and to be at our starting point within a week."

Turning back to the crew he said, "Gentleman, I know we have the best crew ever assembled. We have spent the last two years picking and shaping this team for this mission. We are going to set a record for the most space explored within our allotted six months. I am sure that if we do what I know we can do, we'll find something. Let's pray it is worth it. Dismissed."

"Attention on Deck," the XO barked.

Once the Captain had left the Rec Deck, the XO placed everyone at ease and instructed his officers to meet him in the wardroom in fifteen minutes. By unspoken agreement, the enlisted crew remained on the recreational deck until the officers and Chief Bowman had left. Erik plopped onto a couch and listened in on the conversations around him.

"Off Limits, damn that's not fair," Jimmy Donaldson was saying to his fellow Engineers.

"I don't know why you're so worried Jimmy, you never stood a chance anyway," Big Tom Weaver said with a laugh. Jimmy punched him in the shoulder then joined them in the communal laugh. Jimmy Donaldson looked like a cross between a Greek God and a choir boy. All blond, buffed and ready for bed. Women had a habit of stepping on each other trying to get to

him.

As Erik listened to them and the others bitch and complain, he smiled to himself. A bitching Spacer was a happy Spacer. You didn't start worrying until they stopped bitching.

Shaking his head, he stood up to leave. They were all professionals, and there wouldn't be any problems. Hell, if the Captain really planned to push things, they'd all be busier than Valerian chipmunks on vacation, and wouldn't have any time for fraternization.

He followed Tom and Jimmy towards the berthing area to get changed into his deep space suit, stepping around wooden crates and cardboard boxes piled high along the passageway. Six months of extra rations took up a lot of space that no one had ever designed into things. The students had also brought along more gear than a mountain expedition, with cases of lab equipment and even books made of paper.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, he looked at his two friends. Big Tom was the senior petty officer in navigation and on the first watch. Jimmy, the senior petty officer in Engineering and lead on the second watch. Their two-man state room had been converted into a four-man berthing area to make room for their guests.

The thought that they had to sacrifice their precious space for civilians on a joy ride sent hot sparks up and down his spine. The three of them shared the room with John Chang, the deck department's second lead. He took over whenever Erik shuttled the gig and had been assigned the fourth watch lead. They had formed a tight team over the last two years.

Erik had once heard the XO tell one of the junior lieutenants that the four of them made up the vital core around which the ship's company revolved.

Big Tom got his nickname from his constant battle with weight, regardless of how hard he hit the gym. The Nanos kept it under regulations, barely. But, it was a constant worry every time they had a weigh-in. The missing musketeer, John, was headed back to the bridge to take the watch, leaving the three others to start organizing their crews and making preparations for getting underway.

Tom and Jimmy continued to banter about the civilians, as they walked down the long center hallway.

“Guys,” Erik interrupted. “I’m telling you, we’re going to have to keep a close eye on our men. Having women onboard is going to be a problem. I’m sure of it,” Erik said.

“Do you always judge so quickly?” a voice said from behind them. Erik turned to see Miss Beautiful brunette, Nora Johnson, standing there with her hands on her hips shooting him a look of pure hate.

“I can assure you that we ‘girls’ can take care of ourselves. You don’t need to worry about us,” she said, looking him straight in the eye. Daring him to dispute her.

Erik stopped and examined her, his gaze traveling up the form fitting tailored temp suit and stopping at the heart arresting violet eyes. She looks like a young queen upset at finding a mouse in the pantry. How do these people live with themselves? he wondered.

“Actually, Miss Johnson, “I wasn’t worried about you and your companions,” he said with a small sneer. “I was worried about my men. If they do something to get themselves court marshaled then kicked out of the Navy, I’ll strangle them myself before the Captain ever gets his chance.”

Taking satisfaction at the stunned look on her face, he turned and slapped his shipmates on the back and pushed them down the hall.

They had only traveled a few feet when Erik stopped and turned back around.

“And, Miss Johnson, please ask your friends to tone it down on the perfume. It’s not so bad now, the guys just got off a long shore leave. But, in a few weeks, it’s going to start driving them crazy. There’s no need to tempt fate, now, is there?”

The other two spacers were looking at him like he had lost his mind. Nora’s mouth dropped in shock, and her eyes registered her surprise at being confronted so openly.

Then she relaxed, “Is it ‘the guys,’ or yourself that is so affected, Mr. Tanner?” she said with a self-satisfied grin, obviously pleased with herself at getting in such a good comeback.

Erik grinned back, enjoying the tussle. “Oh, it’s the guys, Miss Johnson. I’m from New Kansas and grew up on a farm. Believe me, I’ve smelled much worse.”

Miss Johnson looked outraged, her hands clinched into fists like she wanted to slap him, hard. He chuckled to himself and pushed his friends down the hall. He was pretty sure he heard a muffled curse behind him.

.o0o.

Erik stood at ease in the Captain's cabin, hands behind his back, feet slightly spread.

"You're sure about this, Petty Officer Tanner?" Captain Freeborn asked, looking down at the broken sensor array on his table. The XO, Engineering Officer Clark, and Chief Bowen stood behind the Captain, looking over his shoulder at the crumpled piece of equipment.

"Yes, Sir. I checked it myself last watch, as part of the monthly preventive maintenance. Everything was fine." Erik and his guys were responsible for maintenance of everything not located on the bridge or the engine room.

Of course, the cooks took care of the kitchen equipment, but everything else was his responsibility, both inside and out. Nothing ever broke. If it did, he had a replicator build him a new one and replaced it. But, this was different. Someone had purposely smashed a sensor array, rendering it useless. He could have it replaced in an hour, but this type of thing had to be brought to the officer's attention.

The Captain looked over his shoulders at the XO. "Any ideas?" he asked.

"No, Sir. It doesn't make any sense. It couldn't have been our people. They'd know how easy it was to replace. What's the point? And, I can't understand any of Professor Breat's people doing it. They're all chomping at the bit to find a new planet just like the rest of us." He shrugged his shoulders with a look of total confusion. Both, Chief Bowen and Engineer Thompson shook their heads in agreement.

Erik stood there without saying another word. He wasn't so sure about the civilians. Some of them seemed a little off to him.

They'd been underway for a week now, and a smooth disrespect had grown up between the two groups. The crew worked their butts off, twelve to sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. And, the civilians sat around and read books, and talked about stuff.

The civilians, on the other hand, resented the enlisted guys. Probably for

the simple reason that the crew resented them. No one likes to be thought of as less than needed. Especially, highly intelligent, privileged little brats like these. It was all so childish and not a big thing, nothing that wouldn't go away given enough time. But, it wasn't his place to say, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Okay Petty Officer Tanner. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Chief, have your people keep an eye out and let me know if anything like this happens again. I'll have a quiet word with the Professor, and maybe we can put a stop to it real quick.

“You know, Sir,” LCDR Clark said, “There is a lot of equipment that if they were sabotaged at the wrong time, in the right situation, could do a lot of damage.” The man shuddered when he thought about what would happen.

Erik swallowed hard, every spacer had heard stories about the wrong piece of equipment breaking at the wrong time and ships disappearing. Traveling through a worm hole and never coming out the other side.

There were two conjectures as to what happened then. Either they were trapped in inner space, stuck in their dead ship until they died of old age. Or, they simply ceased to be. Even the elements of their body were removed from the known universe, as if they never existed.

Receiving the Captain's nod of dismissal, Erik came to attention, performed a smooth about face, and left the cabin.

He wasn't going to let this rest. Nobody intentionally damaged his ship. No way. No how. He would get to the bottom of it, if it was the last thing he did.

**.oOo.**

Coming out of the jump, Nora held her breath. It always sent a thrill up her spine. And, tomorrow would be the first time into new space. Her heart beat faster and her palms began to sweat whenever she thought about it.

Anything could be on the other side. A huge rock hurling towards them, a fading sun ready to explode, or even aliens ready to blow them to smithereens. Anything was possible.

This was the ninth time in the last week, and it amazed her how blasé the crew was about the whole thing. Of course, they all had something important to do during a jump. She and her fellow students were as useless as always.

Gathered in the recreation room. All of the screens lining the wall were focused on the new space.

After the first jump, an unofficial challenge had sprung up between the students and the bridge crew. Who could determine their new position the fastest? It was easy to do when you were in known space. It was just a matter of matching up known star fields. In fact, because you knew where the other end came out before you entered, you already knew where you should be.

But, Professor Breat had set up a test where the students had to find out their new position without using known star field maps. The navigators had heard about it and offered to join. It had become a competition, and the bridge always won. Quite often by several minutes.

The students had been getting closer each time. Jonathan Pierce, the sixteen-year-old boy wonder had taken it as a personal affront, and decided on his own, to rewrite the software application that the Navy had spent millions of credits creating.

For two days he had locked himself in his room, and come out all smiles only the day before. Now he was bent over his computer mumbling commands into his throat mike.

Nora laughed to herself out of pure happiness. Tomorrow there would be no going back. The ship would step off into new space, and everything after that was an official adventure.

Intrepid





