

CHAPTER 1

The Toth evolved from pack hunters. The smaller, fast-breeding and less intelligent members of the race cooperated with larger warriors to run down the sauropods of their swampy home world. The smaller Toth were always expendable, herded beneath the feet of larger creatures to distract them from a striking warrior, or used as bait to lure out the larger predators when a pack leader desired something more unusual for dinner.

The fleet in high orbit over Neptune held to the pack mentality. Dozens of ships ranging from destroyers to battle cruisers waited in high orbit. The warriors in command of each ship understood their place; they were servants to a larger master.

Hidden within the icy strata of Neptune's methane clouds, a leviathan lurked.

A golden sun sunk through bands of red and ochre, its mottled reflection shimmering against the horizon of the Pacific Ocean. Two Marines sat on a boulder lapped by ocean waves, watching the sun's final moments of the day. Puffs of water vapor billowed out to sea on the evening breeze from their e-cigarettes.

"Ain't this something?" Lance Corporal Standish asked. He took a deep breath from his vape stick and closed his eyes, shaking his head slightly as off-white fog exhaled from his nose. "No Xaros drones chasing after us. No insane horde of banshees trying to rip us limb from limb. No—"

"No peace and quiet," Bailey said. She stood barely even with the other Marine's shoulder, her long black hair pulled tight into a bun on the back of her head. She tugged a sleeve of her service khakis away from her wrist and glanced at her watch.

Standish drew in a quick breath to say something else, but Bailey grabbed his arm and he took the hint to stay quiet. Her face, bathed in the final golden rays of the sun, spoke of emotions roiling inside her. One corner of her lip twitched, wavering between a half smile and a frown. A tear glinted from her eyes. Bailey swiped a forearm across her face, leaving a stony countenance in its wake.

"Sorry..." Standish said.

“It’s not you. I’m just being a sook,” the Australian Marine said. “Just thinking about everyone who’s *not* here to see this with us.”

Torni. She’s still hung up on her, Standish thought. Torni had stayed behind on the planet Takeni, giving up her spot on the last evacuation shuttle so more of the alien Dotok civilians, and a few badly wounded Marines that included Bailey, could reach safety. Torni died on Takeni, killed by other Dotok twisted into monsters by the Xaros.

Standish struggled to find the right words that might help Bailey. Every human being on Earth or in the orbiting fleet had lost loved ones when the Xaros invaded. Less than half a million souls remained. Everyone grieved differently, and in Standish’s experience, it was best to let others volunteer their emotions, not go prying for details.

Standish waited until the edge of the sun touched the horizon.

“You ever do a training rotation here on Hawaii? The training area around Pohakuloa?” Standish asked.

“Did a few low-orbit–low-opening drops off the *Poltova* to the Big Island,” Bailey said. “Never got to see the place.”

“I heard there’s some new R&R complex over the hill from the Dotok camps,” Standish said, his voice quickening. “Everybody’s cycling through. Hot chow made by actual chefs, VR domes, fishing trips, white sandy beaches. Whole nine yards.”

“You asking me on a date, Standish?”

“No! No, Sarge. Just saying that we, the bloodied and battered Marines of the *Breitenfeld*, are due our time off the line. Wouldn’t you say?”

“We can ask Lieutenant Hale about it once he and Gunney Cortaro are back from Phoenix,” she said. “Come on, our bird’s supposed to be wheels up in ten minutes.”

They walked past the fenced perimeter of the Dotok camps, row upon row of military tents interspersed with sanitation pods. The Dotok refugees mingled between the rows, gawking at the spectacular sunset and wide sky, sights they’d never experienced on Takeni, a colony world where they’d lived at the bottom of deep, narrow canyons.

Ibarra robots and 3-D printing factories had set up the camp for almost fifty thousand Dotok within days of their arrival, which was not a moment too soon. The ancient generation ship they’d escaped in, the *Canticle of Reason*, was falling to pieces in orbit.

“What’re we going to do with them?” Standish asked, nodding his head toward the fence.

“Above my pay grade,” Bailey said with a shrug. “Maybe they’ll fix their damn ship and help us fight the Xaros when the drones come back.”

“Doesn’t seem like too much to ask. We did save their bacon back on Takeni,” Standish said.

“You hear why we dropped them all on Hawaii instead of Phoenix with all the other civilians?” Bailey asked.

They stepped onto a concrete tarmac and walked toward a Mule transport. Light spilled from the interior down the lowered ramp.

“Beats me. Titan Station locked down the *Breitenfeld’s* commo soon as we came back through the Crucible. I haven’t heard a word from my contacts—I mean friends—in Phoenix,” Standish said. The young Marine was part of the “Lance Corporal Mafia,” a suborganization of the larger Marine Corps since the United States Marines formed at Tun Tavern a little over three centuries ago, and he had an ear for gossip and rumors.

The Mule’s pilot, Jorgen, sat at the bottom of the ramp, his forearms resting on his knees. He squinted at the Marines as they neared, struggling to make them out in the twilight.

“You’re on time,” Jorgen said. “But there’s a problem. Damn plane’s broken.”

“Broken? We came down just fine half an hour ago with a load of orphans,” Bailey said. “How is it broken?”

“Well,” Jorgen said as he stood up and stretched, “my crew chief found out there’s a mess hall just through there.” He pointed to a lit path cut into the jungle beyond the landing pad. “And they’re serving chow right now. Real chow. Not the rehydrated emergency hardtack the galley’s been feeding us for the last six weeks. Turns out, the Mule’s computer core took a dump and we’ve got to wait at least two hours for it to reboot.”

“Oh...that kind of broken,” Standish said.

“Damned shame, lowest bidders and all that. Let’s eat,” Jorgen said.

The mess hall was a man-made cavern, plastic sheeting stretched across a metal frame large enough to enclose an entire football field. Hundreds of Marines, black-uniformed Aerospace Corps men and women, soldiers and sailors lined up at serving stations. More

crowded around banks of coolers holding canned drinks before they found an open seat at the long tables to sit down and eat.

Standish and Bailey, each holding trays of steaming food, watched in awe as the mess hall seethed with activity.

Standish glanced at the shoulder patches on passing sailors' uniforms: *Ottawa*, *Eylau*, *Crimea*.

"Sarge," Standish said, pointing to a sailor sitting at the end of a table, laughing at a joke lost in the din, "that guy's on the *Tucson*."

"So?"

"Xaros blew the *Tucson* to pieces. Saw it with my own eyes," Standish said. "The girl across from him? Her patch says she's on the *Ticonderoga*."

"Only twenty-two ships survived the attack on Ceres. Not one of them was named the *Ticonderoga*," Bailey said.

"I know."

"Let's just eat, OK? We've been gone awhile. Things can change." She led Standish to a pair of open seats and sat down, keeping her eyes on her tray as she ate, and not the crowd around her.

"Holy—Sarge, there's five officers over there with *Midway* patches." Standish had gone pale. "*Midway* went down in the mountains south of Phoenix. There's no way it's back in service so soon. The crew complement on that super carrier was almost nineteen thousand squids. Did they empty out half the fleet to-to-to..."

"Standish," Bailey hissed as she leaned toward him. "Eat. Your. Food."

"How long have we been gone?" Standish whispered. "I was on the *Breit* when we had that flash of light and—" he snapped his fingers "thirty or so years gone just like that. What if every time we jumped to Anthalas and Takeni, we lost a bunch of time?"

"Look at your forearm screen. It should've connected to the local network and auto set to the local time and date," Bailey said. She waited for Standish to check the screen on his arm. The Marine's brow furrowed in deep confusion.

"We didn't do the time warp again," Standish said. "Then...who the hell are all these people?"

The lights across the mess hall dimmed several times and silence fell across the crowd.

A naval officer, with the physique of a champion mountain climber and red hair pulled into a bun behind her head, climbed atop the banks of freezers in the middle of the hall, the four stars of a full admiral's rank on her shoulder boards. A petty officer tossed her a megaphone.

"Eighth Fleet." The megaphone whined with feedback as her words boomed through the mess hall. "This is Admiral Makarov. I hate to do this to you, but all shore leave is cancelled effective immediately." There were a few grumbles from the crowd, all quickly silenced by sharp words from chief petty officers and gunnery sergeants.

"There is a threat, an alien race called the Toth, on course to Earth," Makarov said. "I'll give you a complete briefing as soon as I can. Now...I want every last one of you to return to your barracks. You'll muster for transport back to your ships in the next few hours." She lowered the megaphone and shouted her next words.

"Who are we?"

"Eighth Fleet!" thundered hundreds of voices.

"Who are we?"

"Dragon slayers!" Hoots and cheers followed.

Standish and Bailey traded a look, both too stunned to say anything.

Makarov lifted the bullhorn to her mouth. "That's right. And we're going to make these Toth regret ever setting foot, or claw, or whatever alien filth they have, in our solar system. I've got six more mess halls to get to. You have your orders."

The admiral tossed the megaphone to an aide and jumped off her improvised stage, rolling through her landing with the grace of an acrobat, then striding through a gap between tables toward open doors.

A group of sailors stood up from the tables and made for the doors, buffeting around Standish and Bailey like they were rocks in the middle of a stream.

"Hey, Sarge. I thought Admiral Garret was the only flag grade officer left in the fleet," Standish said.

"I think you remember right." Bailey tossed her fork onto her plate of spaghetti and meatballs and sighed.

"Then where did Admiral Makarov come from?" Standish asked.

"I don't know. Let's get back to the *Breit* before things get any weirder."