

CHAPTER 1

The *Breitenfeld* shuddered beneath Lieutenant Hale's feet. His body and the gauss weapon clenched in his fist felt lighter as the shudder died away.

"Losing gravity. Activate your grips," Hale said. He pressed his heels against the deck and felt his armored boots hum to life as the magnetic linings latched him to the floor.

The team of Marines around him gave him a thumbs-up. He felt the individual thumps of their linings activate through the deck; there was no sound in the airless ship while it was under combat conditions.

A torn food wrapper floated into the passageway. Standish snatched the detritus and held it up to his visor.

"OK, who had the...white-chocolate-covered pretzels and failed to secure their trash, eh? Someone overlooks something little like this and the next thing you know we've got a pallet full of rockets bouncing around the armory like a loose cannon," Standish said, wagging the wrapper in the airless passageway like a disapproving finger.

"Weren't you eating pretzels right before the jump?" Corpsman Yarrow asked.

Standish froze, then stuffed the wrapper into a pouch on his belt.

"I thought they fixed the grav plates." Orozco thumbed the activation switch on his Gustav heavy cannon, spinning the three barrels so fast they blurred.

"They've been twitchy ever since Steuben's cyborg buddy used them to get us out of that gravity well on Takeni," said Bailey, one of the team's two snipers. She had a gauss carbine cradled in her arms since her preferred weapon was locked away in the ship's vaults. The close quarters of the *Breitenfeld's* passageways were no place for a long-barreled rail rifle.

"His name is Lafayette." Steuben, the tall Karigole warrior, raised a hand and braced himself against the ceiling. He stomped a boot against the deck and slid it back and forth. "Why do these infernal things never work right?"

"Did you press your heel down long enough to activate the lining?" Hale asked.

"Your cursed boots aren't meant for my feet," Steuben snarled as his boot finally clamped onto the deck. Steuben had switched from his Karigole battle plate to Marine battle armor after they'd encountered the Toth on Anthalas. Adopting human uniforms meant he wouldn't make an obvious target on the battlefield.

Hale looked over at the two new additions to his squad, Marine Staff Sergeant Egan and Corporal Rohen. His team was down a communications specialist since Torni's death at the hands of Xaros troops; Egan filled the vacancy, but not the hole left in the squad's heart.

Rohen...Captain Valdar said the lithe Marine was a "mission specialist," another sniper for the mission to Nibiru. Both Marines were professionally competent and had integrated well during training, but both were standoffish. Rohen hardly ever said a word beyond what was needed, and Hale swore he'd never seen the man sleep. Every time Hale checked on his Marines in their berthing, Rohen had been wide awake, reading from his Ubi data slate or cleaning his sniper rifle.

"Are we there yet?" Standish asked. "These jumps are supposed to be instantaneous. If there was a fleet of Toth coming to eat our faces, you'd think the good captain would have told us to stick our heads between our legs and kiss—"

"Now hear this! Now hear this!" came through the ship's infrared system.

Standish widened his stance.

"Stand down from combat condition red. The ship will maintain amber until further notice. Prepare for re-pressurization and cross-checks."

"Wait, things are going as planned?" Standish asked. "No boarders? No crazy pocket universe?"

"Don't jinx it or we're throwing you to the lizards first," Bailey said.

A vent opened in the ceiling and a cloud of compressed air rushed into the passageway. Hale watched as the pressure readings changed on his visor screen from red to green.

"Yarrow," Gunney Cortaro pointed a knife hand at the corpsman, "you get to crack."

"Sure thing." Yarrow attached his rifle to his back and hooked his thumbs under the front of his helmet. "Wait, isn't Corporal Rohen the new guy now?"

Yarrow pulled the front of his helmet away and took a quick breath before snapping the helmet back into place. "Clear. Good air."

The Marines and Steuben removed their helmets.

"Corporal Rohen outranks you, Yarrow." Standish ran his fingers through his sweaty scalp. "You're the new guy until we get another lance corporal or below. Deal with it."

Yarrow shook his head and muttered under his breath.

“The next time your trash goes loose cannon, you will be demoted to a mosquito-winged private—again—Standish,” Cortaro said. “Then you can take over all Yarrow’s new-guy duties.”

Standish held up a hand in surrender.

A sudden crush of gravity enveloped Hale like a giant hand had wrapped around his entire body. His armor locked against his body and the pseudo-muscle layer beneath the plates pressed against his body, fighting to keep his blood from pooling against the bottom of his feet. An icon flashed on his visor; the force of gravity against his body was nearly twice the Earth standard. As the press against him faded away, the gravity reading on his visor fluctuated a few percentage points above and below what the ship’s gravity field should have put out.

“Bloody hell, when’re they going to fix that?” Bailey pulled her boots off the deck one at a time with a loud snap. “The plating cut out the last time I took a shower. You know how hard it is to keep your shit together when you’re floating wet, naked and covered in soap?”

Blast panels on the hull slid away from the windows. A sunset-hued nebula filled the void as reed-red gas filaments spread through a honey-colored cloud. A white dwarf star blazed at the center of the nebula, the remnants of a long-ago supernova.

“Definitely ain’t Kansas,” Egan said.

A text message popped up on Hale’s visor.

“Gunney,” Hale said. Cortaro stared out the windows, transfixed by the alien sky. Hale tapped his knuckles against Cortaro’s shoulder.

“Sir? Yes, sorry.” Cortaro turned away from the window.

“Captain Valdar wants me and Steuben on the bridge. We should have a couple hours before anything major happens. What do we need to train?” Hale asked.

“I’ll run them through cloak drills, sir. Orozco and Yarrow are still tripping all over themselves. Then we’ll hit the range,” Cortaro said. He was his team’s leader, responsible for everything they did or failed to do. The team’s senior enlisted Marine since before the Xaros invasion, Cortaro took responsibility for the training the other Marines needed in order to accomplish whatever mission Hale had for the team. Cortaro knew each Marine’s training record by heart, and given a few hours without any interference, he could make decent progress in fine-tuning the squad. Hale gave him a nod and turned away to catch up with Steuben, who was halfway down the passageway.

“Steuben,” Hale said as he caught up to the Karigole, “you ever heard about this planet we’re going to? Nibiru?”

“We lost all contact with the Toth after their betrayal. Before that, the Toth were confined to their home world several light-years from Nibiru.” Steuben didn’t look at Hale as he spoke, his clawed hands opening and closing into fists as they walked together. “I suspect Mentiq colonized the world to put some distance between himself and the Xaros maniple that should reach the Toth home system in the next decade. This is to our advantage. He is an easier target without hundreds of billions of Toth between him and me.”

“You mean us.”

Steuben grunted.

“Steuben, I know things are very...personal for you on this mission after what happened to Kosciusko and Rochambeau.” Hale paused, trying to gauge Steuben’s reaction, but the Karigole was a stoic as ever when Hale mentioned his dead comrades. “This isn’t a suicide mission, you understand?”

Steuben stopped and slowly turned his head to Hale.

“The Toth massacred my people on Mentiq’s order. When I and Lafayette die, the Karigole will die with us. Your mission is to kill Mentiq, end the Toth threat to Earth. Mine is to kill Mentiq out of defiance. My vendetta will end on Nibiru. One way or the other.”

“I saw how determined you were on the *Naga*,” Hale said. “You were willing to keep that overlord locked in his command bridge until the ship crashed into the moon at the cost of your own life.”

“And you, for reasons I still do not understand, insisted on staying with me until Elias threw you off the ship.” Steuben slapped the call button for a turbo lift and got in as the doors opened. Hale entered a code into a key pad to take them to the bridge and the doors shut.

The lift, like everything on the ship, wasn’t designed for comfort. The armored Marine and Karigole barely fit inside; the top of Steuben’s scaly head nearly scraped against the ceiling.

“We do not leave people behind, Steuben. You are not going to put the rest of us at risk for your—”

Steuben snatched Hale by his breastplate and lifted him into the air. He brought him to eye level and bared his double rows of needle-sharp teeth at Hale.

“You think you’re going to stop me from going down there?” Steuben snarled.

Hale's jaw clenched as his eyes locked with Steuben's yellow cat eyes.

"Promise me. Promise you won't risk our lives for your vengeance," Hale said.

The corner of Steuben's lips tugged to the side. He lowered Hale to the deck.

"You have my word. My oath is my own. Not yours," Steuben said.

"This mission doesn't have to end with you as a martyr. You and Lafayette managed to kill an overlord just fine on the *Naga*." Hale adjusted his armor, noting claw marks against the plates.

"You don't understand Karigole, my friend. We are nothing but our stated purpose. I, with ninety-nine of my brothers, swore that we would never give up until our people were avenged. To fail is a disgrace. We would be...found wanting in the next life. The dead brothers of my centurion are in what you would consider purgatory. Their, and my, judgment waits. Either we kill Mentiq to fulfill our oath, or Lafayette and I die and join the rest of them in failure."

"No pressure," Hale said. "If it helps, I want to kill Mentiq too, but my eternal salvation isn't really part of the scenario for me."

"I will speak well of you when I face the god of death." Steuben gave Hale a pat on the shoulder that almost knocked him off balance.

"Thanks—I guess?"

The lift doors opened, revealing the *Breitenfeld*'s bridge. The sound of a half-dozen voices sharing information and open IR lines filled the air. Valdar, standing at the head of a holo table surrounded by the ship's senior officers, waved Hale and Steuben over.

Valdar reached over the holo table and touched the star at the center of the Nibiru system. He twisted the sun from side to side, streaking icons for planets and the *Breitenfeld* across the holo field. Hale stood at the end of the table next to Steuben, whose arms were crossed over his chest.

"Why isn't Nibiru in this diagram, Ensign?" Valdar asked the nervous-looking navigator.

“It’s on the other side of the primary, sir,” Ensign Geller said. “We jumped in on the system’s planetary axis. Which is lucky. The Toth can’t see us and we can’t see them with the sun between us.”

“Are you sure we’re in the right place?” Valdar asked slowly.

“Yes,” Geller almost squeaked the answer. “Pulsar triangulation puts us in the right system, and the composition of the outer ice giants matches records recovered from the Toth fleet. We’re in the right system...just on the wrong side.”

“How long until we’re in orbit?” Valdar asked.

Lieutenant Commander Levin, the chief engineer, spoke up. “The cloak is a significant drain on our batteries. If we stay cloaked, the best speed we can manage without burning out the fusion reactors will get us there in two days.”

“And the jump drive? How long until it’s built up enough charge to get us home?” asked Commander Ericson, the executive officer.

“The dark energy field grows stronger as we near the system’s primary, say five days at best. But that’s not our real problem.” The engineer tapped a flat screen and multicolored bar graphs formed in the tank.

“Damn it,” Valdar said with a shake of his head.

“Excuse me.” Hale raised a hand next to his face. “A little help for the uninitiated?”

“I can’t keep the cloak up,” Levin said. “If I cut power to everything but life support, we’ve got no more than ten days until we’re basically flapping in the wind for all to see.”

“The engineers on Titan Station said the power leak was fixed.” Valdar hit the edge of the table with his knuckles.

“In their defense,” Levin said as he clasped his hands behind his back, “we’re using a Toth cloaking device pulled out of the *Naga*’s wreck. The device is bastardized Karigole technology, which we re-bastardized to mesh with our systems *and* the jump engine that I’m not allowed to touch. It’s a miracle that we haven’t been warped into three-headed tentacle monsters, but the day is young.” He knocked on the tank’s railing.

“So what does this mean for the mission?” Hale asked.

Valdar pulled the power graphs close to him, his eyes darting over the readings.

“I can give you two days on the surface before we have to drop the cloak. Maybe another twelve hours, but if I do that, then we won’t have enough battery power to fire the main guns. Not a risk I want to take if Mentiq has anything in the way of orbital defenses,” Valdar said.

“What about a bombardment? We brought nukes,” Hale said.

“There’s no guarantee that would work,” Steuben said. “Nuclear war was quite common amongst the Toth before Mentiq brought them all under his control. He’s certain to have bunkers that can withstand anything. Better to get in close to kill him.”

“Turning his island into glass with nuclear fire would get our point across,” Valdar said. “Everything we know about the Toth is that they’re business-minded, not prone to blood feuds. I’m OK with de-cloaking, dropping ordnance and jumping out. That should convince the Toth to leave us alone.”

Steuben’s hands balled into fists. He sucked in a deep breath and bared his teeth.

Hale grabbed Steuben by the shoulder and shook his head.

“But the decision isn’t made yet,” Valdar said. “Steuben, where is Lafayette? If there’s anyone in the galaxy who can make Toth, Karigole and human technology work together, it’s him.”

Levin gave a defeated shrug.

“He maintains the vigil. I will relieve him immediately,” Steuben said and walked away.

“This isn’t the plan,” Valdar said, addressing the ship’s senior officers. “We should have had weeks to scout out Nibiru and come up with the best course of action possible. Now, we have a few days—at best—to make this happen. The *Breitenfeld*’s never failed before and we’re not going to start now. We will find a way to kill Mentiq and get back to Earth in one piece, or we will make one. Dismissed.”

Lafayette sat in front of a small shrine in his workshop, his feet tucked beneath his legs, hands resting on his knees. The shrine was a simple wooden box. A small bowl filled with opal-colored beads and a comb made from bone—personal effects of the Karigole named Rochambeau who’d died on the *Naga*—sat on one side of a melted down and sputtering candle.

On the other side of the candle was a burnt scrap of a flight suit, the only thing recovered from the wreckage where Kosciusko rammed his fighter into a fleeing overlord's command bridge.

The candle fluttered, its light shining off the pool of liquid wax just beneath the flame.

He hadn't bothered to keep track of how long he'd knelt before the shrine. His cybernetic body knew neither fatigue nor discomfort. Lafayette's cybernetics remained hidden beneath a set of naval rating coveralls, hiding his disfigurement from view. Much of his body had been burned away by a Xaros disintegration beam years ago. Replacing what was lost had been a painful journey of trial and error. All that was left of his original body was his brain and a few organs in his chest cavity. His face was a mask of polymers over a scaffolding that mimicked expressions and speaking.

Steuben knelt beside Lafayette and matched his pose.

"I relieve you," Steuben said. "I take up the watch."

"They're almost gone," Lafayette whispered. "Let me stay."

"Have you heard them?"

"No, but I don't have ears anymore."

"Ghosts whisper to our souls, not our bodies. If they are silent, then they are at peace, confident that you and I will complete the mission."

The flame danced against the wick, growing fainter. The two warriors sat for several minutes more in silence.

The fire sputtered, then went out with a hiss. The Karigole placed their hands on the deck in front of their knees, then leaned forward to touch their foreheads to the ground.

"Farewell, Rochambeau," Lafayette said, "you gave me a blood transfusion after I was injured. It kept me alive so that I would not be the last."

"Farewell, Kosciusko. You were the best of us. Your will kept me going, saved me from despair so that I would not be the last," Steuben said.

Lafayette placed the balls of his feet against the deck and stood up, his cybernetic knees whirring. He picked up a small trash bin and swept the last bits of candle, beads and fabric away. By the ritual, Kosciusko's and Rochambeau's spirits had lost their final attachment to the mortal plane. Keeping their possessions only served to attract malevolent entities.

"The ship's power systems are out of balance," Lafayette said. "I feel it in the deck plating, see it in fluctuations from the lights."

“The captain requests your assistance,” Steuben said.

“Of course he does. His engineer is quite capable when it comes to human technology, but ask him to recalibrate the quantum field stabilizer on the cloak generator and he looks at me like I just offered to procreate with his sister—isn’t that how humans do it? Male to female?”

“Yes, their Internet archives are full of reference material. I don’t recommend researching the topic. It’s very confusing.” Steuben got to his feet and went to a workbench. He picked up a slightly curved flat box and examined it. “There’s an issue. The ship can’t maintain the cloak for very long. Our time on the surface will be limited.”

Lafayette dumped the contents of the trash bin down a chute and stopped to examine a tool display with several hand and forearm prosthetics. Each set grasped a metal peg sticking out from the wall. Lafayette grabbed a wrist for a hand with five fingers instead of his usual four, and the prosthetic released the peg. Lafayette grabbed the peg with his other hand and detached it from his arm. The new hand went on with a snap.

“What happens to the ship once we’re on the surface is irrelevant,” Lafayette said. “I will not leave Nibiru until Mentiq is dead.”

“Nor will I.”

“The humans will accept this?”

Steuben ran two fingers across his chin in annoyance. “No, but I am not concerned. I would rather die in the course of our mission and come before our brothers in the afterlife with pride, than pass away from old age on Earth trying to please Hale and the others’ sense of honor.”

“Hmm...old age.” Lafayette swapped out his other hand. “I doubt that will be a problem for either of us.”