

# Chapter 1

Smoke and ash billowed from the volcano's crater, forming a black column that stretched upward until high winds bent the darkness across the sky over Cygnus II. Hunks of lava and cooling pumice rained down from the caldera, scorching holes through the thick moss-trees clinging to the side of the volcano.

A rock the size of a small car tumbled down the slope, knocking loose obsidian shards from eruptions long ago. The rock shattered against a jagged edge of a boulder. A moment later, the boulder heaved outward. It came loose in a tide of black and grey ash, then made its own way down the volcano.

Steaming hot air poured from the large hole left by the boulder. Two warriors emerged from the extinct lava tube ran deep into the burning heart of the mountain. Both were fifteen feet tall suits of armor, their metal joints squealing in protest as they worked against the invasion of ash and dust. Air wavered around them as they stepped free of the tube, their armor radiating heat from the journey through the volcano.

The first, his armor bearing a red Templar cross on the breastplate, shook his helm free of ash and looked over the valley. To the north, stray gauss bolts and plasma blasts left lines of burning air in their wake. The thunder of distant explosions fought through the constant rumble of the growing eruption.

He pointed to a clearing at the base of the volcano. Rings of barricades surrounded a cluster of buildings, each shaped like an asteroid embedded into the ground and larger than a corvette class starship. A cable the width of a city bus ran from one of the buildings into the side of the volcano.

"There, Gideon, we've found it," the first soldier pointed down the slope.

Electricity ran up the twin vanes of the rail cannon on Gideon's back. He smacked a fist against the golden fleur-de-lis on his chest.

"Drop anchor and let's end this war with one rail cannon shot," Gideon said.

"Do that and we'll lose the planet to the Vishrakath magma coils. Colonel Martel sent us to win a final victory, not Pyrrhic one."

"Then we find the brood mother, *brother* Tongea," Gideon's emphasis on the word almost turned it into an insult. "Will you waste time with prayer or will you keep up with me?"

Gideon jumped down the slope. His massive sabatons bit into the ash carpeting the volcano, sending up a plume as he slid down.

Tongea went after him. He loaded gauss rounds into the double barreled cannon on his right forearm from the ammo belt that ran from the weapon to an armored housing on his back. The rotary cannon on his left shoulder began spinning.

“May the Saint witness you, Dragoon,” Tongea said.

“I am armor. I am fury. I will not fail. I am armor...” Gideon kept up the mantra as they reached the edge of the moss-trees line. Gideon smashed his way through a thicket almost as tall as he was, then slowed to a stop. He crouched slightly, then leaped into the air. Thrusters on his legs and hips carried him clear of the branches. He arced downward, his armor utilizing the slope to keep him airborne longer. Air whistled passed his external microphones, the sound went directly to his brain through the neural cable connecting his body within the suit’s armored womb.

“Activity from the Vishrakath base,” Tongea said. “Plasma turrets heating up on my infrared optics.”

“Surprised we got this far without being noticed,” Gideon’s armored feet raised up and leg thrusters flared just before he smashed through smoldering moss-tree branches. He leaped into the air again, the thrusters on his back trailed wings of flame as they carried him higher.

A bolt of red plasma struck the mountainside, belting him with burning branches.

Gideon zoomed in on the attacking battery and traced the power cables to a small dome near the inner ring of defenses. The Vishrakath normally buried their power cells to protect them from air attack, they’d either become lazy or complacent as the air thick with ash and smoke kept any airborne assets out of this fight. Either way, he was about to punish that mistake.

He fired his gauss cannons, high velocity cobalt jacketed rounds burst from the twin barrels with a rattling snap and tore into the power cell. It exploded into white flame, pelting the surroundings with rocky shrapnel and wrecking the nearby plasma cannon emplacement. The weapon crumpled onto its side.

Vishrakath fighters scuttled away from the smoking cannon on their four legged abdomens. Gideon unleashed a hail of bullets from his rotary cannon, ripping a line through the dirt and into a pair of aliens taking cover next to a domed building.

He landed close to the outer wall, then jumped up and slammed his armored hands into the razor wire running along the top. He vaulted over and almost crushed an alien holding one of their spindly plasma rifles.

While the Vishrakath defied normal Earth zoological categories, Gideon considered them as flesh-covered insects. They walked like an upright ant, four limbs for locomotion, two more serving as arms. A layer of grey fatty skin covered an endoskeleton shell. The aliens adorned themselves with only functional equipment, Gideon had only ever seen them in military gear or with engineering tools. How they managed to tell each other apart was a mystery to him.

The Vishrakath soldier at Gideon's feet turned its patch of eyes to the rifle in its claws, then looked up at the Terran armor, its maniples twitching.

Gideon backhanded the alien into the inner wall, crushing it with a crunch of black gore. He snapped a kick into the wall and sent the partition flying into the Vishrakath base. The metal plate bounced off the dirt and landed in the remains of the power cell.

The armor charged forward, his shoulder cannon firing from side to side as his onboard trackers locked onto the confused defenders. All of the alien lives were forfeit. All but one.

A string of plasma bolts shot struck the ground to his side, turning the dirt into glass and scorching his legs. Gideon braced his left arm in front of his body and a kite shield unfurled from the housing. Two bolts struck the shield, hitting hard enough to strain his shoulder actuators and send him back a step.

The armor spotted one of the smaller Vishrakath plasma cannons as it dropped behind one of their asteroid shaped buildings. Gideon fired his gauss shells through the top of the alien structure, blasting hunks of rock into the air and puncturing the other side. A gout of white flame burst into the air as the plasma cannon went critical.

"Should have moved after you shot at me," Gideon said.

A door slid open on a nearby alien building and three Vishrakath soldiers ran out and promptly skid to a stop when they saw Gideon. He kicked the enemy, catching all three with one blow. The one in the middle flew back into the building, the others careened off to the side.

Gideon activated the flame thrower on his right arm and jabbed it into the open door. A gout of blue flame poured into the windowless building. He heard the high pitched screams of burning Vishrakath as he withdrew his arm.

“Tongea, any sign of the brood mother?” Gideon ran toward the sound of the other armor’s gauss cannons.

“They’re fighting back now,” Tongea sent over their suit’s IR link. “Whatever rock they defend, that’s where she’ll be.”

Gideon heard and felt a vibration in the air just before an alien grav tank swung around a dome. Flames danced across the reflective armor of the tank. The flattened tear drop of the turret swung toward Gideon. He lowered his shoulder and charged the tank.

The thrum in the air increased pitch, and Gideon leapt to the side just before the tank fired. A compressed plasma bolt nicked his shield, ripped a corner away and almost yanked his arm from the socket.

Gideon regained his footing and jumped into the air. He raised a fist and drove it into the forward edge of the tank. The armor buckled beneath the impact and the rear of the tank flipped up. The tank sailed over Gideon’s head and landed upside down with a crunch of metal. Gideon rammed his heel into the side, right into the crew compartment. The blow bent the tank into a V as sparks erupted from the anti-grav emitters as they malfunctioned.

The top of an egg shaped building opened to the sky. Low pitched Vishrakath words boomed through the camp.

“Intelligence said they were all at the front,” Gideon sent a jolt of power to his rail cannon and dug a heel into the dirt.

“Take it up with them when we get back,” Tongea ran onto the top of a nearby dome.

The Visrakath walker rose out of its hangar like a corpse suddenly sitting up from an open coffin. Its form mimicked the Vishrakath aliens, but both arms ended in plasma cannons and it stood nearly twice as high as the Terran armor.

Gideon aimed at the joint just behind the walker’s left arm and opened fire. Gauss shells careened off the armor, hammering dents into the shell. Tongea added his cannon to the assault, shattering the joint and ripping the cannon clean away from the walker.

The walker twisted its other cannon arm toward Tongea and light grew from the muzzle.

Tongea deployed his shield and ducked behind it at the plasma beam slashed through the air. It cut across the armor’s shield and sent him flying backwards.

Gideon fired on the sensor nodes on the walker's head, breaking them apart with precision shots. He raised what remained of his shield as the beam cut through an alien building and traced a line straight toward Gideon.

The beam snapped off a few feet away from him. Gideon's back foot bumped against something. He ran his heel down the object as he kept firing on the walker. He felt rock give way to the press of his sabaton; another Vishrakath building.

"Tongea, I found the brood mother. Walker won't fire on me and risk hitting where she's hiding."

"First thing's first," Tongea rushed toward the walker. A panel slid down from the alien armor's chest and micro-missiles swarmed out like a nest of angry wasps. Gideon's rotary cannon spun into action, unleashing a torrent of bullets that intercepted some of the missiles.

Some.

A dozen small Vishrakath missiles burst a few feet from Tongea, the explosions deformed small uranium lenses into molten lances that ripped through Tongea's limbs and pierced through his shield and into his breastplate.

Tongea gave off a grunt of pain and stumbled to his knees.

The walker raised a weapon arm to strike as it advanced toward the wounded armor.

Gideon sprinted forward, his gauss cannons blazing.

The walker twisted its torso toward Gideon, and he realized his mistake. The walker could have finished Tongea off with a plasma blast, the Vishrakath pilot had baited Gideon away from the brood mother's shelter, giving the alien a clean shot.

Gideon shunted power to his thrusters and launched himself into the air. He overloaded the thrusters and shot up, taking him higher than the walker's plasma blast that missed his feet by inches.

He smashed into the walker and grabbed its neck servos with one hand. He braced his feet against its body and drew his right arm back. He paused a moment, waiting for the alien pilot to react. Gideon had wrecked most of his optics. If the pilot wanted to know exactly where he was...

An armor plate snapped to the side, revealing the Vishrakath behind an armored pane of glass. The alien looked straight into Gideon's helm optics, then Gideon released the yard long

blade hidden in his forearm. He stabbed the sword through the glass and impaled the alien through its chest and against the back of the cockpit.

Gideon yanked the blade free and dropped to the ground. The walker hunched over, the muzzles of its weapon arms dragging through the dirt.

Tongea limped toward the brood mother's bunker, one arm clutched against his side.

"How bad?" Gideon asked.

"Womb...damaged. Get her. Finish this!"

Gideon sprinted past his fellow armor. Clear fluid leaked from a hole the size of a thumb nail out of Tongea's back. Gideon smashed a fist into the bunker with a shout, cracking the exterior. He beat wild blows into the rock, ripping out a hole large enough for him to go through.

The brood mother sat in a raised dais, her form nearly the size of Gideon's armor. Juvenile Vishrakath scuttled over her body and a bulging egg sac attached to her abdomen. Holo screen surrounded her, showing images of the nearby Terran-Vishrakath battle and scenes of devastation around her bunker.

Alien attendants squealed in fright and backed against the computer banks surrounding the brood mother. One charged at Gideon with a plasma rifle raised over its head. The armor stomped it into paste, then activated his flame thrower and leveled it at the brood mother.

"Surrender," his suit translated the word into squeaks and clicks it could understand.

"Kill me and this planet will be ruined," she said. The brood mother rose up, the tentacles on one hand reaching for a control panel. Gideon let off a spurt of flame and shifted his aim to the egg sack. The brood mother froze.

"Surrender. Stop the eruption, then you and the rest of your kind can leave this planet and return to Vish space," Gideon said. From the corner of an eye, he saw a map with Vishrakath units arrayed against the attacking Terran forces led by Colonel Martel at the far end of the valley. The Vishrakath lines had broken, casualty reports came in fast as the Terran armor ran down their fleeing foes.

"I can accelerate the eruption in an instant," she said. "You're not fast enough to stop me. I'll kill you and that other monstrosity behind you."

“I am armor. I gave up my life a long time ago. But they still have a future,” Gideon stepped toward the alien, his flamethrower trained on the egg sack. “Surrender, or you’ll see them burn before you die.”

“You can’t have the entire galaxy, human! This was our world,” the brood mother pulled her hands to her chest and juvenile Vishrakath rushed over her body and into her hands for safety.

“I don’t care,” Gideon lowered his flamethrower slightly. “We control the void above. We have the Crucible gate. Your army is broken. You have nothing to gain in this fight but to spoil a beautiful world out of spite. Choose to live or die. Now. My patience is at an end.”

The brood mother caressed her egg sack. Her maniples clicked several times...and a tear ran from the cluster of eyes in the middle of her head.

“I submit to your...mercy,” she said.

Gideon shut off his flamethrower, but kept it pointed at her.

“Tongea?” he said through the linked IR. Gideon twisted his helm around. The other armor blocked the exit with his body, cannon armed raised against a crowd of Vishrakath soldiers and a pair of grav-tanks.

“The Saint...” Tongea’s words came out with a struggle, “...she sees us. We are witnessed.”

“It’s over. Activate your med protocols now,” Gideon tapped into Tongea’s armor. His right arm within the armored womb flashed red. The pain added to the neural load going through the plugs connecting him to his armor, bringing him dangerously close to red lining and frying his brain.

“*Sancti spiritus adsit nobis gratia. Kallen, ferrum corde...*” Tongea said slowly, the beginning of a Templar prayer.

“Shutting you down,” Gideon pressed his fingertips into a panel just beneath an armor plate on Tongea’s back, and the damaged armor powered down, leaving only the communications and life support systems active.

“No!” Tongea shouted. “I can’t leave the battlefield...” his words were slurred with shock.

“Battle’s over, brother,” Gideon sent a command to Tongea’s womb and it flooded the amniosis fluid inside his womb with tranquilizers.

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Gideon stood atop a ridgeline outside of his armor, watching as the last Vishrakath transport lifted out of the valley and into the sky. The nearby volcano smoldered, but the threat of a massive eruption that would wreck Cygnus II's atmosphere was gone. He rubbed his fingers on a Toth claw hanging from a necklace on his neck, the same implement that carved the long scars running down the side of his face.

His armor knelt behind him, the breastplate and womb open to the air. The smell of smoke and Sulphur hung heavy around him and the other armor soldier on the ridge.

Colonel Martel knelt in prayer. One knee to the ground, the other bent on front of him. His armor mimed his pose and held a two yard long sword point down into the thin layer of ash covered the ridge. Martel had one hand on the blade, his forehead pressed against it.

Gideon twisted a heel against the ground. Hoping the colonel would finally notice that the aliens had left the planet. It was useless to speak to him while in prayer.

Martel crossed himself, then struggled to his feet. The man's limbs were painfully thin, a consequence of not leaving his armor since the day he set foot on [place] almost a year ago.

"How is Tongea?" Gideon asked.

"He lost an arm, but he can still wear his armor. Recovery will take time," Martel said. "Why didn't you kill the brood mother when you had the chance? She was the one that started this war."

"Desperate enemies fight harder. You broke them on the field of battle. I kill the brood mother and they'd have no choice but to die hard. We are armor, we know what it means to fight a last stand. I offered to let them go and the fighting stops...and we'd save this mud ball from an ecological disaster," Gideon shrugged.

"You did well."

"Am I redeemed in your eyes?"

"You are."

"Then I want what you promised," Gideon's face hardened. "I want my own lance."

"You'll have your lance, but you must forge it yourself."

"Back to Earth? Training?"

“Bring the Iron Dragoons back into the Corps,” Martel leaned against his armor’s leg and ran a hand over his bald head. “You will not fail.”

“I am armor. I am fury. I will not fail,” Gideon nodded. “It’s been a long time since I was home.”

**A new chapter in the Ember War universe begins March 28<sup>th</sup>!**

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