

CHAPTER ONE

---

The cold, hard white sun edged above the horizon, casting long shadows across the desolate landscape. Lt. Commander Hrothgar Tebrey perched atop the nearly vertical basaltic cliff as he studied the base below him. Adaptive camouflage and electronic countermeasures on his powered armor made him virtually invisible to all but the most sophisticated detection equipment. He scanned his surroundings again, but nothing moved except fine grains of ice, dancing in the howling wind.

He stood, shedding ice from his armor, and stepped from the kilometer-high cliff.

To his left, kilometers away, light glinted from the frigid, turbulent ocean. The violence of the waves matched his thoughts perfectly. As he fell, the breadth of the glacial valley below remained shrouded in darkness. The pale, dim lights that marked the perimeter of the Wolf Empire encampment winked like dying stars. Searchlights swept the open area around the encampment; the enemy obviously worried about being attacked, as well they should. In the center of the installation, beyond the watchtowers, the prefabricated buildings huddled together as if for warmth. The wind howled past his helmet as he fell, but Tebrey was comfortable in his sealed suit, even with the air temperature well below zero.

On the far side of the encampment, local civilians – now prisoners – in identical grey coveralls were being driven from their crude shacks to work in the strip mines at the edge of the base. Tebrey's tactical computer estimated over a thousand men, women, and children toiling in the freezing cold. The psychic stench of their misery rolled across him in nauseating waves.

Armed guards in white tactical dress, oblivious to his scrutiny, directed the captives' labors. Tebrey wasn't sure why the Wolf Empire had decided to invade Serendipity. There were no rare mineral resources here, and the planet held little strategic value. It was a worthless, backwater planet on the far edge of Earth Federation space. The planet wasn't even industrialized. In short, there was absolutely no logical reason for the invasion, much less the forced labor.

It was as if the sole purpose of the invasion had been to cause suffering.

It was exactly the sort of activity that Admiral Meleeka had told him to keep an eye open for, and he didn't think it was coincidence that it had happened in a system close to where he had been sent to investigate. Although Tebrey's orders were for reconnaissance only, he couldn't just sit by and watch people suffer, not when he could do something about it.

Tebrey had been aboard the FSS *Warbird* when it had been suddenly diverted to the Pi Orionis system. They'd picked up a garbled distress call from the planet. The Wolf Empire occasionally conducted raids in this region of space, but no one expected the Empire to have fortified positions and ground troops in place on the surface. There had been no response from the planetary government, so Tebrey and Hunter made planetfall while the *Warbird* engaged the two Wolf Empire destroyers in orbit.

Tebrey and his companion found the encampment below. The enemy troops had no backup, no orbital support. It was suicide. It didn't make sense, and that worried him, because no one was that stupid. They had to have a reason for what they were doing, and he had to find out what it was.

He checked his weapons again as the ground rushed toward him. Serendipity possessed a slightly higher gravity than standard, and he adjusted the gravitic engine on his suit to compensate, somersaulting to orient himself to the ground. Tebrey found that every battle was accompanied by a curious mental calmness. He was only truly nervous when he couldn't act. Now that he was committed to action, he was surprised to note that he was actually... *happy*.

*Why would they do this?* Tebrey asked Hunter via his mindlink.

*I've never understood most of human behavior, Hunter lied. It looks like they're trying to find something in the ice, or maybe just provoke a war.*

*That's what worries me. What could be buried in the ice that they would want?*

*Either something important, or as I said, they just want a war.*

*They have to know that they'd lose a war with the Federation, don't they?*

*One would think,* Hunter replied. The bioengineered panther was working his way stealthily toward the fence line two kilometers to the east of Tebrey's position.

The Wolf Empire controlled a paltry two dozen star systems just outside the rimward edge of Federation space. The combined population of all of their worlds was smaller than that of any one of the core Federation planets. Their technology was at least a hundred years behind the Federation's, as well. There was no possibility that they could hope to win a direct conflict.

Nevertheless, they were here now. The Empire encampment was only a few kilometers from the entrance to the cavern network that held Newhavensport, one of the largest cities on Serendipity. The original settlers had built the cities underground to help protect themselves from the planet's brutal winters. On a world where the temperature never rose above seven degrees Celsius even at the equator, the populace had to take extreme measures to stay alive. The sequestered nature of the cities meant that each city had rapidly diverged culturally after colonization. The city-states had spent hundreds of years at war with each other; only their membership in the Federation maintained the fragile accord between them.

Normally, when faced with such an enemy base, Tebrey would call in an orbital kinetic strike and move on. A kinetic strike here, unfortunately, would not only kill the captives but also produce hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties in the nearby city. The ground shock wave from a multi-kiloton blast would collapse most the caverns in the area. So that really wasn't an option, no matter how much he wished for it. The other alternative would be to call in the marines, but the *Warbird* was no longer answering his calls. Without

any contact from the ship, Tebrey and his companion were on their own.

That was something else for him to worry about.

Tebrey hit the ground running, a thousand meters down the cliff. He'd picked his landing location skillfully; although ice and fractured rock blasted away from where he hit, his footing was sure. The force of his impact jarred him to his teeth, but the gravitic engine made the kilometer-long plunge not much worse than a three-meter drop. His audio sensors picked up shouts and then an alarm klaxon as the enemy noticed him. Even with adaptive camouflage on his armor, the enemy sensors couldn't have failed to notice eight hundred kilograms of armored marine hurtling down the cliff. He tucked his head down and ran, relying on surprise and his beryllium-steel armor to protect him.

*You worry too much,* Hunter thought. *It's probably just a communications error. It happens.*

*Yeah, remember the last time there was a communication error? I almost died when a fanatic decided to blast the shuttle I was in. Besides, somebody has to worry. You never worry about anything, even when you should. Stop there,* Tebrey added. *You're not going to get any closer without them seeing you. What are the defenses like?*

*You can see them as well as I can. Six turreted towers guard the approaches. There appear to be about three hundred personnel in the base. Maybe a third of those are currently armed. I don't see any heavy armor. They seem to be moving some of the prisoners away from the others. I've got a bad feeling about this.*

*Does it look like they're preparing to kill the prisoners?*

*Maybe. Maybe not. It doesn't matter, though; you're going to storm it, aren't you?* Hunter asked incredulously.

*I don't like to think of what they're doing to the civilians in that camp, and I cannot, will not, sit here and watch as they slaughter innocents. They won't be able to use their large-caliber weapons once we're in the base, for fear of hitting their own people. I can't raise the Warbird, and I don't know why. Do you have a better idea?* Tebrey waited for the reply that didn't come. *I didn't think so,* he thought. *Just be ready to follow me in.*

*You know I will be. Moreover, you only hope they won't use the big*

*guns. Who says they give a shit about killing their own people?*

*Shut up, you're not helping.* Tebrey steadied his nerves and tried unsuccessfully not to think about the young wife he might never see again. He missed Ana. He was confident in his and Hunter's abilities, but he knew that no plan was foolproof, and this plan didn't have a lot going for it.

Plasma pulses stitched a line of actinic fury as bright as suns along his path. Tebrey raced through the billowing clouds of steam and vaporized rock without pausing to return fire. He had to get inside the range of the heavy guns. A direct hit from one of those cannon would overload the superconductor on his suit and boil him alive.

*At least your plan has the virtue of being so insane that they would never plan against it,* Hunter thought sarcastically.

*I'm in powered armor,* Tebrey thought back. *It's going to take a lot of firepower to stop me.*

*Looks to me as if they have a lot to try with,* Hunter grumbled. *I really think we should've waited for assistance.*

*From where?* Tebrey asked. *Anyway, I'm tired of waiting on others.*

The steep, rocky slope allowed him to build up his speed, and he was running at close to thirty-five kilometers an hour when he reached the fence around the base and leapt over it, sailing through the air to smash through the wall of the closest guard tower that had been raining plasma blasts down upon him. Tebrey heard shouts from above as the soldiers there realized what had happened. He drew his pistols and raced for the stairs; their heavy weapons wouldn't be able to target him inside the building. They would soon learn why it was a mistake to invade an Earth Federation world.

In addition, if there was a darker purpose to what they were doing, Tebrey would take care of that, as well. There was a feral smile upon his lips. Just then, had he known it, he looked very much like his long-lost father.