

Book One,



Trial by Fire

Chapter 1 Timing

This planet's life giving star had retreated an hour ago, taking with it light and warmth. Shadows moved amongst the trees, creeping up the mountains, and enveloping the nearby villages. The fortress, carved from the native rock, was cast in bronze for one beautiful instant before night swept in and claimed us all. Everything seemed to sleep tensely, or perhaps it only waited, watching the sky for things to come.

Sudden flickers on the ground were mirrored in the sky, and the peaceful gloom was broken. White puffballs sparkled into life over rolling hills, illuminating lines of verdant green trees and exposing wondering eyes to a velvet midnight turned into harsh daylight. Blue flowers blossomed across the black blanket of the sky, opening with deceptive gentleness before being swallowed by the void. Seconds later, red and green starbursts joined in, shattering against the stars with bone-crushing force, bathing the audience with pulses of heat that seemed to race across the skin and then evaporate like memories of summer. Not to be left out, the nearby cities and towns let loose with shouts of their own, their words written in straight, chromatic streaks.

If this were a celebration, lovers would be sitting on blankets and stealing kisses between explosions. Children would run, laughing, in neatly tended parks, watched over by smiling parents. Even the elderly would be resting their bones in armchairs on lawns and in gardens, relishing the last gasp of summer warmth. Everyone would marvel at the power, the raw aggressive fire of humanity distilled into a display of pure beauty and joy – one of the few things that justify our existence. Perhaps signs would flutter in the winds: Happy Independence Day, Happy Colonization Day, or maybe Happy New Year 2660/2661. If this were a celebration...

It was not.

Red columns of flame shot up out of the cities, silencing pulse cannons mid-sentence. Angry red hearts beat strung staccatos in the sky as anti-aircraft guns carpeted the clouds with flak, sometimes catching one of the AB-222 fighter/bombers and shattering it open like a fruit made of fire and shrapnel. The high-pitched screech of cruise missiles descending from orbit at hypersonic speeds crashed against ears and shattered glass as they followed their simplistic computer commands to drop payloads with emotionless precision. Up on the mountain, gattling laser defense guns swatted them from the sky with equal, robotic zeal. Air superheated in the wake of the high-intensity light and fluoresced, turning the area around 'President' Luc Kennedy's fortress into an impossibly large, disembodied light. The harsh glow revealed the smoldering stumps of trees, the wrecked skeletons of cities, and thousands of advancing soldiers.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to invest in some *fragging* night-vision sensors and software rather than lighting up the whole sky?" I glanced angrily over my shoulder at Reeves, then tongued the toggle switch for the helmet camera. LEDs shimmered, overlaying the visor of the helmet with what my camera saw rather than what I saw. I used the tongue-stick and managed to zoom in on the fortress. Even with the intense light, minefields, and air attack, dozens of small skirmish groups were already breaking through the tree line and making for the walls.

Fools.

Some months ago, the President of Ashley 9 decided that the best way to make sure that people were taken care of would be to tax the people into near oblivion, bringing on the worst recession anyone

could remember. Once the people were bled dry, he could only fund his progressive social programs by cutting funding to the admittedly bloated navy. According to the briefing packet, Supreme Admiral Tomlinson had seen his people suffer long enough and began trying to oust and capture the sitting President. Fast forward to the here and now and you can bet that the few diplomatic entreaties between the two sides had gone over as well as a paper-mâché spacecraft. War had come to planet Ashley 9.

Then a tiny phone-icon blinked twice in my peripheral vision before expanding into a small picture of our team's liaison. "*Radiation Angels*, GPS readings indicate that you have not left your staging position. Please confirm."

I couldn't stifle a sigh as I toggled the vox speaker on my integrated armband. "Well, Mrs. White, I can patch you into my feed if you want, but the situation is pretty simple. It would appear that you are still bombing the objective quite thoroughly and advancing at this time is counter to my survival instincts."

She smiled, an act that made her tightly tamed hair and severe, quasi-military clothes blend into the very picture of someone's unpleasant boss. Unfortunately, she was my unpleasant boss, "Why, Captain Rook, I never thought you to be a timid type."

I did not reply.

"You do know, of course, that Supreme Admiral Tomlinson has opened the President's fortress as spoils?" Behind me, the six bodies of my command staff shifted tensely. Second in command, First Lieutenant Reeves, picked up his weapon and equipment pack, casting his vote for leaving at this very moment. Lieutenant Toon, leader of Team 1, immediately followed suit.

Evidently, she had cued them into the conversation. Peer pressure at its finest. *Frag peer pressure, and frag you, White.*

Lieutenant Jamal Warner, leader of Team 2, sneered at Reeves, crossed his arms and leaned against the back wall of the bunker. Lieutenant Lakeisha Tanner, from Team 3, gathered her equipment at her feet, but stopped short of fully preparing to move out without an order. Lieutenant Ezekiel Cutter, Team 4, stood at military rest like a statue, expressing no desire whatsoever as to demonstrate his discipline to me. Master Sergeant Tom Logan remained motionless, but for a completely different reason. Little more than a brain encased in two tons of metal, the cyborg always took the long view toward everything. Until there was an order, any movement was a waste of effort.

They might all have their own opinions but they didn't amount to a hill of *grit*. I was in charge, so I ignored White and I ignored them. Our liaison, however, decided to set the screws a little tighter. "I would hate to see you lose out on any share of the loot because of a sudden overdose of caution."

I waited, arms crossed as I surveyed the battle. Machine guns, pulse rifles, and laser carbines unloaded their payloads into the dirt from firing ports in the walls. Those too eager for Kennedy's gold were usually caught in the middle, cut in half, vaporized, or burned beyond recognition as they swept up into the killing fields on all sides of the mountain retreat. Lewis, our business manager, had been right; The Orange Party had hired anybody who showed up, even those minus the usual weight of gray matter. There were probably dozens of fringe-worlders out there; just backwater hunters, wanna-be's, and weapon-enthusiasts who thought a quick foray as a soldier-for-hire would pull in some big bucks.

"Captain Rook, are you there?" One, lone space-to-ground cruise missile bucked and weaved through the ribbons of hot, electric light. The liquid streams of energy crossed back and forth, driven by AI that could no longer tell the difference between the thermal signature of an incoming threat, and those generated by its own weapons. It was literally aiming one set of lasers at the stream created by the other. "Captain?"

We saw the bright flare of light, then felt the tremor in the ground before the triple concussion shockwave reached us, rattling debris and unsecured crap all around the partially sunken bunker. The power plant for the automated defenses had been buried underneath a dozen feet of volcanic basalt, but it might have been in a well-lit field, sitting at the center of a giant bull's-eye, with dozens of neon signs pointing to it. Even at a thousand to one odds, a single missile's subpenetrator had cored the fortress like an apple.

When the eagle breaks the back of the hare, it is because of timing.

The only problem now was the vile, yellow-bone clouds that were erupting from the newly formed hole. I punched a few buttons on the armband. Within a second of hitting 'XQT' a tiny beam had shot out of the C2 helmet next to the cam, a sensor had examined the readings, and the microcomputer had analyzed the data, spitting up on my screen a conga line of bright red letters. "Mrs. White, I assume you are reading this?"

It was as if someone had pulled out the cord supplying her smugness, "Y-ye-, uh, it's not quite clear, here Captain." I noticed the icon change - she had disconnected the rest of the team. That's okay; I reconnected them. All of them, all at once saw the same thing I did: 'Spectral analysis confirms probability 99.956% designated vapor is Demios 4. Initiate immediate safety protocols.'

"Mrs. White, it would appear the scattered earlier Intel was correct: Kennedy has stocked chemical weapons."

"Well, Captain, he is a criminal, that's why you are here-"

"It would also appear that clause 114c of our contract has just been invoked. You just doubled our pay."

"Now, wait a minute, Rook-"

"I'll send my readings to our lawyer for confirmation. We have to suit up and move out, Mrs. White so we will reestablish link when we need you." I shut down the comm and turned to face my crew.

They were already breaking out the nuclear/biological/chemical gear, calling outside the bunker to the other *Angels* so that they could gear up. Only Logan remained still, as was his habit. Made of two tons of titanium, ceramic, and polymers his Templar model cybernetic body had no more need of an NBC suit than he did of air, food, or shelter. With a sub harmonic hum, he shifted his featureless face toward me. Two aerials - positioned almost like the decorative wings of a knight's helm, fluttered slightly. I heard his cold, steely voice over the comm., "Well done, Captain. How did you guess? The reports of chemical agents I saw were pretty sketchy."

I shrugged, accepting an NBC suit from a thoroughly abashed Reeves. "I never trust anyone who puts in a clause in the contract to cut the pay of anyone who dies on the job."

"Good advice." Somewhere deep inside the anthropomorphic hunk of technology, a preserved human brain shook the heavily reinforced head slowly, almost gently, "At least there wasn't a Leningrad Rider."

"*The Radiation Angels* do not sign contracts with Leningrad Riders." I pulled my multi-optic C² helmet off and gathered my dreadlocks into a tight ponytail with a few plastic zip-ties. There was little need for camouflage paint while fully armored and in NBCs. I hated the stinky grease pencils, in my opinion my deep brown skin blended into most backgrounds just fine on its own. I buckled on the light armor, like a suit of hyper-technology knight's plate over the airtight NBC. I attached an oxygen recycler to the back of Reeves' suit, and he did the same to mine before I put the helmet back on, sealed the suit, and activated all systems.

All around me, the company was going about its business with brisk efficiency. They tugged on equipment straps, making sure nothing would be lost, tested gadgets, and checked to see that their weapons were loaded, primed, or charged. The picture made my heart leap, purifying those under my command of their flaws and quirks, purging them of the dirt and grit of this world. They transcended their own flesh and became ageless warriors, preparing for war the same as any roman legionnaire sharpening his gladius in the times before Christ. Tomlinson, White, and the political garbage of Ashley 9 mattered very little to us. We were mercenaries and this is what we got paid to do.

Within five minutes I reconnected to Mrs. White and we began a march toward the Kennedy fortress.

