

JOHN BOWERS



Science
Fiction



REBEL GUNS OF ALPHA CENTAURI



A Nick Walker novel

Nick Walker, United Federation Marshal

**REBEL GUNS OF ALPHA
CENTAURI**

John Bowers



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Prolog

Wednesday, 19 November, 0436 - Trimmer Springs, Alpha Centauri 2 (8 years ago)

The Star Marines had been shot all to hell. Only a hundred thirteen men were still alive in Echo Company and some of those were wounded.

Nick Walker lay on the deck of the hover transport with shell fragments in his back, blood leaking from under his vest. Pvt. Kopshevar sat on one side of him, Sgt. DuBose on the other. The transport was only half full—nearly half the battalion had been lost to Coalition artillery in the heaviest barrage Nick had ever experienced. If their ride hadn't come when it did, no one would have survived.

“Where they taking us?” Nick mumbled, feeling weaker than he had in years.

“Who gives a shit?” Kopshevar said. “Anywhere is better than where we were.”

Nick closed his eyes, grimacing against the pain. “I'd like to know where the hell the rebels got that kind of hardware. They're *farmers*, for god's sake!”

“Stop talking, Private,” Sgt. DuBose said. “Save your strength.”

Nick grimaced. “That's Private *first class* to you, Sergeant.”

DuBose laughed. "I'll put that on your headstone. How you feeling?"

"Like a pin cushion."

"If it helps any, I don't think you're hurt that bad. I don't see more than five or six gallons of blood on the deck."

"Well, shit, I feel better already."

"There's a couple of corpsmen in the other transports. Soon as we land I'll get one of them to look you over."

Nick closed his eyes and nodded. He didn't feel like talking any more.

If they thought they were being evacuated, they were wrong. The transports settled down in a small mountain town on a narrow plateau overlooking the Trimmer Plain. As the Star Marines disembarked, the transports lifted off again and soared away to the west.

Nick looked around, surprised at how few Star Marines he was seeing.

"Where's the rest of the battalion?" he asked.

No one answered him.

Capt. Seals gathered the men in a small park in the center of town. Houses lined the streets on either side, a large church sat on the west end.

"All right, listen up!" Capt. Seals stood in front of them, his face streaked with dirt, his eyes serious. "Here's the situation. The

6 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

battalion has been surrounded and cut off. We're facing at least five thousand enemy troops, and it may be tomorrow before we can expect any relief. The name of this town is Trimmer Springs. It's right on the edge of Coalition territory, and Echo Company has been detailed to dig in and hold at all costs. Most of the people here are on our side, so we're going to defend them as best we can.

“Coalition troops are moving this way, and we expect them to attack within the hour. They'll be coming from the east, and the only way in from that direction is through a narrow pass with a single road—we're going to stop them right there. I want Second Platoon to hold the bottleneck with First Platoon in support, Third in reserve. Find some cover and button up.

“Questions?”

Kopshevar raised his hand. “What happened to the rest of the battalion, Captain?”

“Like I said, we're surrounded. They're guarding the western approach to the town.”

Before he finished speaking they heard the whine of an incoming artillery shell. It exploded several blocks away.

“Looks like they're gonna hammer us while we wait, so get in position and find some cover. Move out!”

First and Second Platoons, badly depleted in numbers, set out toward the east.

Half a dozen more shells streaked in and exploded randomly around town.

Lt. Jaeger of Third Platoon gathered his noncoms to issue orders, then Sgt. DuBose returned to his squad, a corpsman in his wake.

“Walker! Strip off that vest.”

The corpsman looked about seventeen, but was quick and efficient. He picked steel fragments out of Nick’s back, disinfected the wounds with antiseptic spray, and began applying a field dressing.

“Looks like you just got peppered,” he said. “How close were you to the explosion?”

“I dunno, it was behind me. Knocked me off my feet.”

“These laser vests aren’t good for much, but I think it protected you from the worst of it. You’ll be okay in a few days. Try not to move around too much.”

Nick laughed at the absurdity of that statement. “Yeah, right.”

The corpsman finished up and tapped Nick on the helmet. “Good luck, Private.”

Nick nodded gratefully. “Thanks, Doc. Soon as you’re old enough, I’ll buy you a beer.”

Kopshevar laughed. “Don’t let him kid you, Doc—he ain’t old enough either.”

The corpsman grinned and closed up his aid kit. “*Semper fi*, dudes.” He trotted off down the park to join his unit.

8 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

DuBose came over as Nick was putting his vest back on. “You gonna live?”

“Yeah, he gave me five or six hours.”

“All right.” DuBose turned to the rest of his men. “First squad, on me. We’re gonna take cover inside the church.”

“The church!” Kopshevar looked skeptical. “Biggest goddamn target in town!”

“It has a basement. The Freaks are mostly Christian extremists, so the captain thinks they’ll avoid targeting the church. Move out.”

Shells were coming faster now, singing through the air like huge metallic insects.

Nick walked stiffly, carrying his rifle at port arms.

The church was a magnificent structure, but was mostly constructed of wood. Artillery could rip it apart in minutes if the captain was wrong. Still, it boasted a bell tower sixty feet high, which would make a great observation platform if the enemy actually got into town...and if it had a basement, so much the better. Right now a basement sounded very appealing.

The shelling continued for ninety minutes.

Nick dozed while his squad waited for orders.

About thirty civilians also cowered in one of the basement rooms, having sought the nearest shelter after being caught in the open.

His senses attuned to changes in his environment, Nick woke when the shelling stopped.

Kopshevar was staring at the ceiling and other men were stirring as well. Sgt. DuBose was on his helmet radio talking to Lt. Jaeger.

Nick shifted position and winced as his wounds complained.

“What’s going on?”

Kopshevar shrugged.

DuBose turned to face the squad.

“Sounds like the Freaks are making their move. Second Platoon is engaging them. We stay put until the captain says otherwise.”

The squad sat silent, their hearts tripping.

Dimly, Nick could hear small-arms fire somewhere in the distance. He reached into a pocket for a ration pack, ripped it open, and chewed the contents, some kind of granola bar with raisins. He hardly tasted it.

They heard more artillery. The small-arms got louder, closer. DuBose listened on his command link and Nick saw his features tighten.

“Sergeant?”

DuBose shook his head. “Second Platoon is falling back. The Freaks have reached First Platoon. Get ready to move.”

Everyone jumped in alarm as heavy combat boots thundered down the wooden stairs. A private Nick didn’t know scrambled toward them and dropped to a knee in front of

10 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

DuBose. He was out of breath, looking close to panic. He carried a backpack and a heavy .49 calibre Browning sniper rifle, which he gave to DuBose.

“Captain wants to know if anyone here has qualified on this. He wants somebody up in the bell tower. The Freaks are about to overrun First Platoon.”

“Send Walker,” Kopshevar suggested. “He’s about to die anyway.”

Nick tried to laugh, but burst into a coughing fit instead. “Fuck you, Kopycat.”

But DuBose was looking at him. “You are qualified, aren’t you?”

Nick blinked in surprise. “Yeah. I qualified on the range, but I’ve never used one in combat.”

DuBose hefted the rifle and tossed it to him.

“Looks like today’s your lucky day.”

Chapter 1

**Thursday, Jan. 13, 0444 (Colonial Calendar) –
Trimmer Springs, Alpha Centauri 2
(8 years later)**

The damn train only ran once a week...and it was late.

Leaning against the side of the station, Nick Walker glanced at his watch. The maglev was ten minutes overdue, but as he peered down the rail and around the mountain curve, he saw no sign of it. He sighed impatiently and pulled his cowboy hat down to shade his eyes. He would just have to wait; at least it was pleasant here in the shade.

As his eyes swept the platform, Nick almost wondered what century he was living in. Fifty feet away the monorail track was capable of supporting a three hundred-knot maglev passenger train, yet with two or three exceptions the women on the platform were dressed like 19th Century North America—full skirts, bonnets, and in some cases, bustles. The men weren't much better; the majority wore full beards, flat black hats, and baggy pants held up by suspenders.

Trimmer Springs felt almost like an amusement park, one of those fanciful Main Street affairs that hearkened back to earlier times on Terra. Much of it, including the train station, had a gingerbread look, like

12 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

something from a children's fantasy tale. The illusion was heightened by the locals themselves, with their archaic fashions and backward attitudes. Today was the first time he'd seen so many in one place, but that was probably because the maglev only ran once a week. Nick didn't mind; it gave him a chance to study them and get a feel for their collective personality.

The feeling didn't seem entirely mutual, though—of the thirty or so people on the platform, several cast disapproving glances in his direction. Clearly he was an outsider, and the United Federation Marshal badge on his shirt didn't seem to help. Nor did his twin gunbelts, one holding a laser pistol and the other a Ru-Hawk .44 long-barreled revolver. Being an outsider was bad enough, but apparently, being a *Federation* outsider was damn near a mortal sin.

He crossed his arms and yawned. The people didn't have to like him. He was here to keep the peace and protect them as best he could. Sooner or later, he hoped, they would come to understand that.

Of course, they didn't *all* hate him...

“Hey, Marshal.”

Nick glanced to his left. Hugh Povar had stepped out of the station to join him on the platform. Hugh was a local boy, twenty-two, and a deputy marshal. He was about Nick's height but ten pounds lighter, a good-looking

kid with a quick smile and willing attitude. Nick had only known him two days, but liked him.

“Watcha doing? Waitin’ for the train?”

Nick shook his head. “No, just holding up the building in case of an earthquake.”

Hugh glanced sharply at him, his eyes wide with surprise. He blushed when he saw Nick’s bemused grin.

“Oh. I guess that was a stupid question, wasn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. I could have just been checking out the ladies.”

Hugh gave a short laugh, almost a snort. “Why would you check out this bunch? They dress like prehistoric times.”

“They don’t seem very friendly, either.”

“That’s because they hate the Federation, and they hate the badge.”

Nick nodded thoughtfully. He wasn’t surprised at that. He’d seen people like these before, during the war. Back then they’d been shooting at him.

“These are cult people, aren’t they? I remember them.”

“Yeah. The regular citizens are a lot friendlier. They actually *like* the Federation, and you in particular.” Hugh leaned against the building, unconsciously aping Nick.

“I remember there were two cults that formed the Coalition,” Nick said, “but I could

14 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

never tell them apart. They all dress pretty much alike. Who are these people?”

“They’re Homerites. They’re not quite as bad as the Groaners.”

“How do you tell them apart?”

“The Groaners carry guns.”

Nick glanced down the rail again, but still saw nothing coming. A cool breeze washed over him, pleasant in the afternoon heat. The breeze carried the smell of hot food from two or three sources, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten lunch.

Hugh Povar turned his body to face Nick.

“What was it like?” he asked, a look of anticipation on his face.

“What was what like?”

“The war. The church tower.”

Nick blinked, memory flooding back. The question wasn’t completely unexpected, but it was rather unwelcome.

“I remember that day,” Hugh said, his voice rising again. “I was only fourteen, but I remember it.”

Nick frowned. “You were here?”

Hugh nodded, and pointed vaguely.

“Yeah. Our house is only a few blocks from the church. We were down in the basement, but I could hear the fighting. I still remember the sound of that rifle, and the bullets hitting the bell tower. I remember like it was yesterday.”

Nick's eyes strayed to his left where the church tower gleamed in the Alpha Centauri sun. It had been rebuilt, and the tower was clearly visible, dominating the town. A cold shudder washed over him, but he managed to suppress it before Hugh noticed.

"It was the worst day of my life," he said quietly. "Don't ask me again."

The chatter picked up as the train came into sight, reflecting sunlight as it streaked around the mountain curve. Nick still leaned against the station, arms crossed, but Hugh took a step forward and peered down the track. The maglev was decelerating rapidly, silent except for the approaching hiss of compressed air and the shrill tone of the warning horn. It was two miles out when it first came into view, but barely a minute later it was sliding to a stop at the station. The ladies in their long skirts milled about anxiously as they prepared to greet whomever they were waiting for.

Nick's heart beat a little faster as the doors slid open and people began to debark.

"Jesus Christ!" Hugh exclaimed beside him. "Will you look at *that!*"

Nick had already seen "that". The woman who stepped down from the forward car was a magnificent specimen of femininity, a startling contrast to the women on the platform. She wore a white blouse that was tied around the waist and open at the throat,

exposing her belly button and the top third of her magnificent cleavage. Her pants were so tight she seemed to have been poured into them, and her blond hair gleamed like a halo in the sunlight. Her face was chiseled to perfection, with a straight nose, full lips, and narrowed green eyes that peered out like lasers. She was in her early thirties, clearly not a kid, but surely the most stunning woman who had ever set foot in Trimmer Springs.

Hugh Povar was practically shivering.

“Will you look at those *tits!*” he whispered. “I could kiss those once and die happy forever! Nick, have you ever *seen* anything like that?”

Nick nodded. “Once. What you’re looking at is a Vegan woman.”

Hugh stared at him in awe. “You mean it’s true? There’s no such thing as an ugly Vegan?”

“Yep. One hundred percent true.”

Hugh turned to stare at the blond beauty again, his breath coming in short gasps. “What do you suppose she’s doing here?” he asked.

Nick didn’t answer, but pushed himself away from the building and planted his feet. The blonde was headed directly toward them, and as she approached she broke into a smile. As Hugh Povar watched in stunned disbelief, she threw her arms around Nick’s neck and

pulled him down for a long, leisurely kiss. After fully thirty seconds she pulled back and smiled up at him.

“Thanks for meeting me,” she said in a husky, sensuous voice.

Nick kissed her back. “Thanks for coming.”

The blonde turned her devastating eyes on Hugh, who gulped weakly and stood rigid as stone.

“Another U.F. Marshal,” she said with a smile.

Nick nodded. “Suzanne, meet Hugh Povar. Hugh, this is Suzanne Norgaard. My girlfriend.”

Chapter 2

“What a quaint little town!” Suzanne exclaimed as they strolled east from the train station. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s pretty.”

Nick nodded. “It’s fairly typical of this region. Hell of a lot nicer than Kline Corners, don’t you think?”

Suzanne laughed. “Interesting that you mentioned Hell and Kline Corners in the same breath. They do have a lot in common.”

Kline Corners was a small, dusty cow-town on the Sirian frontier. Nick had been posted there for just over a year, where he had met Suzanne and her daughter Kristina. The U.F. Marshal’s office had been eliminated following the Missibama elections, when Lucius Clay was elected President and immediately began to consolidate all the states into a single entity called the Sirian Confederacy. Sirius 1 had been seeking independence for several years, and the unified Confederacy satisfied Federation requirements for autonomy. The United Federation Marshal, once the most powerful law enforcement agency on Sirius, was no longer needed.

Nick had been reposted to Alpha Centauri; Suzanne and Kristina had chosen to leave as

well, because Sirian attitudes toward women were practically medieval.

“Did you get Kristina settled in?” Nick gave Suzanne a squeeze around the waist.

Suzanne sighed. “I left her at Orbital Station 6 on Terra,” she said sadly. “Nathan had already arranged for her passage down to the planet. She sent me a message two days later that they had hooked up. Nathan has a small flat in London and they’re going to live together.”

Nick glanced at her in surprise. “You’re okay with that?”

She smiled weakly. “It’s Nathan. He’s a good boy. And Kristina’s already older than I was when she was born; so...”

“It’s just tough letting go,” he said.

“Real tough.”

“If it helps any,” Nick said, “I have all the confidence in the ‘verse in Nathan. He’s strong and decent and he loves your daughter. He’ll take good care of her.”

“I know.”

As they walked east, the street gradually angled downhill. Trimmer Springs was built on a shelf in the side of the mountain, with peaks on the south end and a steep cliff on the north...with an unrestricted view of the Trimmer Plain. To Nick it seemed the town was sitting down with its back to the mountain and its legs hanging over the edge.

Trimmer Springs was a mile long, but only nine blocks wide.

“So where are you taking me?” Suzanne asked with a gleam in her eye.

“Home,” he said. “To our very own house.”

“We have a *house*?” Her green eyes lit with excitement.

“Yes, Ma’am. A real house with a living room, a kitchen...and a *bedroom!*”

She laughed delightedly. “You can’t wait to show me that last one, can you?”

He shrugged, feigning innocence.

“Well, after being cooped up in a starship for two weeks, I figured a woman like you would probably be going out of her mind with sexual desire.”

“A ‘woman like me’? What kind of woman would that be?”

“A horny woman.”

“Mm. And you aren’t particularly horny yourself, you’re just thinking of my welfare?”

He winked at her. “Just doing my civic duty, Ma’am.”

As the street continued downhill they passed the church. Situated in the geographic center of town, it was a large building, occupying most of a city block, with a six-story bell tower in the front. As they walked past, Nick didn’t bother to look up. Across the street opposite the church sat a community park that covered two square blocks. It looked cool and inviting, lots of green grass, stubby

pinetrees, and willow trees. Small children chased each other in circles while a couple of bored parents watched.

“That’s a *nice* park,” Suzanne observed. “I don’t think I’ve seen a real park since I was a kid. There was nothing like this around Kline Corners.”

“There wasn’t much of anything around Kline Corners,” he said, “except desert and scrub.”

“Ooh, a statue! I love sculptures. Let’s take a look.”

Still holding Nick’s hand, she veered off the sidewalk, dragging him along. He felt his throat tighten as they approached the bronze figure, and his face slowly fused red. The base stood about four feet high and the statue itself was exactly five feet ten inches. The figure depicted a helmeted soldier with a sniper rifle at his shoulder, peering through a telescopic sight at a downward angle. Suzanne’s eyes were wide with curiosity as she studied the lines etched into the bronze.

“That’s really good work. It doesn’t look like it’s been here very long; it hasn’t even turned green yet.”

Nick glanced up at the figure and then away, feeling his heart beat a little faster. Suzanne didn’t seem to notice.

“Who is he?” she wondered aloud. She walked around to the front of the figure and found the inscription plate, reading slowly. As

she read, her eyes widened in amazement, her voice trailing off.

“Private first class Nick Walker, Echo Company, Thirty-third Star Marines...”

She turned to him in stunned amazement.

“Nick...this is *you!*”

He took a deep breath and nodded, his face flaming.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t see it,” he said lamely.

“Why would you hope that?” Her eyes returned to the bronze plate and she continued reading. Nick turned and stared across the street.

“...nineteen November, oh four thirty-six, held off overwhelming rebel forces for thirty-one hours until reinforcements arrived...mm-mm-mm-mm...is credited with saving Trimmer Springs from being overrun and preventing rebel forces from flanking the main line of defense...mm-mm-mm...was awarded the Crimson Cross for wounds and the Galaxy Cross for courage above and beyond...” She closed her mouth and blinked. “Fifty-one men.”

She took a step back and turned to him.

“Nick, why did you never tell me about this?”

He turned back to face her, his mouth tightly clamped. “I didn’t know about the statue until yesterday.”

“I don’t mean that. You won the Galaxy Cross! Isn’t that one of the highest awards the Federation can offer?”

He shrugged. “Killing people isn’t something you brag about.”

Suzanne caught his expression and the excitement faded from her eyes. She walked over and pulled him into her arms.

“Now I understand the nightmares.”

Nick rested his chin on her shoulder and nodded. She pulled back and kissed him.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then we won’t talk about it.”

He grinned feebly, blinking mist out of his eyes.

“I just wish they hadn’t put up the damn statue,” he said. “Most of the people I killed that day still have relatives living around here.”

The house sat on the extreme north edge of town, a small, two-bedroom bungalow with a low front porch and surrounded by a wooden fence. In the rear, a lawn extended sixty feet from the back door and then dropped away sharply beyond the fence; from there the ground sloped at a forty-degree angle until it ended in a sheer cliff a hundred yards from the house. The view of Trimmer Plain was spectacular, an unrestricted vista of rolling grassland that stretched miles into the

distance. Seeing it for the first time, Suzanne Norgaard sucked in her breath.

“I can’t believe it!” she gasped. “It’s even more beautiful than Vega!”

“Sure beats the hell out of the Sirian Outback,” Nick agreed.

“Honestly, I haven’t seen anything close to this since I was growing up. When my parents moved to Sirius they settled at Kline Corners and I never left.” She turned to Nick and embraced him, pressing her face into his shoulder. A stiff breeze sweeping up from the plain buffeted her hair.

“I’m so glad I decided to come with you. This is going to be so much better than Sirius.”

Nick kissed her hungrily, sucking at her full lips.

“It’s sure going to be a lot less lonely for me,” he said.

“For me, too.” She smiled. “Over the last year I kind of got used to having you around. If I had stayed on Sirius, with you and Kristina both gone, I would have been miserable.” She took his hand and led him toward the house. “Are you on duty?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been here two days and haven’t done squat.”

“Then...you don’t have to get back to work right away?”

“Not right away.”

They stepped inside the house and locked the back door. Suzanne led him into the kitchen.

“You hungry?”

“I think I missed lunch,” he admitted.

She turned to face him and began unbuttoning her blouse. He watched silently as she finished, then untied the string around her waist, pulling the blouse open to reveal her bra in all its glory.

“I wasn’t talking about lunch,” she said softly.

He nodded and reached for her with both hands.

“Starving,” he said.

* * *

Luther Nelson had been a U.F. Marshal most of his adult life. Now fifty-one, he had opted for retirement rather than face the rigors of another posting. His last ten years had been spent on Alpha Centauri in five different assignments. He’d been posted to Trimmer Springs twice, the first time at the height of the rebellion that brought Nick Walker there as a Star Marine. Now his second posting to the same town was about to end, and he was thrilled to be turning the office over to the same man whose statue stood prominently in Center Park.

Nelson looked up as Nick walked in the door a little before four in the afternoon. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his

fingers behind his head, which was smooth and pink except for a grey fringe around his ears.

“Get the little lady settled in?” he grinned as Nick dropped into a chair behind his own desk.

“Sure did,” Nick said with a weary sigh.

Nelson grinned. “You were gone long enough.”

Nick smiled but didn’t respond.

“When do I get to meet her?”

“Tomorrow, maybe. She’s sleeping right now. Long trip.”

“Hah. Long reunion, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

Nelson hooted.

“Don’t forget,” he said. “Town meeting tonight. Got to introduce the new U.F. Marshal.”

“Oh, Christ, do you have to?”

“Yes I do. They want to get a look at you. And you need to know all the principles. Sooner or later you’ll be butting heads with most of them.”

“Are they all wackos? They look like wackos.”

“Only about half of them. The rest are just eccentric.”

“Christ.”

“Actually it’s not that bad. Only about twenty percent of the residents are religious freaks. The rest are just ordinary Federation

folks. And most of the religious freaks are good people, just a little odd.”

Nick shrugged. “I guess they can’t be any worse than some of the creeps I ran into on my last two assignments.”

Nelson shook his head. “Don’t make that call yet. Like I said, most of them are okay, but the ones that are *not* okay will give you fits. Trouble is, they’re not like regular felons—you can’t arrest them just because they don’t like you.”

Nelson swiveled his chair around and pulled open a small nitro-cooler, extracted a bottle of cold water, and opened it. He swung back to face Nick and took a long drink. “The name of the game around here is religion. You have your traditional Christians, pretty much all Protestants, who built the church across from the park. Then you have the other two groups. Cults, according to the Christians.”

Nick nodded. “We called them Freaks in the war. The Homerites and the...what’s the other one called?”

“The Groaners. They’re the ones you want to watch out for.”

“Seems to me I should watch out for all of them. Those two were the backbone of the Rebel Coalition a few years ago.”

“They were nearly all of it,” Nelson told him. “They don’t like each other much, but they have one thing in common—they hate

28 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

the Federation even more than they hate each other.”

Nick studied a stylus lying on his desk, picked it up and played with it. He had done his homework on the starship coming in from Sirius 1, mining the ship's database for information about Trimmer Springs. The section on the cults hadn't been extensive, but he'd learned a little, and he had some personal memories as well. Both the Groaners and the Homerites had come from North America when Alpha 2 was first settled, and as luck would have it, settled in the same region.

Outwardly they looked very much alike, living a lifestyle similar to the Amish on Terra, but their outlook was a lot less peaceful. Both groups were seeking some sort of Utopia, a planetary paradise where they could establish a theocratic government. When it came time for Alpha 2 to choose a government each had submitted a proposal for leadership, but the planet at large had rejected them. Determined to be taken seriously, they had joined forces and recruited a surprisingly powerful militia, conducting raids and even atrocities that overwhelmed several other regions of the planet. Alpha Centauri had no military power to speak of, so the Federation had sent the Star Marines.

The Rebel Coalition, as it became known, had been surprisingly well armed and

trained—to this day Nick didn't know who had funded them—and used guerrilla tactics, which meant there was no “front line” and made it very difficult to track them down. The Star Marines had taken nearly two years to suppress them, and technically it still wasn't over. No formal war had been declared and no formal treaty signed; the rebels had simply quit fighting when their losses became too high to continue.

But the two groups together—Groaners and Homerites—still numbered over a quarter million souls, so it wasn't completely paranoid to fear they might renew the rebellion sometime in the future.

“I have a pretty good idea how much they hate the Federation,” Nick told Nelson. “I have the scars to prove it.”

Nelson nodded soberly. “I know you do. And that statue over there in the park? They're not too fond of that, either.”

Chapter 3

The town meeting was surprisingly well attended. As Nick walked onto the stage with Marshal Nelson and took a chair, he estimated four hundred people in attendance. The meeting was held in the community room of the Trimmer Springs church. Nick and Nelson shared the stage with several other people, including Mayor Robinette and Police Chief Jerry Dwyer.

As he waited for the meeting to start, Nick studied the people milling about. Roughly half of them were, as Nelson had said, “regular Federation folks”.

The remaining half, mostly men but including a few women, were from the two religious cults. They stood about in small groups, talking among themselves and eyeing one other with suspicion. Here and there Nick saw a gunbelt; from what Hugh and Nelson had told him, these were probably Groaners. The Groaners were more aggressive than the Homerites, and had contributed a higher percentage of their men to the rebel forces during the war. They had also suffered the heaviest losses.

At five minutes past eight, the mayor called the meeting to order. As people took their seats, they segregated themselves into three distinct sections, each group keeping clear of

the others. The “normal” people—those wearing more modern clothing, who were probably either Protestant or not religious at all—seemed relaxed and curious, and Nick saw smiles at the mayor’s opening remarks. The rest sat in stony silence, glaring, nonresponsive to the mayor’s jokes. Nick felt his blood pressure rise as he waited to see how this was going to go.

Mayor Robinette concluded his opening remarks and got down to the business at hand.

“Tonight’s meeting,” he said, “is a special event. As many of you are aware, Marshal Nelson is retiring this week and will be returning to Terra. Tonight he will introduce his replacement. So at this time, please welcome Marshal Luther Nelson.”

The “regular” people applauded politely as Robinette took his chair and Nelson approached the podium. In the cult section, Nick saw a teenage girl clapping, but she stopped when a severe looking older woman slapped her hands. Nelson placed both hands on the podium, as if to steady himself, and cleared his throat nervously.

“Well, folks, thank you for coming out tonight,” he began. “I’ve enjoyed serving you for the past two years, but my assignment is over and it’s time to move on. Before I go, I want to introduce my replacement, the man who will represent the U.F. Marshal for the

next two years. He's a little bit younger than me..." Grins and some laughter. "...but he ain't no rookie. This will be his third assignment as a U.F. Marshal and he was in the Star Marines before that.

"So, rather than listen to me flap my gums, will you all give a big welcome to your new United Federation Marshal...Nick Walker!"

To Nick's surprise, nearly two hundred people came to their feet cheering and shouting, whooping, whistling, clapping. He stood up, a little dazed by their reaction, and walked toward the podium. Nelson grinned at him, laid a hand on his arm, and leaned in close.

"They must've seen the statue," he whispered, then winked and returned to his chair. Nick realized with a sinking feeling that Nelson was right. He stood in front of the podium with a red face and embarrassed grin, waiting for them to sit down. But they didn't sit down—they continued their ovation for over a minute, until he held up a hand.

Not surprisingly, none of the cult people were cheering. As soon as the room had quieted, before Nick had said a word, one of them came to his feet at the rear of the room.

"Murderer!" he shouted.

Another man stood and repeated the phrase, then a woman joined him.

"Murderer!" she shrieked.

Half a dozen others joined in, standing, some shaking their fists.

“Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!”

Nick stared at them, slightly shaken, not quite sure what to do. Mayor Robinette was on his feet and came forward, grabbed the mini-mike, and tried to calm them down.

“There’s no need for that!” he bellowed. “Please, let’s have order! Let’s have order, please!”

Some in the audience who had cheered Nick were now also on their feet, shouting back at the angry cultists. Chairs scuffed and a couple turned over. Nick realized he was looking at the beginnings of a riot. He quickly grabbed the mini-mike from Mayor Robinette.

“Stop!” he yelled, pointing at his defenders with his left hand. They stopped and stared back at him in surprise. The cult people continued to chant.

“You folks,” Nick said over the uproar, “thank you for the warm welcome. You had your say and I appreciate it, but now let’s hear what they—” He pointed at the chanters. “—have to say.”

The “regular” folks, still unsettled by the commotion, sat down uncertainly and cast disapproving looks back at the protestors. Nick stepped from behind the podium and moved to one side; he stood there for a full minute while the chant continued.

“Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!”

Again some of the “regular” folks began to respond, but Nick held up a hand and they fell silent once more. After two or three minutes the chant began to fade, and the cult people sank back into their chairs, flushed and out of breath.

“Thank you,” Nick said. “It’s good to know where you stand. But before we let things get out of control again, can you let one or two people do the talking? So I can find out what your objection is?”

The man who had started it all stood once more. He was a rawboned man with greying red hair and a red beard, his face also flushed red. He spoke in a bullhorn voice that needed no amplification.

“Our objection,” he said clearly, “is that we don’t want a U.F. Marshal at all, and especially not you. You, sir, are a hired killer!”

“Fuck you, you son of a bitch!” someone yelled from the partisan crowd.

“Sir!” Nick pointed at his supporter and got his attention. “Sir, thank you for your support, but please sit down. I want to hear what this gentleman has to say.”

“He ain’t no gentleman, Marshal! That’s Antiochus Groening! He’s head of that crazy mob!”

“Thank you. Now will you please *sit down!*”

Nick glared at him until he took his seat, then turned to the red-bearded man again.

“You think I’m a hired killer? I would ask you to explain that, please.”

Groening smiled bitterly and began to walk forward down the center aisle. As he spoke, several of his followers nodded agreement.

“I think you know what I’m referring to, Marshal,” Groening said, his voice rising. “It was you up in the idol tower that day! Everyone here knows it! These godless heathens—” He swept his hand toward the modern crowd. “—even erected a graven image in your name! As you can clearly see, they *worship* you, as if you were some sort of false god. They worship *idols*, and *you* are their god!”

A noisy shout of agreement rose from the black-hat cultists, but Groening wasn’t finished. Now he had reached the front of the room, staring up at Nick from ten feet away, arms raised as if beseeching Heaven for a bolt of lightning.

“*You* stood in the pagan tower that day, with your high powered rifle! *You* rained death down on the children of God, like the Angel of Death upon Ancient Egypt! *You* butchered thirty-seven faithful followers of the Living God! *You* defied the will of Almighty God to take control of this sinful town! *You*, Nick Walker, are a sinner and a *murderer!*”

Nick gazed down into the man’s burning black eyes and felt his skin crawl, his heart

skip. He had faced enraged opponents a number of times in his career, had looked into the eyes of pure hatred, but had never glimpsed anything like this. The sheer depth of Groening's hatred was frightening, and his power to persuade was clear. The Groaners in the crowd, those with guns on their belts, were practically swooning in the wake of his oratory.

Nick stared at him a moment longer, then shook himself mentally.

"Thank you for explaining it," he said quietly. "Now if you will take your seat—"

"You will answer the charges!" Groening bellowed. "I will not sit down until you respond!"

Nick swept the crowd with his eyes, then nodded slowly.

"Okay," he said. "Fair enough. The first thing you should know, Reverend—"

"Do not call me Reverend!" the man bellowed again. "Only *God* is called Reverend! Psalms 111 verse 9—'Holy and Reverend is His name'!"

"Okay...what do you want me to call you? *Mister* Groening?"

"My children call me Father!" Groening declared, lifting his eyes up to the ceiling.

"Father." Nick glanced at the modern crowd, who sat mesmerized. He looked back at his accuser. "Isn't 'Father' also one of God's names?"

“DO NOT MOCK THE ALMIGHTY!!!” Groening roared, and his congregants squirmed in distress.

“Father Groening,” Nick said, before the man had time to incite the mob any further. “The first thing you should know is that I never wanted to be in that church tower that day. I was just one man in a company of Star Marines that was sent here to defend the town—”

“You had no business being here at all!” Groening bellowed. “This was not your fight! This is *our planet!* This is *our land!* This was *our fight*, not yours!”

Again the black hats were nodding, and not just the Groaners, but the Homerites as well. Groening raised his arms to continue, but Nick cut him off.

“FATHER GROENING!” he yelled, “you have had your say and now I will have mine. So please, sit down and *shut up!*”

Groening’s mouth fell open, as if Nick had cursed God to His face. His followers gasped in shock and several women fanned themselves. Nick pointed to the red-bearded leader and drove his point home.

“If you interrupt me again, I will have you arrested and E-cuffed until I am finished. Now take a seat, *right there*, and listen.”

Groening took a step back, trembling with righteous fury, and dropped into an open

38 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

chair. Nick made a point of ignoring him while he addressed the room at large.

“I’m sorry that so many of you lost loved ones in the war,” he said. “I’m sorry so many were killed in that one battle. But you aren’t the only ones who suffered loss. I came here with a hundred and twelve other men that day, and when it was all over only thirty-nine of us were still alive.”

He took a deep breath and let it out, to calm his own emotions.

“The only reason I was in the tower that day is that I was the only man still alive who was qualified with that rifle. We had been under constant artillery fire for twenty hours; those of you who lived here then will recall that the town was mostly rubble.”

Heads nodded among the modern folks, and several women wiped their eyes.

“This was a civil war. It was out of control. The Star Marines were sent here to put down the rebellion and restore peace, and that’s what we did. None of us *wanted* to be here. None of us *wanted* to kill anyone. But it *was* a war and we did what we had to do. I personally regret every life that was lost during those two days, on both sides, and especially those that were taken by me.

“As for that statue in the park, I wish the damn thing had never been built. I am not a hero. I was just trying to stay alive, and keep as many others alive as possible. I got shot full

of holes in that tower, and I did not enjoy any of it.”

He turned and walked slowly across the stage, looking down at those who had cheered him.

“It was eight years ago,” he said quietly. “The shooting stopped soon after that, and thank god. It’s over, it’s done, and we can’t change any of it. That was then, this is now. I’m not here as a Star Marine this time. I’m not here as a mercenary. I’m not a hired killer. I am a United Federation Marshal and my job is to protect you—” He turned his eyes on the cult members. “—*all* of you—from harm. And to keep the peace.

“If you believe in God—and I know that most of you do—then I hope you will pray that I am able to do that. There’s been enough division here. It’s time to let go of the past and let yourselves heal.”

He walked back to the other end of the stage and looked at “Father” Groening again.

“Father, I will be happy to sit down with you anytime, anywhere, and talk things over. I will do whatever I reasonably can to make things right. But be aware of one thing, and do not ever forget it—this planet is still under Federation law, and I *will* enforce that law to the best of my ability. With fairness and justice for all.”

40 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

Nick scanned the crowd one last time. They sat silent, all of them, almost breathless. He nodded and took a step back.

“Thank you all for coming.”

Chapter 4

“That was a hell of a speech,” Nelson told him as they walked back to the office after the meeting. “I just about shit myself when they started that chant. Half those Groaners were armed, and I knew we didn’t have the manpower to stop them if they decided to get violent. You handled it like a pro.”

Nick stared at the sidewalk, feeling subdued.

“I’m not so sure,” he said quietly. “I humiliated Groening in public. I don’t think he’s going to take that lying down.”

“Maybe not, but at least nobody got killed tonight. That situation could have turned ugly.”

Nick glanced from left to right; vehicles moved up and down the street, but the sidewalks were still crowded. Knots of cultists were still on the street, talking in small groups. Some looked in his direction as he walked, and the looks weren’t very friendly. “Does Groening live in town?” he asked Nelson.

“No. His people are scattered all over the Plain, but they have a headquarters village a few miles down the valley. Groening lives there.”

“You said the Homerites and the Groaners don’t like each other.”

42 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

“Not really. They look alike on the outside, but they have very different personalities. If it were just the Homerites, I don’t think there would be any trouble, but put the two together and it’s a pretty volatile mix.”

“But the Homerites also hate the Federation?”

Nelson nodded. “Yeah, but it’s more intellectual with them. They’ll fight when provoked, but all by themselves I don’t think they would ever start anything.”

“Who’s their top dog?”

“Guy named Jeb Wiest. It was his great-grandfather, Homer Wiest, who started the cult, or at least brought it out here.”

“What’s he like?”

“Wiest? He’s friendly enough, but stubborn as an old stump. When it comes to matters of belief he’s totally inflexible, especially with his own people. But he doesn’t strike me as dangerous.”

They reached the office and Nelson unlocked the door.

“What are you thinking?” he asked as they settled down at their desks.

Nick dropped his cowboy hat on the desk and rubbed his face.

“I had no idea the sentiment was running this high,” he said.

“Neither did I. It’s been pretty quiet since I’ve been here.”

Nick nodded. "And then I show up. They know me by name. That goddamn statue has them all stirred up, and the sight of me seems to have turned up the heat."

"I have to admit, I never expected any of this. What're you gonna do?"

Nick grimaced. "Not sure yet. How long are you going to be here?"

"Another week. I figured to stick around until you're settled, then I'm taking the next train out."

"After what happened tonight, what are the odds of it turning into something big?"

Nelson was thoughtful a moment.

"Hard to say," he said. "I know the Federation is concerned that the Coalition might rearm, and if it does it will probably be Groening's doing. He still has enough people to field a sizeable army, and if the Homerites join him again it could be a disaster. I think the only thing they lack at the moment is weapons."

"Jesus! The last thing we need is my presence starting the whole damn revolution all over again."

"It never really ended, Nick. Unless or until Alpha Two sets up a permanent government, the danger will always be there. Even then, when the planet finally gains independence, I'm afraid it won't be over. None of this is your fault; it's just unfortunate that you were sent to this particular office."

44 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

“Maybe I should request a transfer elsewhere.”

Nelson shook his head. “That won’t do your career any good.”

Nick laughed. “Neither will starting another war.”

“I think you should give it a chance. This might blow over. *But—*” Nelson pointed to Nick’s cowboy hat. “—you might want to stop wearing that.”

Nick looked up in surprise. “You don’t like my cowboy hat?”

“Hell, I like it just fine. Makes you look like Yancy goddamn West. Trouble is, it also makes you a clear target. Nobody else around here dresses the way you do.”

Nick smiled ruefully. His last posting had been to Kline Corners on Sirius 1, where everyone dressed as if they lived on the North American frontier in ancient times. Nick had been horrified when someone suggested he dress the same way, but later became very comfortable in western clothing. Not only did he wear a cowboy hat, he also wore cowboy boots, a vest, and twin gunbelts, making him look every inch the video Western hero. The only thing he lacked was chewing tobacco.

“Well. At least if they target me they won’t hit some innocent bystander. I think I’ll go see Mr. Wiest and sound him out. If I can get on his good side, maybe he won’t be tempted

to join in if Groening decides to rekindle the flames.”

Nelson nodded. “Can’t hurt. At least I think he’ll take the time to listen. I can’t say I really like the man, but he’s never caused me any problems.”

Nelson glanced at his watch.

“It’s almost ten o’clock. You better get home to that little lady before she decides to head back to Sirius.”

Nick grinned and clambered to his feet.

“Good idea. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Nick walked the six blocks from the Marshal’s office to the bungalow where he had installed Suzanne a few hours earlier. In spite of the hour, the night sky was amazingly bright. He found Suzanne standing on the front porch admiring it.

“Binary stars again,” she smiled as he came through the gate.

“Yeah, but no Sirian Summer. Look at that, will you?”

He waved his hand at the sky. Alpha Centauri B, the smaller of the binaries, had risen just behind the mountain and couldn’t be seen, but its glow diffused the evening with light. The sky was a deep blue, but light enough that one could almost read a databook.

“It’s beautiful!” Suzanne breathed.

46 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

Nick stepped up on the porch and took her in his arms, pulling her against him in a hug. Her huge breasts pressed against him like pliable melons. He followed the hug with a kiss.

“Miss me?”

“Yes.” Her smile turned mischievous. “A twilight like this puts me in the mood.”

“In the mood for love?”

She shook her head. “In the mood for screwing.”

Nick lifted his head and sighed. “Music to my ears.”

She glanced at the sky again. “So are the nights always like this?”

“No. As the binaries come into conjunction the nights get darker, but then they start to get lighter again. Takes a little over seven months to go from dark to light, and another seven to go back again. It’s a fifteen month cycle.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and stood kissing him for a moment, then her eyes narrowed.

“How did the town meeting go?”

He shrugged. “It was okay.”

“Are you sure? You look a little tense.”

He grinned and shook his head. “It was okay.”

**Wednesday, 19 November, 0436 - Trimmer
Springs, Alpha Centauri 2
(8 years ago)**

The air was alive with lead as Nick Walker struggled up the wooden staircase inside the bell tower. Stray bullets had punched holes through the wooden siding, leaving sunbeams shining like lasers through the gloom. Nick panted with exertion as he made the turn at each landing, continuing the painful climb while the shrapnel cuts in his back stretched and stung; blood leaked from under his vest and soaked his underwear.

The belfry was square, eight or ten feet across, surrounded by a wooden skirt that came up to his stomach; a heavy railing capped the skirt, offering a solid firing platform. The brass bell hanging from the apex probably weighed a ton, and took up so much space that he had to duck under it to get into position. He settled behind the skirt and took a moment to catch his breath while he peered out over the town. It was a magnificent vantage point—the tower was the tallest structure in town and offered an unobstructed view in every direction.

The breeze was in his face as he looked east. The rattle of small-arms was louder than ever from here, and he quickly began to pick out Star Marine positions as he opened the backpack and started pulling out magazines. He arranged them on the floor next to him for

48 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

easy access, and slipped one into the rifle. A bullet whined overhead but he ignored it—after one had been in combat for a while such things became routine. Nick checked the rifle's mechanism, hefted it to get a feel for the weight, and rested it on the railing as he prepared to adjust the scope. His heart pumped in a steady rhythm, but he wasn't unduly afraid.

He scanned the streets to the east, the alleys, the back yards, and spotted the men of First Platoon who were waging a desperate battle to hold the rebels back. Then he started seeing the rebels themselves, dozens of them. Scores of them.

Hell—*hundreds* of them!

His mouth turned dry. Capt. Seals hadn't been kidding—the Star Marines were badly outnumbered.

"I'm in position, Sergeant." He spoke quietly into his helmet mike, aware that the enemy might be monitoring the frequency. But he hadn't said *where* he was.

"Copy," Sgt. DuBose said in his ear. "Choose targets of opportunity."

Nick didn't answer. Instead he chambered the first round. The Browning magazine held twenty-one rounds, and after the first one fired the rest would chamber automatically. He took a deep breath to steady his adrenaline, then peered through the scope and took aim. He saw so many targets it was

hard to know where to start, but one particular machine gun was hosing down a squad of Star Marines just six blocks from where he sat...that might be a good starting point.

Two men in flat black hats crewed the gun; the Star Marines on the ground were pinned and didn't have a shot at them, but Nick had a clear field of fire. Unhurriedly, almost leisurely, he fired his first round; the man behind the gun catapulted backward, landing in a bloody heap eight feet from the gun. The man feeding the gun spun around in surprise—Nick could actually see the astonishment in his eyes when he turned back. Before he could decide what to do, Nick blew his head off. The sharp *crack* of the rifle echoed across town like the voice of doom, and Nick heard the brass cartridge ring as it hit the composite-stone floor of the belfry.

He shifted the rifle a few inches and picked out two more men providing covering fire for the gun—they also looked startled, and one began to crawl away to look for better cover. He hadn't gone three feet when Nick fired again. The rebel's body jerked as if electrocuted and his white shirt blossomed red. The second man lurched to his feet and turned to run, but Nick shot him right between the shoulder blades, and his rifle clattered to the ground.

50 Rebel Guns of Alpha Centauri – Sneak Peek

Just that quickly, the sound of small-arms was reduced by half.

Nick took a moment to wipe his brow, his helmet dipping below the railing for a few seconds. He had no illusions about what was coming—as soon as the rebels realized they were facing a sniper they would figure out where he was located, and then he would be in deep shit. He needed to inflict maximum damage before that happened. He pulled his canteen out and took a brief swig, then capped it and raised his head again.

Several houses were burning on the east end of town, and some streets were obscured by smoke. But he saw motion in several places. Star Marines were scattered about in strategic locations, blocking key streets and intersections to hold the rebels back. At best it was a delaying action—Second Platoon had already been pushed back behind First Platoon, and if the rebels kept the pressure up First Platoon would soon have to retreat as well, leap-frogging backwards.

Nick spotted four Star Marines holding an alley, pouring lead toward the Coalition troops...but one block to the north a column of Freaks was moving through residential back yards trying to flank them. They were farther away than the machine gun he'd taken out, but well within range. Realizing the Freaks were almost in position to hit the Marines from behind, Nick quickly took aim.

Intent on their prey, they were bunched together, only a few feet between them. Nick counted nine of them, and opened fire. He pumped out six quick shots and saw five men ripped apart—a sixth spun in horror as his left arm came off at the shoulder and pinwheeled across the alley.

With five men down and one spinning in panic, the remaining three sprawled hastily on the ground, casting frantically about for the source of the attack. As Nick focused on them with the scope, he saw one man's eyes widen in understanding as he gazed directly at the bell tower... it was the last thing he ever saw. Nick shot him through the face and saw a volcano of blood and gore spatter across the man behind him. The two remaining rebels scrambled backward, and Nick was tempted to let them go, but realized they also probably knew where he was and would give away his position. He killed them quickly, a little frown creasing his brow. He really hated doing that, but if he had any hope of surviving the next few hours, he didn't have much choice.

He dropped behind the skirt again and ejected the magazine. It still had rounds in it but he hadn't been counting, and it was always better to have a full mag inserted. He reloaded the rifle, chambered a round, and took a deep breath, releasing it with a puff of his cheeks. The floor around him was smeared with a thin film of blood, but he no

longer noticed the pain. With a grunt of resolution, he raised his head again and aimed the rifle.

He saw targets, but some were so far away they were difficult shots, and the Star Marines on the ground seemed to have rallied a little—here and there Coalition troops were falling back.

But farther out, at the very edge of town, a horde of men was moving in his direction, forty or more. Peering through his scope, he realized this was the bottleneck Capt. Seals had been talking about, the point where the road came into town from the mountain pass on the east. Two light armored vehicles were burning in the mouth of the pass, no doubt knocked out by Second Platoon when the battle started, but there was still room for more vehicles to get through, and men on foot would have no trouble at all. Right now that mass of men was fully exposed, and Nick took aim.

They were half a mile away, eight or nine hundred yards, but the scope brought them right into his face, and they were so closely grouped he couldn't miss. He got off four shots before they realized what was happening, and as they began to scatter he could tell he was getting three or four men with each shot. Once they dispersed he saw a dozen or more men on the ground, and he hit five or six more before they could find cover.

Suddenly the horde was in hiding, no longer moving forward. He shifted to another target.

The bell rang.

Only it didn't exactly *ring*—it was more of a *clunk*.

Nick ducked as another bullet ricocheted off the bell. This was it—they had him spotted. The turkey shoot was over. He looked up and saw the bell moving slightly, vibrating with a low harmonic. A bright spot had appeared on the brass surface and as he watched, another appeared, to the accompaniment of another dull ring. He stayed down for another minute or two while several scattered rounds whined through the belfry.

Sgt. DuBose was suddenly in his ear. "How's it going, Walker?"

"Funny you should ask, Sergeant. They've figured me out."

"Thought so. Heard the bell ring."

"Makes a lovely sound, doesn't it?"

"You been hit?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know when to send in the scrubs."

He heard DuBose laugh. "Watch your ass, Walker. We can't afford to lose this fight."

"*Semper fi*, Sergeant."

Targets became scarce for awhile. Nick watched and waited, ducking occasional shots aimed at the bell tower, but only scored three more hits.

Sometime in early afternoon another armored vehicle crawled out of the pass and stopped at the edge of town facing him. An open turret on top of the vehicle sported a heavy machine gun that looked big enough to bring down a star destroyer. Nick killed the driver before the vehicle could move any closer, but before he could get an angle on the turret the heavy gun opened up. It was aimed straight at him.

BONG-ONG-ONG-ONG-ONG-ONG-ONG!

Heavy steel slugs hammered the bell in a steady stream—

“Ungh!”

Nick felt a sharp, penetrating pain as a ricochet punched through his lower back. He gasped in shock and hit the floor, agony washing over him. For a moment he lay helpless, numb with fear, as the wooden skirt above him began to disintegrate. Wood splinters flew in all directions, one of them opening his cheek, but his real problem was the bullet in his back. He wondered if this was it—the pain diminished a little, as long as he didn’t move around too much, but he couldn’t tell how badly he was hit. Blood pooled on the floor around him, but it was just a steady trickle, not a flood. He waited to see if his vision would dim, or if he would get light-headed. In the meantime, heavy bullets still chewed up the bell tower, effectively pinning him down.