



Science
Fiction

JOHN BOWERS

A story from
The Fighter Queen saga



STAR MARINE

It takes all kinds to fight a war.

The man ahead of him disappeared, leaping over an embankment, and Rico was right behind him. He reached the embankment and leaped just as a stream of bullets swept across it; he heard the ricochets behind him as he landed heavily in the bottom of a drainage ditch, rolling to take up his momentum. The man immediately behind him shouted in pain and lurched sideways as bullets swept the embankment again.

Rico came up with his helmet askew, panting like a hound after a hunt, and plastered himself against the side of the ditch nearest the fire, trying to burrow into the grass. Dozens of helmets lined the inside of the ditch, looking like a turtle convention. A sergeant was running down the ditch, counting heads.

Rico wanted to look, but was afraid to. He heard an explosion from the runway, felt the blast wave pass over the ditch, and ducked as dirt and broken starcrete rained down.

by John Bowers
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THE FIGHTER QUEEN SAGA

In order of publication:

A Vow to Sophia
The Fighter Queen
The Fighter King
Star Marine

In chronological order:

The Fighter King
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Star Marine
The Fighter Queen

STAR MARINE

by

John Bowers



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Dedicated to all the men and women of the U.S. Armed forces, from 1776 to the present. We owe you *everything!*

Special dedication to the men of the 84th Infantry Division (Railsplitters) in World War II. My dad, T/5 John H. Bowers, was a Railsplitter. He served in Company A, 309th Combat Engineers at the Siegfried Line, Ardennes, and Rhineland Campaign. You guys never got all the credit you deserved. Thank you.

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Chapter 26

Sunday, 7 June, 0229 (PCC) - San Francisco, CA, North America, Terra

Peter Miller sat at the table in the committee chamber with his hands crossed casually before him. Andrew Lockner sat at his side. It was a closed session, as usual; not even Federation Security was present. Unlike normal committee meetings, this one was so sensitive they were required to guard the chamber from the outside.

The Senate Defense Committee members had just taken their seats, *sans aides*. After a tense few moments as everyone settled in and straightened their datapads, Henry Wells opened the meeting with a slight strain in his voice. Glancing around the semicircle, he cleared his throat and began.

"For the record, today is Sunday, June 7, 0229. The Senate Defense Committee has been called into emergency session by the Director of the Federation Intelligence Agency. I see that all members of the committee are present, as well as the Director and Assistant Director of FIA. No one else is present; no aides are present, no security members are present."

He glanced at Lester Rice, one chair to his left. Rice looked pale; he was a great one to

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worry, but this time Henry felt a chill of apprehension as well.

"At this time, I yield the floor to the Director of FIA. Mr. Director."

Peter Miller nodded, unperturbed as usual. He managed a weak smile, and spoke in a clear, even voice that carried to all corners of the chamber.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee. I apologize for calling you out on Sunday, and I would not have done so were it not, in my opinion, an emergency."

He paused dramatically, heightening the tension in the room. All eyes were on him.

"Late yesterday," Peter Miller continued, "I received news of a most urgent nature. For security reasons I cannot reveal the source of this news, but I am absolutely convinced that it is authentic." He paused again, briefly. "In a nutshell, ladies and gentlemen, the Sirians know about Operation Gang-Bang."

A gasp escaped half a dozen throats. Eyes filled with horror, glances were exchanged. Henry Wells felt his stomach twist. He closed his eyes hopelessly. He didn't dare look at Lester.

"How the Sirians learned of the operation is not known," Peter Miller said. "But they do know. It would seem our leak is still functioning. The Sirians know the approximate date of the operation as well, and are anticipating a

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great victory. I believe the exact quote was that they would 'crush' our forces when we attack Altair and Alpha Centauri, leaving the Solar System wide open for their return."

Peter Miller raised his head and looked around the semicircle of faces. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "That's all I have."

Jesus! Henry thought. *That's plenty!*

"Mr. Director," he said aloud, "have you any idea who or what the leak is, or how to stop it?"

"At this time, Senator, no. I've taken definitive steps toward that end, however. I cannot reveal those steps to you, but we're working on it. I'm confident that within the foreseeable future we'll have the answer."

"Thank you. I yield the floor to questions."

There were many, most of them obvious and redundant. To most, Peter Miller replied simply that he didn't know. The committee members were so shocked that many repeated the same questions already asked and answered, but Miller patiently repeated his answers each time. After twenty minutes, Henry cleared the floor.

"I believe the Director has told us everything he knows," he said finally. "On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for bringing this news to us so promptly, even if it means convening on a Sunday."

Peter Miller inclined his head graciously.

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"Before we adjourn, Mr. Director — do you have any recommendations as to what we do about this? Obviously we can't just send our troops blindly into a trap."

Peter Miller shrugged. "Cancel the operation," he said.

"We can't just cancel the goddamned war!" Lester Rice blurted angrily, his face red, his hands shaking. "We've got to find this damned leak and plug it!"

"Yes, sir," Peter Miller said stoically.

"You've got to do *something!*" Rice bellowed, turning his fear and frustration on the FIA director.

"I assure you that I —"

"Excuse me," Henry Wells interrupted. "Once again, Mr. Director, thank you. You are excused."

Peter Miller nodded and stood up immediately. At his side, Andrew Lockner did the same. They gathered their papers and headed for the door.

"I think we have all received quite a shock this morning," Henry said to the committee. "I suggest we retire to our homes and take the rest of the day off. We have a lot to think about, a lot to plan for. We won't accomplish anything by flinging accusations or recriminations. I thank you all for coming out today.

"This session is adjourned."

In the hallway, Henry put a hand on Rice's shoulder.

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"You've got to get a grip, Les," he said. "It isn't Miller's fault."

Rice was still shaking. He turned watery eyes on his friend.

"No? Then who the hell's fault *is* it?"

"I would say the fault lies with whoever or whatever this leak is. That's where your anger belongs, not with the FIA."

"Well, I'd like to know what the hell they're doing about it!"

"I'm sure we all would. But wartime security —"

"Apparently isn't worth a shit! I'm sorry, Henry, but I'm scared. This situation is getting worse every day!"

"I know. But we've got to keep a grip. The Federation's best people are working on it."

But back in his own office, Henry Wells had to pour himself a drink. He was shaking almost as hard as Rice, and the scotch didn't immediately help. Foremost in his mind was, did Regina have anything to do with providing that information? And at what risk? God! If anything happened to his little girl ...

He finished the drink and poured another. This job was getting him down. He finished the second drink and put the bottle away. It was Sunday. He would just go home, watch a solarball game, and try to put it out of his mind. For a few hours, anyway.

He needed the rest.

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Monday, 8 June, 0229 (PCC) - Polygon, Washington City, DC, North America, Terra

Monday morning was a shock. Wade arrived at his office to discover that General Willard had already called a strategy meeting; all senior planners and their aides were ordered to attend, no exceptions. Kamada looked worried as he and Wade headed upstairs to join Admiral Boucher.

"What's it about?" Wade asked. "The next session wasn't supposed to be until Wednesday."

"No idea," Kamada said. "Something must be up."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Not recently."

The Strategy Room was tense as they entered, a buzz of conversation indicating the uncertainty felt by all the planners. Not until everyone was present and seated did General Willard make his entrance, and he looked more forbidding than Wade had ever seen him. He didn't have to ask for quiet — the room fell silent immediately. Willard stopped at the head of the table and looked around. Without preamble, he told them.

"The enemy knows about Gang-Bang," he said.

A hundred pairs of eyes stared at him in shock. No one even breathed.

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"I don't know how they found out," Willard continued. "But FIA has developed the information and they swear it's accurate."

He paused a minute, seeming to struggle with his anger. His face turned almost purple.

"If I ever find out," he said in a low, menacing growl, "that anyone in this room, or on any of this staff, delivered that information to the enemy, even unintentionally ... I will personally *shoot* the son of a bitch! I mean that. I'll take the star-court and sacrifice my career!"

Wade sat listening, barely hearing the words. It was too horrible to contemplate. How could the Sirians possibly know? Who could have leaked the information? It had to be a leak — there was no other possibility.

"I was in teleconference with the President and the Defense Committee chairman most of the night," Willard went on. "The President feels we have no choice but to continue with Gang-Bang. We have to invade those worlds sooner or later, and the longer we wait the more time the Sirians will have to prepare. They know we'll try it sooner or later, so we have no choice but to go ahead."

"Do you think that's wise, General?" a senior planner dared ask. "Perhaps we should ..."

"*I said the plan is a go!*" Willard bellowed.

The questioner fell silent, coloring under the verbal bludgeoning. No one else spoke, and Willard seemed to control his rage with

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an effort. "Operation Gang-Bang kicks off on One January, as originally planned. You all have work to do, so this meeting is over."

He turned and stalked out of the room.

Wade walked back to his office on wooden legs. Boucher looked pale, Kamada inscrutable. It was a nightmare, and Wade had the feeling he might never wake up.

Ten minutes later, Kamada called him in and closed the door.

"Sit down," he said.

Wade sat uncertainly.

"Admiral Boucher just called me," Kamada said. "When he got back to his office, he had a call waiting from General Willard. Willard has moved the timetable up. It isn't One January, it's Fifteen September."

"*What!*" Wade was stunned — September 15 was only fourteen weeks away. "Why did he change his mind?"

"Apparently, he didn't. He got permission from the President last night to move the operation up, but he thinks we have a leak somewhere on the staff, so he told them the date hadn't changed."

"I'm confused," Wade admitted.

Kamada grimaced. "General Willard doesn't trust anyone right now. But since our office came up with the operational plan, he's telling us the real date. Nobody knows except you, me, and Admiral Boucher. And we are sworn to secrecy. Understand?"

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Wade nodded.

"Fifteen September is the date. Which means we have to get our asses in gear and solve the supply problem. It's up to the three of us. We can't even tell the others in our own office." Kamada peered at him intently. "Are you up to that?"

"Yes, sir. But what about the ground schedule? I can't cover all the tactical details in that time. Not even all of us working together can."

"Most of that's already been done. We were working out tac plans several years ago for each of the major planets likely to be invaded. The only changes will be seasonal details — weather patterns, changes in enemy troop intelligence, stuff like that. The ground war will take care of itself, but we've got to get the troops down safely and keep them supplied. That's going to be largely your job. Think you can handle it?"

"Yes, sir. I guess I'll have to."

"Good. I hear there's a sale on caffeine down at the super center. You'd better stock up, because you aren't going to be sleeping much for a while."

Chapter 27

Monday, 3 August, 0229 (PCC) - San Francisco, CA, North America, Terra

Henry Wells stared out the window of his office without seeing a thing. San Francisco lay under a blanket of heat that was rare in the Bay Area, the temperature in the high nineties. Hover traffic choked the streets below and people bustled about, but he hardly noticed.

He felt listless and lethargic, definitely unlike him. He'd been this way for months, ever since his conversation with Peter Miller in Washington City. There'd been no word from Regina since then, and Miller hadn't contacted him — not that Henry expected him to. Henry hadn't seen her in thirteen months, or was it fourteen? He couldn't even remember. He'd met her surrogate twice, but that only upset him more. The alternate was a nice enough girl, he supposed, but she wasn't his daughter. Goddammit, *she wasn't his daughter!*

Henry knew he was letting this get him down. He wasn't doing his job properly, and he knew people were starting to notice. How could they help it, after all — Henry Wells, the most dynamic, energetic man in the Senate, for thirty years the champion of the armed

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forces and defender of the Federation, suddenly lying down on the job. It was only weeks until the election, and he'd barely begun to campaign. He simply didn't have the heart for it.

"You're going to lose this race, Henry!" Yvonne had scolded him during one of their late-night arguments. "Your opponent is calling you a dinosaur, says you're slowing down. He's trying to convince the people they need fresh blood, and you're giving him all the ammunition he needs!"

Henry had just shaken his head in frustration.

"Yvonne, I don't much give a damn any more!"

"How can you say that! You've poured your life into this job! For three decades you've beaten, badgered, and threatened people until you got the results you wanted. If you hadn't, we'd have lost this war already, because it was you that got the appropriations the military needed to arm itself. How can you just turn your back on them now?"

"I'm not turning my back on anybody!" he'd shouted. "The Congress is behind them now. They don't need me any more."

"And you think you're not feeling sorry for yourself?"

"No! It's not me I'm worried about — it's Gina. Why in god's name did she let herself get roped into this thing?"

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Yvonne lowered her head to control her own emotions, then reached out and took his hand.

"Henry, you raised her on a diet of patriotism. So did I. The Federation was everything in our lives, and it still is. The real question is, how could she have turned it down?"

"She promised me!" he shouted. "She promised me she wouldn't enlist!"

"She kept her promise. She didn't enlist. And she's not a member of the military."

"This is worse!"

"How do you know that? How can you say it's worse? Sure, there's an element of danger involved, but she's undercover. The enemy doesn't know who she is, and as long as they don't find out, she's perfectly safe. If she were in the military, she'd be wearing a uniform and be a clear target for every enemy who saw her. At least this way her exposure is minimal."

Henry blinked at the window as his eyes started to mist. Heaving a sigh, he turned back to his desk and settled into his chair. He considered pouring himself a drink, but it was still early afternoon. He had enough problems without becoming a lush. He enjoyed a casual relationship with alcohol, but had no desire to become dependent on it. He had an appointment in a few minutes, but was in no mood to keep it. He needed something, he realized, but didn't know what. Things couldn't keep going

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the way they were, that much was for sure. He had to shake off this depression, but how?

He needed to talk to somebody, he decided. Somebody who could relate to his feelings. After a moment of reflection, he realized there was only one person he knew who might possibly be able to talk him out of his depression. He keyed the office intercom.

"Julie, cancel my appointments for the afternoon," he said. "Call the spaceport and order the Lear for a six o'clock departure. Tell them we're going to Colorado. Then put through a call to Oliver Lincoln III."

Lincoln Enterprises, Denver, CO, North America, Terra

It was just dark in Colorado when the Lear rocket dropped out of a clear summer sky and touched down on the LincEnt runway. Henry stepped down at the general aviation apron and grinned as his boyhood friend strode forward to shake his hand. Oliver Lincoln III was three inches taller and seventy pounds heavier than Henry, who stood only five feet six. The bigger man grabbed his hand and almost shook him off his feet.

"Goddamn, Henry! I thought you'd forgot about me!" Oliver exclaimed. "Where's Yvonne?"

"She didn't come, Ollie. This is personal business."

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"Well, too bad. Rosemary will be disappointed. Look, have you had dinner? Hobbs is laying on a special feed. I called him as soon as I got your message."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Then let's go. My car is right over there."

They crossed the apron to where Lincoln had left his hovercar, and minutes later were skimming above a narrow highway that wound its way from the spacecraft factory to Lincoln's private mansion higher in the mountains. Henry watched the dark landscape shoot by with pleasure; he'd always enjoyed his visits to Colorado. It was too dark to see much, but it didn't matter. He would see it in the morning.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Henry. What's the occasion?"

"As I said, Ollie, it's personal. I need a pep talk."

Oliver raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"*You* need a pep talk? That's a first. The way I remember it, you were always the one coming to *my* rescue!"

The friendship between Henry and Oliver dated back to their teenage years. Their fathers had been college buddies, and though Henry was three years older, the boys had become bosom friends as well.

They arrived at the Lincoln mansion, and Henry met Rosemary Lincoln at the door. She was a lovely brunette and a gracious hostess.

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She was almost as close a friend as Oliver, and greeted him warmly.

"Henry! It's so good to see you!"

She hugged him and he kissed her cheek.

"Good to see you, too, dear. How are you holding up?"

Rosemary smiled bravely. Her only son had been killed in action seven years earlier, in combat against a Sirian carrier force.

"I'm surviving," she whispered, still smiling. "You and Yvonne were a tremendous support." She frowned and looked toward the car. "Didn't Yvonne come with you?"

"No, I'm sorry. I came rather on the spur of the moment."

They enjoyed a quiet dinner together, keeping the talk light. After brandy, Rosemary sensed that the men wanted to be alone, and excused herself. Henry kissed her again and she headed up the stairs, then Oliver led him into his study. They settled down on deep leather cushions. Oliver poured scotch. Henry looked around at the opulently furnished den, feeling reluctant to jump in just yet. Instead, he eyed his old friend with a smile.

"How's the new fighter coming, Ollie? Got a production date yet?"

"Six months, maximum." Oliver grinned. "We've got a few bugs left, but we're getting real close. Already got the new assembly line tooled up, and when it goes online we'll retool the other two as well. In the meantime, we

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have to finish the order we're working on now."

"And what did you say the new ship is called?"

"The PulsarFighter. Faster, meaner, longer range, and it has two gun turrets instead of one. But still carries a crew of two."

Henry nodded in admiration. Oliver's enthusiasm for his product had never waned.

Oliver put his drink down and leaned slightly forward.

"Henry, you didn't come here to ask about my PulsarFighter. What's going on? You look troubled."

Henry smiled weakly. Now that he was here, he felt a little sheepish. He'd always been there for Oliver to lean on, even when Oliver didn't want him. Now the shoe was on the other foot.

"Ollie ... I've got a dilemma, and you're the only man I know who might understand what I'm feeling."

"Good! It's about time I got a chance to pay you back for all the free advice I got from you over the years."

Henry smiled again. Oliver's life had been a roller coaster of triumphs and tragedies, from his personal involvement in the defense of Vega during the Sirian invasion to his most recent loss, the death of Johnny Lincoln. Henry had been his big brother through it all.

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"What I'm about to reveal to you is top secret," he said quietly. "You simply can't tell a soul. Not even Rosemary."

"You've told me secrets before, Henry."

"Yes, but this one could get my daughter killed."

Oliver's eyes narrowed in disbelief.

"Did you say your *daughter*? Is Regina in some kind of trouble?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, but ... " He sighed. "Maybe I'd better tell you from the beginning."

Henry talked for twenty minutes. Oliver listened closely, asked an occasional question, and finally it had all been said.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Lincoln breathed in amazement. "God *damn!*"

"I feel silly, Ollie, coming to you like this. After all, as far as I know, Gina is alive and well. I'm sure if anything happened to her they would tell me. I feel like a wimp; your son is dead, and I'm crying over my daughter without knowing that anything has happened to her."

"Bullshit. You're entitled. When it's your kid out there, you worry, and it's the not knowing that's the worst. At least with Johnny, we *know*. The Fighter Queen came here herself and told us exactly what happened. This is different."

Henry lowered his eyes, but said nothing.

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"I think Rosemary would be a greater help to you than I am," Oliver was saying. "She went through something similar when I was on Vega. For nearly a year she didn't know if I was alive or dead."

"I remember. But we can't tell her about this. It wouldn't be fair to her to lay a Federation secret on her illegally."

"No, of course not. And I won't tell her, I promise you that. What exactly are you feeling?" he asked.

"You mean beside the worry? I have no energy. I'm not doing my job any more, and it's election year. I've got a contender out there who's thirty-one years old and has vidstar looks, and he's calling me a dinosaur. On top of that, he's a veteran. He was wounded in the first year of the war, and his campaign is selling him as a hero. I need all my concentration to beat him, but I just don't have the energy."

"Your record speaks for itself."

Henry shook his head.

"You're wrong there, Ollie. Voters have a short memory, and they're suckers for good looks. The people who kept me in office all these years are being replaced by their children; they look at me and see a fat little man with grey hair. Why should they vote for me when the other guy is closer to their own age, and sexy besides?" He grinned. "I wasn't very sexy, but I won my first election on my youth,

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too. That, and talking about you fighting for freedom on Vega."

Oliver regarded him solemnly, trying to think of a solution.

"Do you *want* to stay in the Senate? Hell, after thirty years, you're entitled to retire."

"I could retire," Henry admitted. "Maybe I should, in fact. But somehow I'd like to see this thing through. The minute this war is over, I'll be ready to get out, but I hate to quit before then. I've got another decade in me, if I can shake off this lethargy."

Oliver stood up and refilled their brandy glasses, then sat down again. He pinned his friend with intense grey eyes.

"When Johnny was killed," he said slowly, "the only thing that saved me was work. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life, but it was the only option I had. We were just prototyping the new fighter, and I threw myself into that. I told myself those kids out there needed it, because it would save more young lives. And that's how I did it." He grimaced. "What you need, Henry, is a project."

Henry's eyebrows lifted. He spread his hands.

"Got any ideas? I'm listening."

Oliver nodded slowly, sipping his scotch.

"The election is, what, fourteen weeks away? Fifteen?"

"That's right."

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"There's another election next year, isn't there?"

Henry frowned, not quite understanding.

"What ... ?"

"Why don't you run for President?"

John Bowers

Chapter 28

Saturday, 15 August 0229 (PCC) - Wallace Plantation, Texiana, Sirius 1

Scarlett Wallace and General Martin Vaughn were married on August 15 in a lovely, lightly attended ceremony in the garden behind the Wallace mansion. Capt. Davenport stood in as best man, and the serf girl Kim was Scarlett's bridesmaid. Scarlett's cousin Boyd gave her away.

It wasn't the grand wedding she'd always dreamed of, but she understood perfectly that the demands of the war came first, and every citizen must make certain sacrifices. No doubt they would one day be able to rededicate their vows before a much larger gathering.

Scarlett was blushing and breathless when it was over, and when she tossed her bouquet, it was caught by Minnie. Everyone laughed — Minnie was close to fifty.

The reception was lovely, the food delicious, and as evening approached, the newlyweds retired to Scarlett's suite. Unfortunately, they wouldn't enjoy a honeymoon at this time, although Martin swore to make it up to her as soon as the Feddies had been defeated at Alpha Centauri.

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Scarlett was nervous as she faced her new husband in her bedroom. He smiled at her with all the pride of a new husband.

"My darlin'!" he breathed. "I cannot begin to express how lovely you are. Or how happy I am at this moment."

"I feel very much the same, Martin," she smiled.

He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly. As he continued to kiss her and nuzzle her flaming red hair, his passion increased until she could feel the tension in his body. His hands became more active and he began to press against her feverishly. She felt quite breathless herself.

"Martin ... "

"Oh, Scarlett!" He moved her toward the bed, his hands roaming her petite body. He began to release the locks on her dress.

"Martin!" She broke free of his kiss for a moment, though he still held her. "My love, there is — somethin' I haven't told you."

"I'm sure it's nothin' important," he whispered, sucking at her throat.

"It might be," she said, worry in her eyes.

He stopped and straightened up, his face flushed, and looked down into her clear green eyes.

"When I was on Altair," she said, unable to meet his gaze. "I — I didn't tell you everything."

"You are referrin' to your imprisonment?"

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"Yes."

Martin stared at her for a moment. His brow creased into a frown.

"Did they abuse you, my darlin'?"

She gulped in surprise, meeting his eyes. Her cheeks burned red with shame.

"I-I should have told you!" she whispered. "I don't know what possessed me to keep it from you."

"It is not somethin' you wanted to advertise," he told her. "I understand completely."

She smiled uncertainly. "You do?"

"Of course. In any case, I already knew it."

"You did?"

"Yes. I reviewed the report submitted by Colonel Huggins. I would have been surprised if the heathen bastards had not taken advantage of you. They are animals, every last one of them. You are not to blame, my love. Your only sin was bein' beautiful. Those filthy heathens are entirely at fault."

"Then ... you still want me?"

"I would not have married you otherwise."

Tears gleamed in her eyes, and she threw her arms around his neck.

"I love you so dearly, Martin! Thank you!"

Vaughn proved to be something of an animal himself. Except for her virgin rite, Scarlett had never voluntarily made love before, and though her passion was strong, she fell somewhat short in that department. She almost felt trapped as he engaged her sexu-

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ally, and for some minutes felt a rising sense of panic as the memories from Altair flooded back during his heated coupling. Fortunately, he finished before she lost control, and she was able to keep him from realizing just how close she'd come to hysteria.

They lay side-by-side then, out of breath and exhausted. He was quite attentive, and they spoke in low tones for some time, planning their future.

"Are you comin' back to New Angeles with me tomorrow?" he asked.

"Why, I hadn't decided," she said. "You will be so busy and all, I thought it might be advisable for me to remain here temporarily. Until you have the time to introduce me to your circle."

"I will be quite occupied," he agreed. "For the next few weeks, perhaps you should remain here. I will visit you on the weekends, and as soon as this immediate crisis is over, we can schedule an extended visit for you at my house. You have your servants here, and I am quite sure you want to be near the business operation until things settle down."

"Yes, that is a good idea."

"I declare, I will miss you, though." He kissed her.

"And I will count the hours until you return."

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"At least I won't have to worry about jealous officers tryin' to sneak around and court you." He smiled.

"Of course not. They would never dare come near me. I have my own SE escort."

Vaughn's smile faded.

"Yes, there is Captain Davenport," he conceded. "I am not entirely happy about his presence here."

Scarlett looked at him in surprise.

"Martin! Why in the galaxy not?"

"Because he *is* SE. They have their own rules, you know. He can do anything he pleases, even to a Sirian lady."

"I am sure you needn't worry. Captain Davenport has been a perfect gentleman. And he has had many opportunities."

"He has never done anything improper?"

"Never."

"And you would certainly tell me if he did?"

"Immediately."

Vaughn sighed. "Very well, then. I shall regard Captain Davenport as a faithful and trusted servant, as long as you have so much confidence in him."

"I have absolute confidence in him. He is a Sirian gentleman, even if he is SE."

Later they made love again. Vaughn was much less urgent this time, giving Scarlett time to enjoy it, and she experienced her first orgasm, gasping with unbelievable chills

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when it was over. Shortly afterward, as they cuddled closely, she fell asleep.

Vaughn left early the next morning, for the Feddie crisis had not abated.

"Must you leave so soon?" Scarlett begged as he gathered up his effects and stowed them in a valise.

"I'm afraid I must," he said regretfully. He turned and kissed her longingly. "This damned war, you know."

"Have the Feddies attacked already? I have worried ever since you first told me about their plan."

"My dear, I apologize. Perhaps I misled you. The attack is not expected for some months yet. But we have much plannin' to do if we are to ensure their defeat. There's not a moment to be wasted."

She relaxed visibly.

"In that case, I am certain you will have ample opportunity to destroy them. I dread to think of such barbarians comin' here. Imagine what they would do to me!"

Vaughn gazed into her eyes and shook his head slowly.

"You must never think such things again," he assured her. "The Feddies could never get this far, not in a million years. And even if they did, they would have to step over my dead body to reach you. It simply could not ever happen." He smiled reassuringly and

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kissed her one last time. "Unhappily, I really must go now. Good-bye, my darlin'."

Davenport came in after Vaughn's hovercar had disappeared in the distance. He leaned against the wall and watched her, waiting.

"Nothing new," she reported. "Except the Feddie attack isn't due for some months yet."

"How many months?"

"He didn't say."

Davenport nodded, and turned to leave.

"Captain ... "

He turned back.

"What will I do if you get reassigned? Now that I'm married, the SE probably has better things for you to do."

He grinned and shook his head.

"The SE works in mysterious ways," he said. "I won't be reassigned."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me. I know."

"And if I move to New Angeles with Martin?"

"I'll be nearby. Don't worry about it."

He walked out the door and closed it behind him. She sat down on the bed and stared at the wall, wishing she could be as confident.

Saturday, 12 September, 0229 (PCC) - Wallace Plantation, Texiana, Sirius 1

True to his word, Vaughn came every weekend, spending either a Saturday or Sunday at the plantation. He and Scarlett spent the time

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in ecstatic seclusion, making love like teenagers. It was like courting, with the added benefit of sex. Scarlett had never been happier in her life. The horrors of Altair were forgotten as she gave herself over totally to the man she loved. He came the last two weekends of August and the first weekend of September. But as the second weekend of September approached, Scarlett was surprised to receive a vidphone call from him. In the tiny screen, he looked distressed.

"Scarlett, my love!" he exclaimed, and she could see the conflict in his eyes.

"Martin? Why, what is it, Martin? You look as if ..."

"I cannot come tonight, my dear. Please accept my sincerest apology."

"Why, certainly, Martin. I do! But — when will I see you?"

He glanced away, as if someone else were vying for his attention. He looked back at her miserably.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It may be some time."

"Why? What has happened?"

"It's ... I cannot tell you, I fear. But believe me when I say it is an emergency." He glanced away again. "I'm sorry, my love. I have to go. I swear I'll call you at the earliest opportunity." He smiled sadly. "I do love you, my dear."

"And I you, Martin. Do be careful!"

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He smiled again and broke the connection. Scarlett stared at the blank screen for a long moment, her heart racing. She punched the OFF button and stood up, weak in the knees. She turned and headed up the stairs.

Davenport met her outside her suite, the question in his eyes. Regina glanced over her shoulder to be sure they were alone.

"He isn't coming!" she whispered. "It must have started!"

Monday, 14 September, 0229 (PCC) - Orbit of Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

"Attention!" the cockpit computer announced tersely. "Approaching target coordinates. Return to normal space in thirty seconds."

Onja Kvoorik felt her pulse increase slightly as she heard the same message in her gun turret. Her mouth felt dry, not from excessive fear, but because this was a new experience. It would be the first assault on a planet outside the Solar System, which heralded a new era of the war. She checked her weapons systems one last time, making sure everything was ready. Lasers charged, autocannon charged, torpedo tubes loaded. All gun switches on. She hooked her knees over the directional controls of her turret, tightened her suspension harness. It was about to hit the fan.

Star Marine

"Return to normal space in ten seconds," the computer chanted. "Nine seconds. Eight seconds. Seven seconds ... "

A familiar sensation rippled across her skin, like electric current, and outside her viewport the mottled grey of hyperspace flashed like lightning. She suddenly saw blackness and scattered stars. They had dropped out of warp.

"Input: shields up!"

Alpha 2 hung before them like a giant medicine ball, its oceans and continents clearly defined through light cloud cover. It was roughly the size of Terra, some twenty-two thousand nautical miles in circumference, and completely under Sirian control. Onja scanned her target holos closely, but no threats were visible. Relief flooded her for just a moment; the briefing had indicated that the Sirians knew about Operation Gang-Bang, and though the timetable had been moved forward a hundred days, no one knew if the enemy was aware of the change. There had been a very real possibility of an ambush awaiting them.

If there was, it was in the wrong place. Forty squadrons of QuasarFighters dropped out of warp within five minutes of each other, emerging dangerously close to the planet's atmosphere. Eight hundred-plus fighters, each with assigned targets, and every target a Sirian fighter base. In less than four hours,

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another eight hundred would appear, with more to follow.

"My HH is clear, Onja!" David Coffey told her from the cockpit. "How does it look to you?"

"No threats, at least for the moment. I think we pulled it off."

Major Madison was giving orders over the SpectraWav, then the planet outside spun out of sight as David Coffey rolled inverted and arrowed for the atmosphere, his four-ship section following. It was daylight on this side of the planet, but within minutes they entered the night side. Then they hit the atmosphere, bucking and bouncing crazily for several minutes as they gradually reduced speed to a tolerable level. Onja rode it out stoically, long accustomed to it. Soon ZF-313 was streaking through the Centauri stratosphere toward their designated target.

"I'm picking up Ladar scans," Onja announced suddenly. "They've seen us."

"Won't do the fuckers any good," Coffey replied. "Unless they've got fighters up, they're dead meat!"

Onja grinned. She loved to hear Coffey talk tough. When he got angry, or was feeling mean, he was at his best in the cockpit. She kept one eye on her target holo while she unloaded the torpedo tubes and recharged them with atmosphere missiles. Torpedoes were worthless after reentry, but until she

Star Marine

knew for sure the Sirians weren't waiting for them, she had kept them ready.

"Four minutes to target," Coffey announced.

Onja felt the drag of heavy atmosphere as the QF angled lower, and her topography map began to take on a familiar look as she approached terrain she'd studied during the briefing. The base they were approaching was located on a mountain plateau, roughly ten thousand feet in altitude, and more than fifty miles from any civilian habitation. She wouldn't have to worry about collateral casualties on this run.

"Two minutes," Coffey said, and Onja glanced out to see a mountain peak sweep past, a black silhouette against the gorgeous Centauri night sky.

A piercing alarm filled her turret, and her sky-blue eyes widened accordingly.

"Incoming, David!" she cried. "I've got — *Jesus!* — *nine* GAMs inbound at three five one degrees relative!" On her holo the ground to air missiles — "GAMs" in service parlance — approached like streaks of lightning.

"I see 'em!" Coffey shouted, and immediately the fighter nosed up into a thirty-degree climb. Six seconds later Onja punched a toggle that fired a spread of deceptors, tiny rockets that spread out in a fan above the fighter. Each deceptor would reflect a Ladar image that looked exactly like a Quasar-

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Fighter, hopefully sending the GAMs after false targets.

"Deceptors away!" she shouted, and immediately Coffey dived for the deck, pulling out only a hundred feet above the narrow valley below.

Onja's eyes narrowed as blood raced through her veins. She had the target in sight, and as the night outside flashed white like the sun from exploding GAMs, she launched six missiles from her wing tubes, flipped the switch to auto-reload, and wrapped a slender hand around her cannon grip. Kicking the turret controls with her left leg, she spun the turret longitudinally until she was underneath the fighter, hanging upside down, with a clear shot at the ground. Explosions blossomed ahead of her, sending huge fireballs into the sky that illuminated everything on the ground in stark relief. She squeezed the trigger and the turret began to shudder. Twin streams of 29mm cannon streaked off into the night, ripping through installations, fuel tanks, and fighters parked along the apron. She saw more explosions, and then they were past, the base falling away behind. Coffey was already climbing for another pass, the G forces crushing the breath out of her as he turned the fighter in a wide bank to the right, traveling well past Mach 2.

Before the fighter completed its turn, Onja rotated her turret back to the top of the fuse-

Star Marine

lage, and when the G forces abated she panted rapidly to reoxygenate her blood. Her vision had clouded during the turn, but now it cleared as they raced back downrange, and she could see the enemy base below as they passed overhead. More fighters from 313 were making their runs, and half the installation appeared to be in flames. More explosions boiled up even as she watched, yet the battle wasn't entirely one-sided. Several miles in the distance she saw two fires burning against the side of the mountain – the GAMS hadn't missed completely. A quick look at her holo showed that, of twenty-four ships in the squadron, three had been lost; as she glanced outside again she saw another explode as a GAM caught it in the nose. Flaming debris showered into the ground, adding to the fires.

Onja wondered who it was.

"Okay, everybody, this is Mad Man!" Major Madison called over the SpectraWav. "We've got time, let's hit 'em again! And watch those fucking GAMS! Use your deceptors!"

The squadron was strung out over sixty miles, six sections trailing each other like a train. As they reached the far end of the high mountain valley, the lead section, led by Coffey and Kvoorik, made another bone-crushing turn and screamed back toward the target. This time Onja used her turret laser, burning things from forty miles away as she approached. More GAMS shrieked up to meet

them, and once again the deceptors did their job, although this time one GAM exploded close enough that Onja felt the concussion, and heard fragments riddle the fuselage.

Coffey began executing a head-spinning weave, jerking his fighter from side to side as laser batteries streaked the night with murderous beams. The lasers were blinding, but only Coffey was affected; Onja's target holo showed her all she needed to see while protecting her vision. As they approached the target for the second time, she flipped her laser to recharge and released six more missiles, then trained her cannon along the dual runways that loomed directly ahead. The Sirians had been unable to get anything in the air during their first approach, but hadn't been idle. After the last Fed fighter finished its run, two enemy ships had managed to get onto the runway, and Onja could see their afterburners as they streaked forward on their takeoff runs.

"Steady!" she shouted, and Coffey immediately stopped his weave. Instantly Onja squeezed the trigger, and one of the Sirian fighters began to disintegrate. Even before it crashed, she adjusted minutely and fired again, nailing the second just as it began its near-vertical climb for altitude. Her cannon stream caught it in the cockpit and walked down its length with deadly accuracy. The

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fighter exploded before she could release her trigger.

"Finished!" she shouted, and Coffey began to weave again.

She rolled back to the bottom and resumed fire, spraying everything she could see that wasn't already burning. The lasers were thick as raindrops now, and even as the missiles took out several batteries, GAMs continued to reach for the attackers. Just seconds before Coffey pulled up for the last time, Onja heard an explosive bang and felt the fighter jerk as if it had been swatted by a giant hand.

"*Shit!*" Coffey screamed. "We're *hit*, Onja! Hang on! I don't know how bad —"

The fighter staggered sickeningly, and Onja felt bile spill into her mouth. She remained calm, but fear froze her blood; she panted through her mouth as she began shutting down weapons, then grabbed hold and hung on while she waited to learn whether she was about to die.

Coffey had his hands full in the cockpit, for though he didn't know it yet, he'd lost nearly four feet off the tip of his starboard wing. What remained of the wing root was mostly shredded metal, with just enough structure remaining to keep the whole thing from flying apart. Whether it would support the fighter long enough to clear the atmosphere was anybody's guess.

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"Mad Man, Java Man!" Coffey yelled over the SpectraWav, his voice chattering as the fighter bucked like a roller coaster under him. "I'm hit! Request permission to head for orbit!"

"Java Man, Mad Man! Can you make it?"

"I dunno, Major! She's shakin' like a whore in church! If I don't get out of the atmosphere in a hurry, we're finished!"

"Roger that, Java Man! Get the fuck clear! We'll watch for you."

Coffey struggled with the controls, talking to the AI as it complained about structural damage. After nearly a minute of bowel-churning terror, he got it stabilized enough to use his rockets, and with his nose angled up a mere twenty degrees, fired them at full thrust. The QuasarFighter surged forward and began to climb. It tried to roll to the right, but Coffey used his attitude jets — designed for extra-atmosphere only — to nudge the ship back level. The ship shuddered violently, and Onja wondered if they would literally fly apart before they could reach escape velocity. Somehow, after nearly ten minutes of blood-chilling fear, the QF reached the upper stratosphere and was soon clear of Alpha 2.

Now, if they didn't run into enemy fighters, Onja thought, they just might get home alive.

"Do we still have our hyperdrives?" she asked Coffey. She hadn't dared speak to him during the climbout.

Star Marine

"I think so. Looks like wing damage only."

"I hope you're right."

"Mad Man, Java Man. I'm in orbit. Request permission to head for home."

"Go ahead, Java Man. We're right behind you. See you back at the dorm."

"Roger, Mad Man." Coffey heaved a deep breath, and to Onja he added, "Hold your breath!"

Onja literally did, and when Coffey issued the order, she also offered a silent prayer.

"Execute!" he said, and instantly she felt the ripple. They were back into hyperspace.

They'd be back aboard ship in six hours.

John Bowers

Chapter 29

11 Sept. 0229

Dear Angela,

By the time you get this, I'll be in battle again. Sgt. Rags said we should make chips for our families, but they won't be sent for a few weeks, after the public already knows about what's happened.

We're going to Alpha Centauri. I don't know any details yet, but we'll be briefed aboard ship. The captain says it's risky, that the enemy will be waiting for us. Okay, then, I guess that's how it is. We're Star Marines, we're trained to take chances. We'll kick their ass anyway.

Angela, I don't want you should worry, okay? I'm going to be just fine. I came through the last one alive, when almost no one else in my outfit did. I'll come through this one, too. Just keep on believing it, and keep praying.

Whatever happens, take care of Mama. She needs you. And tell Juanito he's a great kid. I love him. Got to go now. Promise me you won't worry. Tell everybody at work to keep making those fighters.

I love you, *'mana*. Take care.

Rico

Star Marine

**Tuesday, 15 September, 0229 (PCC) - Alpha 2,
Alpha Centauri System**

Maniac was in the infantry berth next to his, and he kept rubbing his crotch.

"God damn! I shoulda gone to see the pink ladies before we shipped out! I never had a hard-on like this before!"

"Shut the fuck up, Maniac!" Texas muttered from the berth in front. "Don't need that outta you right now."

"This fucker's like starcrete!" Maniac insisted.

"Great. Beat the Sirians over the head with it. Now shut up."

For once, Rico agreed with Texas. He was in no mood to hear Maniac's woes — he had plenty of his own. For the third time in two years he was back in a lander, heading into battle. Unlike the last time, when the enemy had been absent, this time there would be no reprieve. He just hoped to Jesus they could reach the ground before the shooting started.

The transport hit the outer atmosphere above Alpha 2 and bounced; Rico bit his tongue painfully, and swore under his breath. The ship hit air again, and the roller coaster ride commenced. Retro thrusters fired and everyone shifted painfully forward, helmets slamming against bulkheads. Rico closed his eyes and sweated, tasting his stomach con-

John Bowers

tents as they tried to cycle through his mouth. His breath came in short, rapid gasps, and he wondered how long it would take to reach the ground. Alpha 2 was twice as big as Titan.

The ground-pounders had been told as little as necessary; they knew only their immediate objectives, and little else. They'd been advised that Federation fighter sweeps had already cleared the atmosphere of Sirians, but that wasn't completely true. Enemy air and space opposition had been reduced to a minimum by massive strikes against over two hundred fighter bases, but in no way had Sirian space power been eliminated.

But the men in the transports needed all the confidence they could get.

Once the bone-jarring reentry was complete, the transports burned toward the ground at as steep an angle as possible, their skins heating dangerously as they maintained a steady Mach 3 until the last possible minute. Sonic waves cracked across the continent below as hundreds of troop transports split the atmosphere in a ragged string, heading for the launch points that would drop a quarter million men on this first pass alone. Twenty squadrons of Lincoln fighters ranged on ahead, clearing the sky for the troop carriers, shooting down aircraft and what few space fighters they found. Landing zones were blasted by missiles, lasers, cannons, and gravity bombs.

Star Marine

The war had come full force to Alpha Centauri.

Polygon, Washington City, DC, North America, Terra

Wade Palmer sat in the War Room and sucked hot coffee, his eyes like star maps, hands trembling, nerves shot. He'd done all he could do, and then some; his role now was to watch and wait — and worry.

He couldn't help it. His blood temperature was near freezing, and nothing could settle him. Kamada had tried reassuring him, even joked with him, but nothing helped. The only relief he would find was if the troops got down safely, and managed to stay alive. He was only a junior officer, yet it was his plan beginning execution, and before it was over some ten million lives would be at risk. Even the slightest miscalculation on his part could cost thousands of them.

Sure, his plans had been reviewed and scrutinized — by Kamada, by Boucher, by Willard ... even the President. Some changes had been made, modifications added or subtracted, but — it was still his plan. If it failed ...

He couldn't bear to think about it.

Altair was going smoothly — the fighter delivery had taken place ten days earlier, with no indication that the Sirians had detected it. Just hours ago, Operation Gang had begun, and though the space battles were still swirl-

John Bowers

ing in the skies around Altair, word had arrived that the first wave of troops was on the ground. They'd met no opposition at all, and landed in friendly territory.

But Alpha Centauri was the big one. Alpha 2 had no friendly territory.

Wade sipped his coffee and waited.

Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

Through the roar of jets and the scream of atmosphere, Rico heard the outer doors open. Unlike Captain Mendez, Captain Connor hadn't bothered to tune his men in to the cockpit frequency, so they could only guess at what was going on. But when Rico heard those doors, and the increase in wind shriek, he knew. He began to hyperventilate, and crossed himself without thinking. He'd barely begun to chant the Hail Mary when the lander fired; his feet slammed against the bulkhead and his skeleton whiplashed — and he felt the sickening drop as the lander began a headfirst dive toward the planet.

Start the engines! Start the engines. Come ooon, start the fucking engines!

The engines were already turning, but he hadn't noticed. Until the thrust pushed him backward, and then he realized the lander was under full control, but was still diving.

Hope that fucker up front can see where we're goin'!

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He heard explosions then, and his heart almost stopped. The lander bucked and shuddered as something exploded nearby, and Titan flashed before his eyes like a death scene. It was safe to say he was no longer frightened — he had completely turned to stone.

The lander finally began to pull out of its dive, forcing the Marines hard against the bottoms of their berths, their body weight suddenly doubling under the G force. The lander rolled precariously, right and left, never quite tipping over, as turbulent air from nearby explosions jarred them severely.

God damn! How much farther is it?

Rico smelled puke.

The lander bounced like a cork as another ship screamed by not far away, and Rico heard cannon in rapid-fire mode. A fighter, he thought. *Hope it's one of ours.*

"Delta Company!" Capt. Connor bellowed in his headset, "one minute to touchdown! On your toes!"

Rico swallowed and began sucking air again. Across from him, Maniac was silent. Rico dared not look at him to see why. He felt like a marble inside a vigorously shaken bottle, at the mercy of forces beyond his control. The never-ending ride continued.

Explosions near and far, the shriek of lasers, the scream of jet engines, the thunder of cannon ... a person could go deaf.

John Bowers

"Twenty seconds, Delta! Give your hearts to Jesus!"

Roberson would call that blasphemy, Rico thought, and suddenly wanted to laugh. He broke into a grin, even as sweat burned his eyes. He could hear the ground fire now — added to the din was the *swoosh* of rockets rising to meet them. Oh, God, please! We're so close — don't let them get us now. At least let us get down first!

His grin faded.

Forward thrusters fired and Rico slid forward an inch, his helmet slamming into the bulkhead. Up and down the lander men swore reflexively, and then he felt the gear touch down, hard. They were on the ground, thank God! But the ground was rough, and the retros were firing harder. All his blood seemed to rush into his head.

And then, unbelievably — they stopped. The lander sat rocking on its gear, engines still turning, and up and down the line officers and squad leaders were yelling.

"Let's go let's go let's go let's get outta here!"

"Go-go-go-go-go-go-go! Get the fuck moving! You got ten seconds!"

The yelling continued as Rico unsnapped his harness and rolled off his berth into the aisle, hanging a boot and falling headlong to the deck. Someone swore at him, someone else kicked him, and four men leaped over

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him on their way to the exit. He scrambled up and lurched forward, gripping his rifle in both hands, his backpack swaying from side to side. He reached the hatch at the tail and saw daylight. The ground was four feet below, and he leaped, landing solidly and turning left to follow the other olive-clad Star Marines racing for cover forty yards away.

He heard small-arms fire from somewhere not far away, a steady crackle. As he raced after the others, his peripheral senses gave him an impression of things around him. They'd landed on some kind of runway, a military base — exactly according to plan. The fire seemed to be coming from some burned-out buildings a few hundred yards to his left. He tried to run a little faster.

At the moment he jumped from the lander, he'd seen at least four other ships rolling to a stop behind them, men already pouring out of one, and more ships arrowing in for a landing behind. The sky was heavy with smoke. Everything was like a kaleidoscope, confusing images burned forever into his mind, but in disjointed pieces. First impressions would remain for a lifetime, but the true picture would take much longer to sort out.

The man ahead of him disappeared, leaping over an embankment, and Rico was right behind him. He reached the embankment and leaped just as a stream of bullets swept across it; he heard the ricochets behind him as he

John Bowers

landed heavily in the bottom of a drainage ditch, rolling to take up his momentum. The man immediately behind him shouted in pain and lurched sideways as bullets swept the embankment again.

Rico came up with his helmet askew, panting like a hound after a hunt, and plastered himself against the side of the ditch nearest the fire, trying to burrow into the grass. Dozens of helmets lined the inside of the ditch, looking like a turtle convention. A sergeant was running down the ditch, counting heads.

Rico wanted to look, but was afraid to. He heard an explosion from the runway, felt the blast wave pass over the ditch, and ducked as dirt and broken starcrete rained down.

Weapons began firing from the ditch. He looked up to see at least a squad of men hanging their rifles over the top of the embankment, hammering back at the enemy. Belatedly, he checked his own rifle to make sure it hadn't got clogged with dirt or grass when he rolled. He hefted it without noticing the weight. It was a Spandau 48, balanced and comfortable. A good weapon, with a forty-eight round magazine, firing an 11mm slug that mushroomed on impact. Accurate and deadly.

For this operation they wouldn't use laser rifles at all.

The firing from the ditch increased in volume. Rico realized then that no one was

Star Marine

giving orders, and he didn't know the men next to him. The squads and platoons were all mixed up, so if he waited for orders from his own leaders, he'd be there all day. He peered over the top of the embankment.

An incredible scene met his eyes. Two landers burned fiercely on the runway, gouts of red flame boiling out of them. At least twenty bodies sprawled on the starcrete, thrown about like matchsticks. The lander he'd arrived in was gone, headed back for orbit to take on a fresh load of troops. Two more were accelerating under full thrust, racing down the runway as their jets poured thunder back at him. And to his left, at least twenty more dropping in to land. On the ground, six were unloading, troops scattering in different directions. But those poor fuckers were under heavy fire now, and he saw several drop as enemy fire increased in intensity.

Shit! He swiveled his head, looking for the source of the fire. The men in the ditch were blazing away at the burned buildings, but Rico could see nothing over there, except chips flying where the bullets were hitting. He raised his rifle, but held his fire, seeing no point in shooting blindly unless he had a target.

A pair of QuasarFighters streaked overhead, just fifty feet off the ground. They were opposite the runway from him, keeping clear of the troop landers, and weren't shooting.

John Bowers

Rico wondered why, until he realized they didn't dare fire for fear of hitting Star Marines. Their job was strictly intimidation, he decided. Then he heard their bombs explode two miles away, and decided he didn't know so much after all.

Shit, combat was confusing!

Polygon, Washington City, DC, North America, Terra

The technician monitoring the comm unit froze rigid and held up a hand for quiet, pressing his left hand against his headset for better contact. Every eye locked onto him and no one dared breathe, Wade Palmer least of all. The tech listened for nearly twenty seconds, then nodded casually and replied.

"Copy that, Snowflake. Avalanche out."

He turned and stared at General Willard for an extra second or two, obviously enjoying his role in the drama.

"Snowflake reports the first wave is down. Initial losses estimated at point zero two percent!"

An explosive cheer rocked the War Room. Kamada and Wade pounded each other on the back, shouting and laughing happily. The tech grinned hugely as even General Willard grabbed a senior planner and hugged him. The report was only the first, and there would be years to go, but the news was encouraging.

Star Marine

San Francisco, CA, North America, Terra

Henry Wells jerked as the vidphone went off by his bedside. He'd slept poorly for several weeks, and the sand under his eyelids made him feel as if he hadn't slept at all. He peered at the bedside clock — three-thirty. He reached for the vidphone and punched the VOICE ONLY button, not caring to be seen in his present state.

"Henry Wells," he mumbled, frowning as he tried to concentrate. The caller was also on voice only, as the screen didn't light up.

"Senator, this is Andrew Lockner. Do you have a scrambler?"

"Lockner?" Henry sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Why would the Assistant Director of FIA be calling him at this hour? He picked up the handset and put it to his ear, then punched the SCRAMBLE button.

"Yes, go ahead."

He listened for thirty seconds. His heart began to beat faster.

"Are you sure? Yes. Yes ... I see. Yes, thank you."

He put the handset down slowly, feeling a sense of awe he hadn't felt in a long time. He took a deep breath, rubbed his face with both hands, and let out a long sigh. There was no way he'd be getting back to sleep now.

"What is it, Henry?" Yvonne had lifted up on one elbow, was staring at him.

John Bowers

"That was the FIA," he said. "Operation Gang-Bang has started."

"What's Operation Gang-Bang?"

He shook his head. He'd never told her about it, since it was top secret. He supposed it didn't matter now. He stood up and turned to face her.

"The simultaneous invasion of Altair and Alpha Centauri."

"*Both* of them? At the same time?" She was startled.

"And the good news," he finished, "is that the first waves are on the ground, with minimal losses."

She digested that for a moment.

"Was there anything about — Regina?"

He nodded. "He told me she made it possible. That was all. He didn't explain how."

"Is she all right?"

"He didn't say. But if she weren't, he would've told me."

Yvonne bit her lip with worry. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," he said. And hoped he wasn't lying.

Lucaston, Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

The initial landings on Alpha 2 were aimed at occupying the Sirian fighter bases, almost two hundred of them. Once they were under Federation control — or at least contested by Federation troops — they would be largely

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unable to launch counterstrikes against further landings. But it was risky — the bases were situated around the planet, and if they were to be held, reinforcements would be needed in large numbers at each base. For that reason, some sixty of the bases would be abandoned as soon as the Star Marines could secure and destroy them. Those units would then be withdrawn and sent elsewhere.

The 33rd Star Marines landed at a large installation in the southern hemisphere called simply Fleet Base 49. It was a new facility, built less than four years earlier on the outskirts of a sizable city called Lucaston, located at the intersection of two rivers that flowed toward the Syracuse Sea some six hundred miles distant. Lucaston boasted a population of nearly two million, and was home to two fighter bases; the second, about twenty miles to the south, was also under attack, by the 51st Star Marines.

Standard military doctrine called for major attacks to be launched at dawn, to take advantage of as many daylight hours as possible. In a planet-wide assault, such timing was useless, for the dawn line lay across a very narrow slice of the planet's surface. The assault on Lucaston arrived in midafternoon, just two hours before the end of the business day. Civilians in the city were close to panic; even though Fleet Base 49 had been bombed nineteen hours earlier, few had imagined that

John Bowers

a massive landing would follow so quickly. Hysteria ensued.

The fighting remained outside the city itself, but terrified civilians killed each other as they stampeded for safety, hovercars crashing to the streets in tangles of flaming wreckage. Many managed to escape the city on surface highways, streaming out in every possible direction, but even they suffered their share of losses as they reacted to the horrific spectacle of QuasarFighters crisscrossing the sky. It was unfortunate, as Alpha 2 was a Federation ally, but it couldn't be avoided.

Within an hour of the first touchdown by the Star Marines, the ground fire sweeping the runways was silenced. Commanders and squad leaders, separated in many cases from their own troops, organized any troops available and assaulted the buildings from which the fire stemmed, killed the defenders, and spread out across the base in a hasty effort to occupy it before dark.

Rico Martinez and the group he was with captured the base hospital, after shooting a dozen defenders off the roof. A Sirian doctor was killed when he tried to draw a sidearm, but he was the only casualty inside the building. Darkness had fallen by the time the facility was secure, and the lieutenant in charge of the assault force ordered his men to remain inside the building until commanders higher up the line could sort things out. Rico

Star Marine

was placed in position on the roof with about thirty other men, and enjoyed a spectacular view of the entire base. Fires burned in every direction, and he could hear both small arms and heavy weapons fire from the direction of the river.

He wondered where Delta Company was.

The landers had stopped coming for about an hour, then began to arrive again. Streaming in out of the night sky, their underbellies gleaming orange from the fires around the base, they landed thousands of Star Marines and tons of equipment, including portable antispacecraft (ASC) lasers, portable rocket launchers, and light hovertanks.

Around midnight Rico realized he was starving. Too wired to think about sleep, he ate ravenously from his field rations without even noticing the taste. As the hardware continued to drop out of the sky, accompanied by wave after wave of escorting fighters, he began to feel more secure. They still might not pull this off, but they'd at least reached the ground, and in force. He hadn't seen a Sirian fighter all day.

The Star Marines had come to stay.

Wednesday, 16 September, 0229 (PCC) - Polygon, Washington City, DC, North America, Terra

"Ensign, perhaps you should get some sleep."

John Bowers

Rear Admiral Henri Boucher stood in front of him, looking concerned. Wade pulled his eyes away from the holomap with difficulty, and looked up at the senior planner. Boucher's face crinkled in a gentle smile.

"It's only been thirteen hours," Wade protested. "The Sirians are almost certain to counterattack!"

Boucher shrugged with typical European fatalism.

"And you per'aps can stop it?"

"No, of course not ..."

"There is much warfare a'ead. We will need you then, rested and alert."

Wade started to protest further, but the admiral cut him off.

"This is an order, Palm-air. Go 'ome. Sleep. Do not come back for twenty-four hours, unless I call for you."

Wade rubbed a hand over his face. His skin felt as if it belonged to someone else. His eyes were burning. He nodded reluctantly, and stood up wearily. He was four inches taller than Boucher.

"Yes, sir," he sighed.

Boucher laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You should be very proud, Palm-air. The operation is working. It is un'eard of for a junior plan-nair to accomplish what you 'ave. You 'ave done a wonderful job. *Magnifique!*"

"Thank you, sir."

Star Marine

Wade left the War Room alone, unnoticed by anyone but Boucher. The others were busy watching the progress of the Alpha 2 landings, adjusting schedules as necessary, making decisions. Wade hadn't been involved in any of that; although he'd drawn up the broad invasion plan, including as many details as he had time for, he had no experience in real-time planning, the hard decisions that must be made as the battle was being fought. The senior staff was doing that.

General Willard had kept the timetable a secret, but as the plan began to mature under the combined heads of Boucher, Kamada, and Palmer, the senior staff had been given enough details that they could familiarize themselves with it. They all thought it was Willard's own plan, never guessing the true identity of the designers. Twelve hours before the first fighter squadrons launched, Willard had brought them all together, laid the final plan on them, and told them it was about to begin. They'd been shocked, but if any of them was the leak, they had no time to advise the Sirians of the new developments.

Once the operation began, Wade Palmer was outside the loop. But he'd remained in the War Room and watched, worrying and chewing his nails, praying silently and cheering each positive communication, until Boucher sent him home.

John Bowers

He left the Polygon on foot, planning to walk the six blocks to the BOQ. He frowned as he saw the gaggle of people on the sidewalk, men and women and children, nearly a hundred of them. Anti-war protesters, religious zealots who believed for some unfathomable reason that the Federation was somehow immoral for defending itself against foreign aggression. Wade had seen them before; the movement had existed since the war began, and every few weeks they mobilized to picket the Polygon and various military bases around the planet.

They were a seedy looking bunch, singing some obscure gospel hymn as they marched in a loose circle carrying placards.

THOU SHALT NOT KILL.
WAR IS MURDER.
JESUS DIED FOR SIRIANS, TOO.

Two bored looking cops stood nearby, in case the demonstration got out of hand. A holonews crew across the street was interviewing a spokesman. Wade steeled himself to walk past them, aware that the news of the Centauri invasion had probably brought them out; also aware that they would view his crisp white uniform as a red flag.

"Stop the war!" a man shouted at Wade as he approached. "End the killing! Usher in the age of peace!"

Star Marine

Wade scowled and walked on past. A woman rushed at him next.

"Murderer! He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword!" Her voice was shrill, grating his nerves like a laserblade on Solarglas.

He brushed past her, but was instantly surrounded. He stopped suddenly, not really afraid because they were supposed to be non-violent, but annoyed beyond belief. They shouted at him in a chorus of discordant voices, a wave of sound that he couldn't sort out. He was dimly aware of the two cops elbowing their way toward him.

He held up a hand, and their voices trailed off into expectant silence.

"If you don't believe in the war," he said calmly, "no one is forcing you to fight it. But if you don't like the way things are now, they'll be a lot worse if the Sirians win."

"Peace, brother!" the man nearest him shouted. "Peace and dialogue! Let the voices of reason prevail! Stop the killing!"

Wade just shook his head. "Tell that to the Sirians."

"*Murderer!*" the same shrill woman shrieked again.

The cops reached him then and forced open a path for him to get through. He broke free of the crowd and continued on his way, a sick feeling in his gut. Today of all days! The invasion forces were down at Alpha Centauri, for

John Bowers

which he was thankful, yet these malcontents had managed to spoil his elation.

Murderer, indeed! As if he carried a rifle. He'd never met the enemy, never fired a shot in anger.

He felt a twinge of guilt at the thought.

Chapter 30

Denver, CO, North America, Terra

Angela Martinez left home as usual that morning. As a single mother her routine was always hectic. After getting Johnny out of bed and into the shower, she laid on his breakfast and hurried into her bedroom to get ready for work. When she returned, he was lingering over his oatmeal, manipulating a holo-toy of a QuasarFighter that soared and swooped about the room. She scolded him and told him to hurry, then rushed him off to his room to get dressed. Minutes later she hustled him out the door and into the company hovercar.

The Denver rush hour was a nightmare on a good day, but with Johnny out of school for the last week of summer holiday, Angela had to drop him at his grandmother Lincoln's, which meant she had extra miles to cover. She usually kept the car radio tuned to a news station in case of war developments, but today Johnny wanted to listen to Supernova Rock, so she let him change it. There hadn't been any war news for months, so once couldn't hurt.

She hit the northbound interstate, swooping around cargohovers, and tried to make extra time. But the hover lanes were crowded,

John Bowers

and she saw a police car riding above the traffic to discourage jumpers.

"Mom, I want to learn to fly," Johnny said suddenly, catching her completely unaware.

"What?" She glanced at him in horror. "You mean, airplanes?"

"Yeah. Gramps says I can."

Angela made a face; she would have a word with *Gramps!*

"You're only eight," she told him. "That's much too young to learn to fly."

"How old do I have to be?"

"At least twelve."

"Can I learn to fly when I'm twelve?"

"No."

Johnny's face turned petulant.

"Aw, Mom! Gramps said my dad started flying when he was old enough."

"That's why you're not going to learn," Angela said firmly.

"Aw, Mom! Please?"

"Listen to your music. I've got heavy traffic and I can't talk right now."

He subsided, playing with his holo-toy. It took Angela forty minutes to reach LincEnt, twenty miles north of Denver. By the time she did, the traffic was starting to thin, and she made the turn toward the Lincoln mansion, a further twelve miles into the mountains. Shortly she was at the front door, quickly kissed her son and turned him over to Rose-

Star Marine

mary Lincoln; ten minutes later she entered the security gate at LincEnt.

She was six minutes late.

Angela parked the hovercar next to the executive building known as the Tower, hurried inside, and took the lift to the top floor. Two people were already seated in the reception area, looking impatient, and she threw them a nervous smile. Stowing her purse behind her desk, she took her seat, switched on her electronic systems, and inserted her remote headset.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she told the visitors. "Can I take your names, please?"

Both were waiting to see her boss, Oliver Lincoln III, and as soon as she had their names she punched his intercom.

"Yes?" Lincoln growled.

She spoke briefly, telling him about the visitors. To her surprise, he didn't answer immediately. Then,

"Angie, step inside, will you?"

She entered the office immediately, puzzled and a little frightened. Rarely did Lincoln call her in for a private conference, and when he did it was usually something momentous. He was looking at her curiously, his weathered face unreadable.

"Sit down," he said, and she perched on the edge of a chair, her dark brown eyes wide with growing apprehension.

"What's wrong, Mr. Lincoln?"

John Bowers

He peered at her a minute, then leaned back in his chair.

"You were late this morning."

She flushed. She'd been late before, and he never made a big deal of it.

"I'm sorry. Your grandson dawdled over his breakfast."

His eyes softened and he shook his head.

"No problem, Angie. But I really didn't know if you felt like coming in at all. If you want the day off, it's yours."

She frowned, puzzled. "Why?"

"You mean you haven't heard?"

Fear clutched at her heart. What was he talking about?

"Heard what?"

"I thought you listened to the news in your car. It's all over the holo and the microwave."

"Johnny was listening to music this morning ... Mr. Lincoln, what's happened?"

"The Star Marines hit Alpha Centauri last night. Altair, too, but your brother's division is on Alpha. They landed in the first wave."

"Oh!" Angela felt suddenly dizzy, and gripped the chair arm.

"There's no bad news, Angie. Just that they went in. I expect Rico's right in the middle of it." He peered at her closely.

"I'm sure he is," she whispered.

"Are you all right? Do you need some time off?"

Star Marine

She forced her eyes to focus and center on his face. For five seconds she didn't answer, then managed to shake her head.

"No. If I go home I'll just worry. I'd rather be busy."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Thank you. I'm all right."

Lincoln nodded slowly. "If you change your mind, let me know."

"I will."

"Okay. Send Burgess in, will you?"

Angela pushed herself to her feet and headed for the door. Before she reached it, she crossed herself.

Lucaston, Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

Rico had no idea what was going on. The Centauri night seemed to last forever, but time was relative. Shortly after stuffing himself from his rations, with sporadic firing still audible in many directions, he spotted a gun-sled approaching. He might not have seen it except it was firing at something on the ground with a light laser weapon. The streaks of laser fire flashing downward told him it was Sirian; the briefing on board the transport had made it very clear that the only lasers the Star Marines would be using were ASC batteries — anything smaller would be the enemy.

Rico's heart pounded and he brought his Spandau to his shoulder, picked up the ap-

John Bowers

proaching sled in his night scope, and tracked it as it came closer. It was still several hundred yards away and stationary, tipping slightly as it turned now and then to line up more targets. Rico saw tracer fire reaching for it, but the hull was apparently armored, and even machine gun fire bounced off.

"Gunsled!" Rico called out to others on the roof, and a dozen men scrambled to the edge of the building to rest their rifles on the ledge, sighting in on it.

"Jesus!" somebody muttered. "That thing must be murdering those guys on the ground!"

"Anybody got a missile tube?" Rico asked.

No one did. He took a deep breath and held it, adjusted for the range, and took careful aim. He couldn't really see the men on the sled, but there had to be two of them, a pilot and a gunner. He squeezed the trigger, spitting a stream of 11mm slugs toward the sled. Nothing happened, as far as he could tell, except the laser stopped for a moment. The sled began to move, angling away from its present location, and Rico thought he might've hit the gunner, but then it stopped and the laser flashed downward again.

"Fuck! Okay, guys! Let's take that thing out!"

Rico fired again, his rifle chattering as it vibrated against his shoulder. He fired three long bursts, then stopped and slapped in a

Star Marine

fresh magazine. On both sides of him, others were doing the same, but none of the Spandaus were loaded with tracer, so it was impossible to tell how close their shots were coming. Rico slammed his rifle to his shoulder again and took aim, but just as he was about to fire, someone on the ground beneath the enemy sled let fly with a portable missile tube. The sled flashed a brilliant white and exploded, spinning out of control toward the ground.

The men on the hospital roof cheered.

After that it was quiet for several hours. Rico was too wired to sleep, and the night seemed to drag interminably ...

He woke with a start. Someone had kicked his boot, and he scrambled to his knees in confusion. The night had given way to dawn; Alpha Prime was just peeking over the horizon. The air was acrid with smoke from the previous night's fires. His mouth tasted gummy and rancid. He looked up to see who'd kicked him.

"What's your unit, Marine?" the strange sergeant demanded.

"Delta Company," he replied.

"What the fuck you doin' here?"

"I dunno, sergeant. Everything got mixed up when we landed. I just ended up here."

The beefy sergeant merely grunted, then turned and pointed.

John Bowers

"See that bridge abutment at the edge of the river? Delta's over there. Watch yourself, there's stray Sirians all over the place."

"Aye-aye." Rico scrambled to his feet, picking up his pack and rifle.

"What's your unit, Marine?" the sergeant asked the next man, but Rico didn't hear the reply. Without another word, he headed for the exit leading down into the hospital, and five minutes later was on the ground outside the building, heading toward the river.

Everything was a shambles. Star Marines were visible everywhere, light tanks were parked in the shelter of buildings, and infantry hovers skimmed along twenty feet above the ground. A pair of QuasarFighters streaked overhead, jets throttled back and drag flaps fully extended, looking for targets. Here and there a building still smoldered. He passed a field kitchen and resisted the temptation to stop and get in line. The river was nearly a mile away, and he kept going in that direction, watchful for stray Sirians, hoping he wouldn't encounter any. He passed the body of a Star Marine lying facedown in the grass, as if merely resting. A hover ambulance coming from the river passed him, and he saw three men lying flat, with a corpsman bending over them. In the distance he still heard small-arms fire, but it was intermittent, apparently cleaning out pockets of resistance that had managed to survive the night.

Star Marine

As far as he could tell, Fleet Base 49 was in Federation hands.

He reached the river as the heat from the local sun began to warm his shirt. He spotted a squad of Marines sitting in a huddle eating their morning rations.

"Any of you guys seen Delta Company?" he asked.

"Down by the water." One of them pointed.

"Thanks."

He continued walking as the ground began to slope downward. Something exploded off to his right, and he instinctively ducked, but it was a quarter mile away. He could see smoke rising into the air, and wondered if it was artillery or something else.

The Star Marines were hard to see. Their camouflage fatigues blended with the ground cover, and unless one of them moved they were largely invisible. He spotted several just ahead, again inquired of Delta, and was motioned still farther forward. He frowned — the water was only thirty yards away, and the bridge abutment appeared to be deserted. The bridge itself lay in the river, probably destroyed by the space strike that preceded the landings.

"Beaner! Over here!"

Rico's heart leaped unexpectedly at the familiar voice. He saw Texas waving at him, and grinned with relief. He hurried forward and found most of his squad sitting in a narrow

John Bowers

trench they'd dug during the night. He quickly leaped inside with them.

"You better get your brown ass in here!" Texas chided him. "There's snipers on the other side."

"Where the fuck you guys been!" Rico demanded.

Rico looked around and counted heads. The Fearless Fourless were all present, as were White, Roberson, and Sgt. Ragsdale. The other three were missing.

"We been right here. Most of us, anyway. We thought you was dead. Where the hell were you?"

Rico brought them up to date, then asked about the three missing squad members.

"Sean Kelly got it last night," Tiny told him. "We don't know about the other two. Probably like you, got separated."

"They'll turn up," Rico guessed. "So what's been happening here?"

"I learned something important," Maniac told him.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, and this wasn't in the service manual. But it could save your life."

Rico was hooked. "What is it?"

Maniac leaned forward confidentially, his eyes serious.

"I can tell where the Sirians are before anybody sees them."

"How?"

Star Marine

"I get this hard-on like you can't believe —"

The others exploded into laughter, and Rico realized he'd been suckered.

"Hey," Gearloose demanded, "you get any Sirians last night?"

Rico nodded. "I think I got one. When we captured the hospital."

"Outstanding."

Rico shrugged off his pack and dug inside for something to eat. The others talked aimlessly, killing time until they were ordered to do something. No one seemed to know what was next; their briefing on the ship had merely stated their objective as capturing the fighter base. They'd done that.

As the morning wore on, more landers screamed in from orbit and disgorged still more troops, supplies, and equipment. By noon Fleet Base 49 looked like a Federation supply depot. In addition to nearly a full division of Star Marines, two regiments of Federation Infantry were also down.

Though the men of Delta were not aware of it, thousands of men were already moving off the base in combat-ready columns, spreading out into the countryside around the city and forming a cordon that any enemy counterattack would have to cross. South of Lucaston, the other fighter base had also been taken, and similar activity was in progress there. By the end of the day, Federation troops completely surrounded Lucaston, though none

John Bowers

had attempted to enter the city itself. Except for the two fighter bases, the Sirians had no military strength in the immediate area. The only resistance now came from stragglers who'd escaped the initial attack.

Elsewhere on Alpha 2, however, the war was starting to heat up.

* * *

The first thirty hours of the invasion had gone better than anyone had dared hope. Pre-landing strikes by QuasarFighters had sent Sirian space power reeling; the first wave of fighters had faced virtually no opposition in the atmosphere or in orbit, with the result that nearly half the fighter bases had sustained heavy damage, the only losses coming from ground fire. Succeeding waves had met some resistance, with higher losses, but more bases had been bombed, and Sirian pilots had been largely ineffective, perhaps demoralized by the unexpected timing of the attack. By the time the first transports arrived, the enemy fighter threat had been seriously reduced.

But Alpha Centauri was far from finished. Even as the first wave of Star Marines was landing, hundreds of fighters from scattered bases had managed to get into the air. Fortunately, they'd concentrated on the Federation fighters instead of the transports. Losses had been traded evenly, and the Sirian pilots who survived returned to their bases to find most of them under attack; of 213 bases on the

Star Marine

planet, 197 were swarming with Federation troops. Most returning pilots were vectored by their central traffic control to one of the unoccupied bases.

Sixteen fighter bases were still a threat to the invasion, and they were gorged with ships, far more at each facility than normal.

By the second day of the invasion, Sirian command on Alpha 2 had recovered enough to map out a hasty defensive plan, which included an umbrella of fighters around the planet to try to blunt any further landings. With some four thousand fighters still available, the only problem now was keeping them armed and fueled; the few remaining bases were terribly overcrowded.

The new defense plan didn't go into full effect until the third day, giving the Federation time to land still more troops, supplies, and equipment. By the end of the third day, nearly five million men were on the ground.

Then the Sirians closed the door.

Friday, 18 September, 0229 (PCC) - Orbit of Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

"God *damn!*" David Coffey gasped as ZF-313 dropped out of warp on 18 September. "Where the hell did they all come from?"

In her turret, Onja Kvoorik saw them as well, just a few thousand miles ahead. Dozens of fighters, several squadrons in all, in what looked like a parking orbit around the planet

John Bowers

— like guard dogs waiting for burglars. Within seconds of the appearance of 313, about fifty of them canceled orbit and angled to intercept. Onja's blue eyes widened in dismay for five seconds. Then she keyed her throat mike.

"Mad Man, Fighter Queen. Major, you'd better stop that convoy before they get here. We've got lots of company."

"Roger, Fighter Queen. I was just thinking the same."

The 313 was running interference for a merchant convoy bringing in supplies for the ground troops. The convoy was ten minutes behind them, still in warp, and if they canceled warp here they'd be slaughtered — or at least seriously injured — in spite of their fighter escort. Major Madison subspaced the convoy, ordering them to cancel warp where they were and wait for instructions.

Even before he finished, the Fed fighters broke into sections and raced for the enemy, outnumbered two to one. David Coffey led the attack; as the Fighter Queen's pilot, his was the lead section.

"This doesn't look good, Onja!" he told her over the intercom. He was already rolling into a corkscrew that would make him a difficult target.

"Don't worry," she told him confidently. "I've done this before."

Onja released two pairs of Yin-Yangs, targeting the enemy as widely as possible. The

Star Marine

Yins raced in and flashed their nuclear fire, releasing a massive pulse of EMP, which brought down the shields on more than half the Sirian fighters. The Yangs then delivered high explosives that killed or crippled two of them. Most of the remaining enemy fighters were now vulnerable to standard warhead and laser fire.

Her turret laser flashed and a Sirian fighter exploded, then a second. She fired a pair of torpedoes, then continued with laser. For the next six minutes, the 313 slugged it out, whittling down the enemy. Six QuasarFighters and nineteen Sirians were destroyed. Two more Sirian squadrons peeled off from orbit and climbed to assist, relieving their bloodied comrades — forty fresh fighters against fourteen Fed ships. Undaunted, ZF-313 turned to meet the new threat, and as they did another Fed squadron dropped out of warp — and then two more.

The odds were suddenly a lot more pleasant.

* * *

On the planet's surface, entire armies of Sirian and Vegan troops had mobilized into defensive positions around large cities and other vital assets. The immediate requirement was to meet the Federation threat, and then, as the situation stabilized, launch a counterattack to destroy those troops already on the ground. The Sirian command had in its arse-

John Bowers

nal some nine million ground troops, including Sirians, Vegans, and Alpha Centauri conscripts. These troops were virtually immune from air attack, as Federation space power had its hands full protecting inbound convoys.

Wade Palmer's plan had worked; most of the troops were on the ground, along with most of their equipment and supplies. But that was as far as Wade Palmer could go. Now it was up to the Star Marines and Federation Infantry. Neither service had ever fought a sustained action for more than a few weeks. The test of their training was about to begin.

Chapter 31

Tuesday, 22 September, 0229 (PCC) - Wallace Plantation, Texiana, Sirius 1

Scarlett Wallace Vaughn waited several days for word from her husband — in vain. General Vaughn was much too busy worrying about the developments on Alpha Centauri to give his new bride a thought. Scarlett debated calling him, but decided it was best to wait. If the crisis were indeed as grave as he'd indicated, she might only distract him.

Capt. Davenport remained at the plantation, with nothing to do but escort her when she left the house. He took his SE assignment seriously, and she couldn't even visit the plantation office without him tagging along. She hardly minded — his company was welcome.

Five days after her new husband failed to make an appearance because of the wartime emergency, Scarlett ventured over to the office and interrupted her cousin Boyd, who, though somewhat surprised to see her, welcomed her graciously. Davenport took a seat in the corner of the office and listened silently, his cold blue eyes watching Boyd as if he were food.

"Scarlett!" Boyd smiled distractedly. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" He clasped his

John Bowers

hands on the desk before him; he was busy, but she was now his employer.

"Boyd, I've been thinkin'," she told him with a little smile, her clear green eyes fixed on his face. "About what you said to me last year."

"And what was that, cousin Scarlett?"

"You said that God gave serfs dark skin to protect them from the heat."

He smiled as if she'd told a joke.

"I reckon I did say that, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. And I was thinkin', Boyd — why would the Lord do that, when dark colors absorb heat, but light colors reflect it?"

Boyd's eyes widened a fraction. He hadn't expected such logic from his uneducated cousin. His eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to fathom the answer.

"Well, now that you mention it — I suppose that's right, ain't it?"

"Yes. Which means that a serf would suffer *more* from the heat than we would. Don't you think?"

He puzzled over it a moment, at a loss for an answer.

"Well," he said finally, "that does make sense, I reckon. But did you know that niggos don't get sunburn?"

"They don't?"

"Not a bit. Except the half-breeds. The ones with white blood in them burn, if their skin is light enough, but the pure black ones don't."

Star Marine

"Well, I declare, I did not know that!"

He shrugged, as if that settled it.

"I don't know what that proves," he said, "but there it is."

"What about the Spanics and the slants?" she inquired.

"Same thing — if their skin is light enough, then they burn. Otherwise, they don't."

Scarlett pondered that for a moment. Then, as if none of it was really relevant anyway, she tossed her red hair and lifted her chin.

"Boyd, I want you to put coolers in the serf shanties."

Boyd's jaw dropped open in shock. "Cousin Scarlett, are you *serious*?"

She nodded emphatically. "I am."

"But — but ... " He fumbled for a response, then blurted, "Scarlett, that would cost a *fortune*! And it would be money wasted. It would do no more good than pourin' per-fume on a hog!"

"Boyd, you've been to college, and I know you are very wise about many things. But I don't believe you can prove that statement."

"We can't *afford* it, Scarlett!"

"How much would it cost?"

"I-I don't even know! But —"

"How many shanties are there?"

"Almost ten thousand! That's how many workers we have, and nearly all of them have families. One shanty to a family."

"How much do the coolers cost?"

John Bowers

"A hundred, hundred-fifty apiece! That's ..."
"He hastily did the arithmetic. "That's well over a million sirios!"

"Do we have a million sirios?"

"Why, yes, we have much more than a million, but —"

"Then we can afford it, can't we?"

Boyd was almost frantic. He stood up and spread his hands helplessly.

"Cousin Scarlett ... !" He glanced at Davenport. "Captain, surely *you* can appreciate my position here! *Tell* her!"

Davenport merely shrugged.

"As I understand it, she owns the plantation," he said quietly.

"Yes, of course, but —"

Davenport shrugged again, as if that said it all. Boyd sighed deeply and sat down again.

"Cousin Scarlett, you have a warm heart," he said. "I can appreciate what you are tryin' to do. But you asked me to manage the plantation for you, and in my professional opinion, this is a useless expenditure of your money. I must protest."

Scarlett smiled sweetly.

"Your protest is noted," she replied. "And it is very kind of you to be concerned about my money. But I believe those people are sufferin' under the heat of Sirian Summer. I want them to have relief."

"Sirian Summer is over."

Star Marine

"Yes, and that means you have seven months to install the coolers before it comes around again."

Boyd spread his hands on the desktop and tried one last time.

"Cousin Scarlett, please reconsider. I simply cannot condone this expenditure!"

"I am not askin' you to condone it, Boyd. I am tellin' you to *do* it."

"How much are you paying these serfs?" Davenport asked.

"It varies," Boyd told him. "Fifty sirios a month for common labor, more for the skilled people. The foremen make around ninety."

"How much of that do they really need?"

"Very little," Boyd admitted. "We increase them every few years to prevent them from riotin'."

"They can live on less?"

"Most certainly. They purchase their food from the company store, they have no need for luxuries, and any other necessities we supply."

"Explain to them that any who want the air-conditioning can have it, but it will cost them five sirios a month. Let them choose, and for those that want it, in a couple of years you'll have your money back."

Boyd stared at the SE officer with new respect — his dilemma was solved. He looked at Scarlett, and she smiled encouragingly.

John Bowers

"Very well," he conceded. "I don't personally believe they need it, but under those circumstances I can justify it. I thank you, Captain."

"And I thank you, Boyd," Scarlett bubbled. "You are very sweet." She stood suddenly and turned toward the door. "Captain Davenport?"

* * *

"Let me ask you a question, Captain," Regina Wells said as they walked back to the big house.

"Go ahead."

"You seemed to approve of giving the serfs air conditioning back there."

"Absolutely. That business about brown skin beating the heat is pig shit."

"You have compassion for serfs," she stated. "So why did you rape Kim?"

Jolted, Davenport looked at her quickly.

"I didn't rape her!"

"What would you call it? 'Coerced sexual intercourse'? Please explain the difference to me."

He stopped walking, and they faced each other. No one was in sight, no one could hear them.

"You're speaking as a Feddie now, I take it?"

"I'm speaking as a *woman!*" Her green eyes blazed.

Star Marine

"Okay, I know what you're getting at. But I told you, I've been here since I was fourteen. I was recruited young. My goal became the SE long before I was old enough to vote."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"In case you haven't noticed, the SE controls the slave industry. SE loads the transports on the Centauri systems, on Altair, and Vega. SE oversees the slave transports back to Sirius, SE runs the slave processing centers, and SE regulates the market. SE is the highest authority on the entire fucking planet, with the power to enslave even citizen females! How far do you think I would've got in the organization if I worried about the civil rights of a nonwhite woman?"

"And that makes it all right for you to rape my house girls?"

"Not all right," he corrected. "Necessary."

"*Necessary!* You fucking pervert!"

Davenport flushed and was tempted to slap her, but didn't, in case anyone from the house was watching.

"Look, I didn't come here with the intention of raping anybody. I do it when I have to, because it's part of my cover. But the first time that girl saw me, she reacted to the uniform. The sight of me scared the shit out of her. I saw it in her eyes, and right then I knew I had to do it, because she expected it."

"She *expected* it?" Regina was furious. "That's bullshit!"

John Bowers

"You think so? Fine. We'll leave it at that. But just remember, I'm all you've got. Without me, you're *naked* on this planet!"

He turned and stalked off toward the house, leaving her standing by herself.

Wednesday, 30 September, 0229 (PCC) - Polygon, Washington City, DC, North America, Terra

The Strategy Room was crowded. Wade Palmer was alert, his sleeping schedule somewhat more normal than it had been for some weeks. He sat beside Cdr. Kamada and listened quietly as General Willard delivered his morning recap of the situation on Altair and Alpha Centauri. The news was mixed.

"Altair is going better than we expected," he said, displaying the overhead holomap and adjusting colored markers to illustrate. "The fighter bases on the moons are fully operational, and the fresh squadrons have been very successful against the enemy. They are concurrently engaging enemy fighters and supporting the ground troops. So far, there's been no overt attempt by the Confederates to reinforce Altair, thanks in no small part to the landings on Alpha 2.

"Ground forces have captured most of their objectives so far, and friendly Muslim forces are fighting much better than we expected. Pending further developments, I feel confident we can put Altair to bed for at least a

Star Marine

month. At some point we'll have to get another supply convoy out to them, but there's no immediate need."

He switched holomaps, and Alpha 2 came up. His face hardened as he looked at it.

"Alpha Centauri is another story," he said. "We knew from the beginning it was going to be the more critical battle, and we were right."

He began rattling off reports of the most recent engagements, including casualty figures, objectives won and lost, and the prognosis for continued results.

"We have almost completely occupied the Isthmus of Latia," he said, pointing to one of the more strategic areas near the planet's equator. "Combined forces of Infantry and Star Marines have expanded out from Lucas-ton; that region is entirely in our hands, but Camarrell —" He pointed. "— is proving to be difficult. The Cimarron Mountains form a natural barrier around the city, and the Sirians have dug in. They have a strong presence throughout those mountains, and they're throwing counter assaults against us. It's going to be a tough go."

He turned to look around the room.

"We've been getting more troop convoys in," he said. "The Fighter Service has been extremely successful against enemy interdiction, and we now have just under seven million men on the ground, which brings us almost to parity with the enemy. We also have the ad-

John Bowers

vantage of friendly civilians, who give our men aid whenever possible.

"But there's a complication."

Wade grimaced. He knew what that would be. The battle had been in progress for two weeks, and he was surprised it hadn't happened sooner.

"The enemy is transferring fighter squadrons from Beta Centauri," Willard said. "They're doing just what we're doing — letting their fighters make the jump through hyperspace instead of sending in carriers. At this point, we're not sure if their fighters are coming all the way from Beta, or if they have carriers lying out of range and launching from there. But we do know these new squadrons are *not* based on Alpha 2, because our people have seen them arrive and depart."

He sighed.

"Our own squadrons have taken some serious losses, and we've been rotating them out when their combat efficiency drops below fifty percent. Palmer's idea of sending fresh squadrons out to the carriers has saved us, because we can bring the decimated units out the same way. We have plenty of reserves, but they won't last forever. Sooner or later, we may have to find those enemy carriers and engage them."

He grimaced.

"I'm not sure we're ready for that."

Wade rested his face in his hands. God!

Star Marine

"Nobody said it was going to be easy," Willard said. "When this war started, we knew it was going to be a fight to the death. Alpha 2 is going to be the first real test of our ground forces. If we can take it, and hold it ... " He shrugged. "Well, then we'll know, won't we?"

Wade looked at the map again. It was a big planet, and the blue shading showed the areas under Federation control. It represented less than ten percent of the landmass, and most of that had been captured the first day.

This thing was going to take years.

Camarrell, Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

Rico Martinez cowered in his foxhole, cold, dirty, and tired, wishing he could sleep, completely unable to. After two weeks of ceaseless maneuvering, the 33rd was finally in action again. He was finally getting the experience he'd expected on Titan.

The mountainside looked like a wasteland. Trees had once covered it, but they were mostly gone now, shattered or blown apart by explosives, lasers, and bullets. The terrain was composed of layered ridges, each a few hundred feet higher than the last, stair-stepping up to the final ridge, and beyond that was Camarrell, a fair-sized city valued for its skiing and scenic tourism. Only one major highway led in from the west, and the enemy had it blocked with armor and interlocking artillery fire.

John Bowers

The 3rd Star Marine Division sat astraddle the lower ridges, men clinging precariously to their sides like fleas on a trembling dog. The night was split by flashes as Sirian missiles and artillery cracked across the slopes, the ground heaving with each salvo. White-hot, razor-sharp shrapnel sang through the night. It had been going on for hours, with no sign of relief any time soon.

A few yards away, Lt. Bauer was screaming into a microwave handset.

"Goddammit! I said *twenty-two* degrees, not *twenty*! *Twenty-two* degrees! The fuckers are *killing* us! If you can't hit the bastards, call in a space strike! We can't keep this shit up forever!"

Bauer was hunched over in his shelter, one hand pressed to his ear as he listened to the microwave response. In the flash from an enemy missile Rico saw the grim expression on his face; teeth bared, sweat pouring down his chin.

"That's right!" Bauer shouted. "Yes, sir! Can you do it?"

Federation artillery had been having trouble hitting the Confederate batteries ever since the assault on these ridges began; apparently the enemy used shields similar to those used by spacecraft. Their batteries seemed invincible.

Bauer acknowledged the other end and broke the connection. Enemy fire continued

Star Marine

to rain from the sky; Rico ducked his head and tried to still his nerves. It had to end sooner or later. Next to him, Jeff White sat perfectly still, only the whites of his eyes betraying his terror.

"Hey," he said, and Rico turned toward him. "You been through this before, ain't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been in action."

Rico turned away, feeling guilty.

"Who told you that?"

"I always knew, man."

"You're full of shit."

"No, I ain't. I seen you open your footlocker once, back on Luna. You got a Crimson Cross."

Rico didn't answer. He wasn't aware anyone had seen his medal. The Crimson Cross was awarded to anyone wounded in battle. He'd received it after Titan.

"No, I ain't never seen nothing like this before."

"Then where'd you git the Cross?"

"Found it in a yard sale."

White laughed, an explosive release of tension.

"Bullshit!"

Even above the unending explosions, they heard the passage of Federation missiles overhead, and soon brilliant flashes in the east indicated they'd hit. More missiles passed

John Bowers

over in a steady stream, and the enemy began taking it, too. But the artillery didn't decrease appreciably — either the Fed artillery wasn't hitting its targets, or it was doing no good.

Twenty minutes crawled by. The mountain ridge seemed to convulse with pain. Men continued to die; twice White and Rico were half buried by nearby explosions. Suddenly, out of the west and high in the night sky, Rico heard a peculiarly familiar sound, as if the very air were being ripped by a lasersaw. He looked up, but could see nothing. The sound grew louder.

"Ours!" he shouted, shaking White by the shoulder.

The fighters were in a steep dive toward the east, invisible in the night, but clearly heard even above the din. Rico never saw them, but as they passed overhead their sonic reverberations crashed louder than the enemy fire. The ground trembled anew as massive explosions a few miles to the east turned some of the Sirian positions into a preview of hell, lighting the entire mountain for several seconds.

The Sirian artillery all but stopped, just a few sporadic missiles still dropping.

"Okay, Delta!" Capt. Connor's voice sounded in the headset of every man in the company. "Lock and load! Over the top, let's *go!*"

Rico scrambled to his feet, shook off the dirt, grabbed his weapon, and shrugged into

Star Marine

his backpack. Around him, the rest of Delta did the same. The artillery had been frightening, but at least it had been a break in the action. Now they were on the offensive again. They started toward the top of the ridge in winding files, each platoon forming its own line. Second Squad was in the lead, with Ragsdale on point and Rico just behind the Fearless Fourless.

Rico couldn't see shit. His IR contacts displayed heat sigs, but the ground was still largely invisible. The terrain kept rising, and he plodded along behind the man in front, feeling for each step to keep from stumbling. The air was oppressive, the ridgeline blocking the wind. Sweat trickled inside his fatigues, mixing with grit to form mud, itchy and uncomfortable. The smell of cordite and smoke from burning trees stung his eyes and made him sneeze.

The file wound around a knob on the hillside and into a narrow draw, with sides sloping darkly upward against the night sky. Somewhere to the rear, missiles still exploded ineffectually as what remained of the Sirian batteries continued to fire. But the space strike must have taken out the bulk of them. The draw continued for several hundred yards, twisting and turning without warning. Its rocky floor required careful footing. Rico thought about rattlesnakes, then remembered there were none on Alpha 2.

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"Delta, this is Captain Connor. We're coming to a trench line in a few minutes. Keep your heads down. They'll be watching for us from their bunkers."

Rico's heart quickened, and without thinking he pressed the switch that displayed his rifle's load meter. The magazine was full. Something opened fire to his left. He kept walking, panting lightly as the rattle of small arms increased. He could see the flash of lasers reflected over the side of the draw.

Third Platoon was almost up to the line of bunkers when they blundered into a minefield. Everyone hit the ground simultaneously. Rico heard men scream up ahead as plasma flashed and the night turned to day. *Oh, Jesus! Don't let me step on one of those things!*

Suddenly everything was pandemonium. The exploding mines had alerted the Sirians, and lasers reached out from the bunkers, chipping rock and sending fragments flying. Rico huddled behind a boulder, trembling with excess adrenaline. Jeff White crouched ten feet away, behind a smaller rock.

"Let 'em have it!" Bauer screamed in his headset. "Hit the bunkers! Cover Third Platoon!"

Gritting his teeth, Rico leaned around his boulder and took in the scene. The bunkers were about fifty yards away, poorly defined in the darkness, just black shapes from which pencil lines of lasers flashed. Third Platoon

Star Marine

was fully exposed in the minefield, most of them flat on the ground, illuminated by the smoldering bodies of three men and the dancing beams of Sirian lasers. Rico spotted a laser beam and took aim at its source; he opened fire.

He fired in short bursts of ten or fifteen rounds each, aware that his muzzle flash gave him away, but comforted by the fact that seventy others were doing the same thing, which reduced the odds that a Sirian would fire on him personally. He couldn't tell if his fire was having any effect, but the idea was less to kill individual Sirians than to discourage them from firing on Third Platoon.

The firefight continued for twenty minutes. The men of Third Platoon gradually worked their way out of the minefield, feeling with their hands for the mines, some crawling forward, others back. Two more mines exploded, and Rico was instantly blinded by the flash of plasma, recording retinal images of men writhing in agony, something he would never forget. He blinked away the spots before his eyes, changed magazines, and continued to fire, sweeping the bunkers at the level where the firing ports seemed to be.

Finally, Third Platoon was out of immediate danger, leaving at least a dozen men trapped between the minefield and the bunkers, unable to move either forward or back. Their only defense for the moment was the

John Bowers

cover of darkness. Someone opened up with a laser-sighted missile launcher and put one through the firing port of a bunker. The inside flashed yellow as the missile exploded, and the bunker fell silent. The rest kept up a steady fire.

The minefield was the problem. No one dared move forward, and the trapped Marines couldn't get back. Delta found itself in stalemate for over an hour, until a Fed Engineer platoon moved up from the rear. They were carrying sonic equipment for detecting mines. The Star Marines resumed their grazing fire while a squad of Engineers crawled carefully forward with the sonic mine-busters in hand. It took another hour to clear a path through thirty yards of mines, first detecting and then detonating them. Each detonation looked like a nuclear blast, brilliantly white and painful to the eyes. Two of the Engineers were hit by laser as they worked, but the rest completed the task and placed markers so the Marines could see the path through the mines.

Connor came over the headsets then.

"First Platoon, stand by. When I give the word, you go through the minefield. Get into the trench behind those bunkers, and take them out!"

Christ! Why us?

Rico swallowed rapidly and began to hyperventilate. All he had, besides his rifle, was a bandoleer of grenades. No heavy explosives,

Star Marine

nothing heavy enough to take on a bunker. Jesus!

Connor gave directions to the other platoons as well, and ten minutes later the volume of fire against the bunkers increased dramatically. Missiles from launch tubes crashed against them and the Engineer platoon joined in with heavy machine guns. For six minutes, the firefight raged furiously, the night streaked with return fire from Sirian lasers.

"First Platoon! *Go!*"

Rico forced himself out of cover, sprinting toward the lane through the minefield. He felt completely and totally alone, but thirty other men also converged on the lane, and seven reached it ahead of him. Keeping low, he dashed as fast as he could between the mines, and prayed the Engineer guys hadn't missed any. His heart almost stopped as lasers began to converge like flickering searchlights, and the man immediately in front of him went down. It was Healy, from his squad.

"Keep goin', Beaner! Don't slow down!"

The voice was right on his heels, and Rico recognized it as Maniac. He leaped over Healy and poured on speed. It was the longest thirty yards of his life.

He reached the base of the embankment and dived for cover, landing between two others who'd been ahead of him. A few yards away were three of the trapped men from

John Bowers

Third Platoon, and as more men traversed the narrow lane Rico heard them land heavily along the embankment. Missiles still burst against the bunkers, showering the area with fragments. He panted rapidly, wondering what the hell to do next.

"Second Squad, follow me!"

The voice in his headset was Ragsdale, and he saw the sergeant leap to his feet and claw his way up the embankment toward a gap between two bunkers. Rico decided Rags was crazy — the combined fire of Delta and the Infantry was still sweeping the sides of the bunkers. But Texas leaped up, followed by Tiny and Gearloose, and Rico instinctively followed them, certain he was about to die.

When they were ten feet from the top, the fire from behind them died, and Ragsdale heaved a grenade that soared too far and missed the trench. They went over the top between the bunkers, five abreast, with Maniac, Quince, and White right behind them. Rico opened fire as he cleared the top of the embankment, sweeping his rifle right and left, and then he was inside the trench, surrounded by Sirians, and wondered suddenly what had happened to the others. The Sirians had been keeping their heads down, and were startled to find Star Marines in their midst. Rico's Spandau chattered in terror and he swept from side to side, spattering Sirians across the side of the trench. He heard more

Star Marine

firing behind him, and recognized the familiar sound of the Spandau.

He was fighting by instinct now, too terrified to think. Things seemed to happen without his knowledge or approval; he saw the gaping black hole of a doorway in the nearest bunker, and jerked a grenade off his bandoleer. Pulling the pin, he tossed it inside, then threw another before the first one exploded. The interior flashed red and yellow, he heard screams, but was already running toward the next bunker, twenty yards away. Shapes poured into the trench, just heat sigs in the darkness, and a laser beam cut through the black toward him.

He pulled the trigger again, spraying the trench ahead, but had forgot to change magazines. The Spandau stopped suddenly, and another laser streaked by him, missing by an inch. He dived to the bottom of the trench, grunting loudly with the impact. He peeled another grenade from his bandoleer and threw it, then buried his face in the dirt and let his helmet shield him from the blast. The explosion left him completely deaf, only a shrill ringing in his ears. No fragments had touched him, and he managed to insert another magazine.

No heat sigs were still standing, and Rico leaped to his feet again. Like the last bunker, the door to the next one was also open, and he pulled off more grenades. Someone filled the

John Bowers

doorway and Rico fired; hot blood sprayed over him as the Sirian stumbled backward. Rico loosed the grenades and ducked for cover.

After the blast, he was about to head for the next bunker down the line, but several men with lasers opened fire on him, narrowly missing. He dived through the doorway of the bunker he'd just grenaded, choking on the smoke that still rolled through the starcrete room. The floor was slippery with blood and flesh fragments, fifteen to twenty bodies sprawled in all directions. Three tripod lasers now sat unmanned at the firing ports along the far wall, another lay on its side.

Rico trembled as he plastered himself against the open doorway, listening as Sirians from the next bunker ran to meet the Star Marines in the trench. When they were only seconds away, he began tossing grenades, driving them back.

"Sergeant!" he gasped into his headset, "this is Martinez! I've got the third bunker to the left of where we hit the trench! I need some help down here!"

Ragsdale didn't answer, but Texas did. Rico could barely understand him for the ringing that persisted in his ears.

"I'm headed your way, Beaner! Don't shoot me!"

Thirty seconds later, in spite of laser fire that flickered down the trench from the left,

Star Marine

the Fearless Fourless poured pell-mell into the bunker, slipped on the blood, and landed heavily beside Rico. Gearloose scrambled to his feet in a panic, his fatigues covered with gore.

"Jesus Christ, Martin-ez! You're a god-damned *butcher!* Fucking *shit*, man!"

"Hey, man, nobody told you to roll around in it!" Rico chattered.

They held the bunker for forty-five minutes, driving back another attempt by the Sirians to retake it. With five bunkers in Federation hands, the rest of Delta and the Engineer platoon poured through the minefield and into the trench, pushing the attack in both directions until they met friendly forces from other companies. As dawn peaked over the next ridge to the east, the Sirians had lost all but four of their bunkers. The defenders pulled back while they still had some advantage of darkness, and when full daylight arrived, the ridge was in Federation hands.

But just half a mile to the east was another ridge — a thousand feet higher than this one.

Chapter 32

Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

When the first stellar settlements had been established, some planets had become a homeland of sorts for particular regional and ethnic groups. Altair had become the new galactic center of Islam; Sirius had been settled initially by white supremacists from North America. Vega had been opened up by Scandinavians, French, Italians, and Greeks; Beta Centauri by Russians, Slavs, and Eastern Europeans. Asians and Africans had migrated a little later to Vega and Sirius, though in lesser numbers.

Alpha Centauri had become the first true planetary melting pot, at least by design. Similar to Terra in so many respects, it had almost a generic appeal to those who opted to settle the stars, and became something of an overflow world. The culture and government reflected Terra in almost every way, and though it wasn't a member of the Federation, Alpha 2 was so similar to Terra that it was almost like a sister planet.

Thus, the civilian population of Alpha 2 was clearly pleased to have Federation armies invade and drive out the Sirians. Unfortunately, such an invasion invariably meant a severe loss of life.

Star Marine

As the fighting raged for the first few weeks, the areas under attack were witness to streams of refugees trying to escape the battle zones. A few were fortunate enough to find themselves behind Federation lines, but most were forced to flee the advancing Feddies, deeper into Sirian-held territory. The Sirians didn't try to prevent them; the fewer civilians in a combat zone, the fewer worries for all concerned. There was little fear of sabotage or local resistance — Alpha 2 had never developed a military, a fact that had aided the Confederates when they first invaded in 0220. They'd taken the entire planet in a matter of days.

The first weeks of battle were traumatic on both sides, as no battle lines were clearly drawn. The Federation had landed in force in a hundred places, spreading like a virus as they sought to expand their gains. Losses were fearful, especially as space battles screamed through the upper atmosphere and orbital space, but by the fifth week of the campaign, things had begun to jell. The Federation held twelve percent of the landmass, and the Sirians began a concerted effort to reduce that toehold.

Sirian space power from Beta Centauri kept the pressure on the Federation fleet, making it increasingly difficult to reinforce and re-supply the assault forces.

John Bowers

**Tuesday, 27 October, 0229 (PCC) - Polygon,
Washington City, DC, North America, Terra**

Wade Palmer spent several hours each day in the War Room. Fresh signals constantly updated the situation, the holomaps changing hour to hour. Camarrell had been taken after several days of brutal combat, and other cities had been surrounded or penetrated. But in other places — in particular the central continent — Sirian counterattacks had all but destroyed the Federation Infantry units fighting there. The situation in space fluctuated almost hourly.

For good news, the Sirian presence on Altair was weakening. The Muslims had taken charge of their own war of liberation, and Federation armies were now little more than a support force. Fighter Service squadrons had virtually eliminated the Sirian fighter fleet; Wade no longer worried about Altair.

But Alpha 2 nagged him constantly. He even dreamed about it. Each setback upset his stomach; he almost felt the battles were his personal responsibility.

General Willard seemed almost pessimistic lately. Supply convoys were having increasing difficulty getting through, and no fresh troops had been landed in more than two weeks. The enemy still enjoyed numerical superiority on the ground, and with years of training behind them, the Confederates were fighting even better than anyone had expected.

Star Marine

Meetings were held every day in the Strategy Room, but the bulk of Wade's time was spent reviewing statistics and battle maps, trying to figure the best way to gain even the smallest advantage. Hundreds of other planners were doing the same.

On 27 October, Rear Admiral Boucher called a meeting of his own staff to review the current situation and talk it through, in the hopes of someone having a brilliant idea.

"The battle is not lost," Boucher said by way of opening the meeting. "We are not losing, but we also are not winning. At least, we are not winning as quickly as we would like. The enemy is fighting very 'ard."

The discussion went on for some time, several people making observations, offering suggestions — and generally arriving back at the starting point.

"Palm-air, do you have something?" Boucher frowned at Wade with his peculiar narrow-eyed stare.

Wade shook his head slowly.

"The problem now is fighter support from Beta Centauri," he said. "If we could reduce that, we could get more troops through to Alpha 2. But there's no way to do it. We still only have the five carriers, and they're operating around the clock. Our squadrons are strained already."

Boucher nodded. Nothing new there.

John Bowers

"I think," Wade went on, "maybe it's time to start basing our squadrons on Alpha 2."

Several people nodded, including Kamada, but Boucher looked troubled.

"General Will-aird is opposed to that idea at this stage," he said. "Many of the bases 'ave been so badly damaged that they cannot support our fighters. And with Sirian space power growing as it is, our fighters would be subject to destruction on the ground."

"I understand that, Admiral. But our fighters still have a twelve-hour round trip every time they go into battle. Even with our overlapping schedules and rotations from the Solar System, they're flying fewer missions than they're capable of. And think about this — if we base, say, fifty squadrons on Alpha 2, we can replace them in the order of battle with fresh squadrons from home. That will increase our fighter cover by fifty squadrons."

"Not only that," interrupted Beck, "but squadrons based on the planet will take fewer losses than they do now. They won't already be tired when they reach the action. I dare say we'll notice a ten percent drop in losses, maybe more."

"Beck is right," Wade said. "Another advantage is that we can give the ground troops closer support than we do now. Since the enemy has been bringing in fighters from beyond the system, we've been increasingly

Star Marine

inadequate on ground support. I really think it's time, sir."

Boucher polled his staff, and most of them agreed — it was time to start basing Fed fighters on the ground.

"I will take this recommendation to General Willard," Boucher said reluctantly. "I do not believe he will agree, however."

The meeting broke up. An hour later Cdr. Kamada called Wade into his office.

"General Willard was quite upset with the admiral," he said. "He said he won't put our fighters on the ground so they can be destroyed like sitting ducks. He also suggested that we aren't using our heads, if we can't come up with a better solution."

Wade looked at Kamada in alarm. As always, Kamada was expressionless.

"With all respect to General Willard," he said, "we're stretched pretty goddamned thin right now! What the hell does he want from us?"

Kamada tilted his head in warning.

"Careful, Palmer. Don't let anyone else hear you talk like this."

"Sorry, Commander, but — dammit, there's nothing wrong with the idea. Sure, there's some risk of space attack against our ships on the ground, but that's what Ladar is for. It's even more risky to keep sending them across six hours of warp space the way we're doing

John Bowers

now, while the odds keep increasing in the enemy's favor!"

"I agree completely. But General Willard doesn't. We have to find another solution. Any more ideas?"

Wade held up his hands helplessly, then let them drop.

"No. That was it. I'm fresh out."

"Okay. Go home and get drunk. Maybe you'll find the answer then."

Wade snorted. "I'm not the only planner, you know. At last count there were about a thousand others."

"Yes, but you've had all the good ideas lately." Kamada grinned. "I'll see you tomorrow. Go home."

Alpha 2, Alpha Centauri System

Rico didn't know the name of the place, but he was glad to be there. The 33rd had just returned from the line after nearly four continuous weeks of action. Delta Company had taken thirty percent losses, and Second Squad was down to seven men. Quince had been killed days earlier, and Roberson wounded; the latter had just returned, giving Jesus all the credit for his survival.

"The whole armor of God," he told anyone who would listen. "I tell you, fellas, you've got to give your hearts to the Lord."

"Didn't stop a laser, did it?" Texas pointed out.

Star Marine

"I'm alive, Graves. Don't you get it? A millimeter to either side and I wouldn't be!"

"Yeah, you told us already!" Maniac said. "Let's go get laid."

They were in a small town a few miles from an ocean. Alpha Prime had just set, and the air was fresh with sea breeze. Rico was tired but exuberant. His luck had changed for sure; after Titan, he'd privately wondered if he was a marked man. But he'd just been through some hellacious combat, and was still around to talk about it.

"Hey, Lieutenant!" Maniac had spotted Bauer a few yards away, talking to the quartermaster. "Which way to the pink ladies?"

Bauer glanced in his direction, but ignored him until he completed his conversation. First Platoon stood around wearily, waiting for directions. A minute later, Bauer strode toward them.

"No pink ladies until you guys get cleaned up," he said. "Follow me, men."

He led them to their temporary billet, a row of tents set up to house itinerant soldiers, and assigned them housing by squads. He showed them where to find the water showers and the mess tent, then finally admitted that pink ladies were available.

"The 41st Domestic Detachment is expecting you," he said. "But nobody gets admitted

John Bowers

without a shower and a shave. Any questions?"

"How long will they wait for us, sir?" Gearloose asked worriedly.

"Until you get there. They have girls on duty all night. Take your time, make yourselves smell good, and make damned sure you clean your teeth." He grinned and turned away.

Rico staked out a rack, a low metal bunk with a thin mattress — technology several hundred years old — and tossed his backpack onto it. He kept his rifle as he headed for the showers, and spent nearly an hour under the hot water. He was unable to remove all the dirt that had accumulated over the weeks, but did the best he could. At least he *felt* clean, and refreshed. He accompanied White to the mess tent and they ate hot food for the first time in days.

"You gonna visit the girls?" White grinned at him as they ate.

"I dunno. I never do that much."

"Yeh, I noticed. Back on Luna you hardly ever went. How come?"

"I dunno. Doesn't really seem right. I mean, what if they get knocked up?"

"You kiddin'? Didn't nobody never tell you? They're hypnoed! They can't git knocked up."

Rico had known that, but didn't say so.

"Just the same," he said, "I never felt right about it."

Star Marine

White finished his meal and pushed his tray aside.

"Well, do what you want. Me, I figure I might not come out the other side of this war. Could be the last chance I'll ever git. I never turn it down."

Rico grinned. "Yeah, I noticed."

Texas, sitting a few chairs away, had apparently been listening.

"Hey, Knee Grow — you know the definition of a Latin lover?"

White broke into a toothy grin.

"No, Texas. Tell me."

Texas smiled, and winked at Rico. "Just a fuckin' Mexican!"

Walking back to his billet afterward, Rico breathed deeply of the fresh ocean air, enjoying the sensations of just being alive. He walked slowly, looking up at the night sky. Alpha 2's only moon was in full phase, casting a silver glow across the ground. It was a beautiful evening, so far from home. A romantic evening.

Rico sighed. He'd never been much good with girls, even though Texas teased him about being a Latin lover. He'd had a girl friend briefly in high school, but it hadn't been serious. He'd enlisted less than a year later, and the Star Marines didn't afford many opportunities for romance. He would much prefer to share an evening like this with a girl he cared about, but maybe White was right.

John Bowers

They were light years from home, might never get back, and — what the hell? Biology made its demands whether one had a special girl or not.

Twenty minutes later he located the camp street where the 41st Domestic Detachment was located. It looked like the rest of the camp, just a row of tents stretching off down the street. The only difference was the sign in front of the tent, which proclaimed it as unit headquarters, like the lobby in a hotel, and the small red lanterns that glowed at the entrance to each tent on the street.

Feeling ill at ease, he removed his helmet and stepped into the first tent. Two other men were already there, getting set up. They left a moment later, and the woman behind the makeshift desk smiled at Rico.

"Hi, there, Star Marine! Are you from the 33rd, too?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Rico's face felt hot. The woman was middle-aged, yet she was petite and attractive. The front of her uniform was unbuttoned halfway down, and he could see white cleavage pressing upward, begging to be noticed. She wore light makeup and some kind of dizzying perfume. Her hair was a light silver, soft and feathery. She looked beautiful.

"Can I see your datatag, please?" she smiled. He lifted it from around his neck and handed it to her. As she scanned it, she talked to him as if they were old friends. "Sounds

Star Marine

like you fellows just got back from a hell of a fight," she said. "We sure do appreciate the job you Star Marines are doing. Here you go."

She handed the tag back to him, and he strung it around his neck. She was smiling again.

"We have quite a few girls available at the moment," she said. "Do you have any preference? Blonde, brunette ... ?"

Rico's tongue slid uncertainly over his lips.

"You, uh, got any Spanic girls?"

"Yes, of course we do. Several. Would you like to meet them?"

"Um, any one will be okay, I guess." He felt squeamish putting it like that. "Just whoever is available."

She smiled again, trying to put him at ease.

"Tent number 11. Her name is Lupe. I think you'll like her." She handed him a slip of paper from her printer, and he thanked her, then backed toward the entrance. "Oh, by the way —" She winked at him. "We're not very busy tonight. Take your time."

Number 11 was on the left, sitting quiet and dark amid all the other tents that looked just like it. The red lantern glowed dimly, and he hesitated a moment before entering. His nerves sang with an apprehension every bit as strong as what he felt in battle, though it was a different kind of fear. He forced a deep breath and stepped through the entrance to the tent.

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The interior was so dark he didn't see her at first. The only light came from a small blue lamp just inside the doorway. She stood to one side of a very sturdy hoverbed, which was trimmed in pink lace, and she was wearing a negligee, the top half hanging several inches clear of her stomach, held away from her body by the swell of her breasts. Rico stared at her in wonder for a few seconds, and belatedly removed his helmet again.

She was staring at him, dark and sultry. He couldn't see her face clearly, but could tell she was stunning. A figure like in a pornographic holomag, long black hair that fell in thick, gentle waves down her back. Full, sensuous lips, and large, beautiful brown eyes. Her age was impossible to guess, but he estimated her to be around twenty.

She moved sensuously toward him; "slunk" would be a better word. He could smell her perfume before she reached him, and his mouth suddenly felt dry. She reached for his printout and filed it in a box with several others, never taking her eyes from his face. She slid her arms around his neck, pressing her full breasts against him.

"¿*Como te llamas?*" she murmured.

"Rico," he gulped. "¿*Y tu?*"

"*Yo soy Lupe,*" she breathed, and fastened her full, sexy lips onto his mouth.

Rico hadn't realized how badly he needed it. Her sensuality was almost magnetic, and