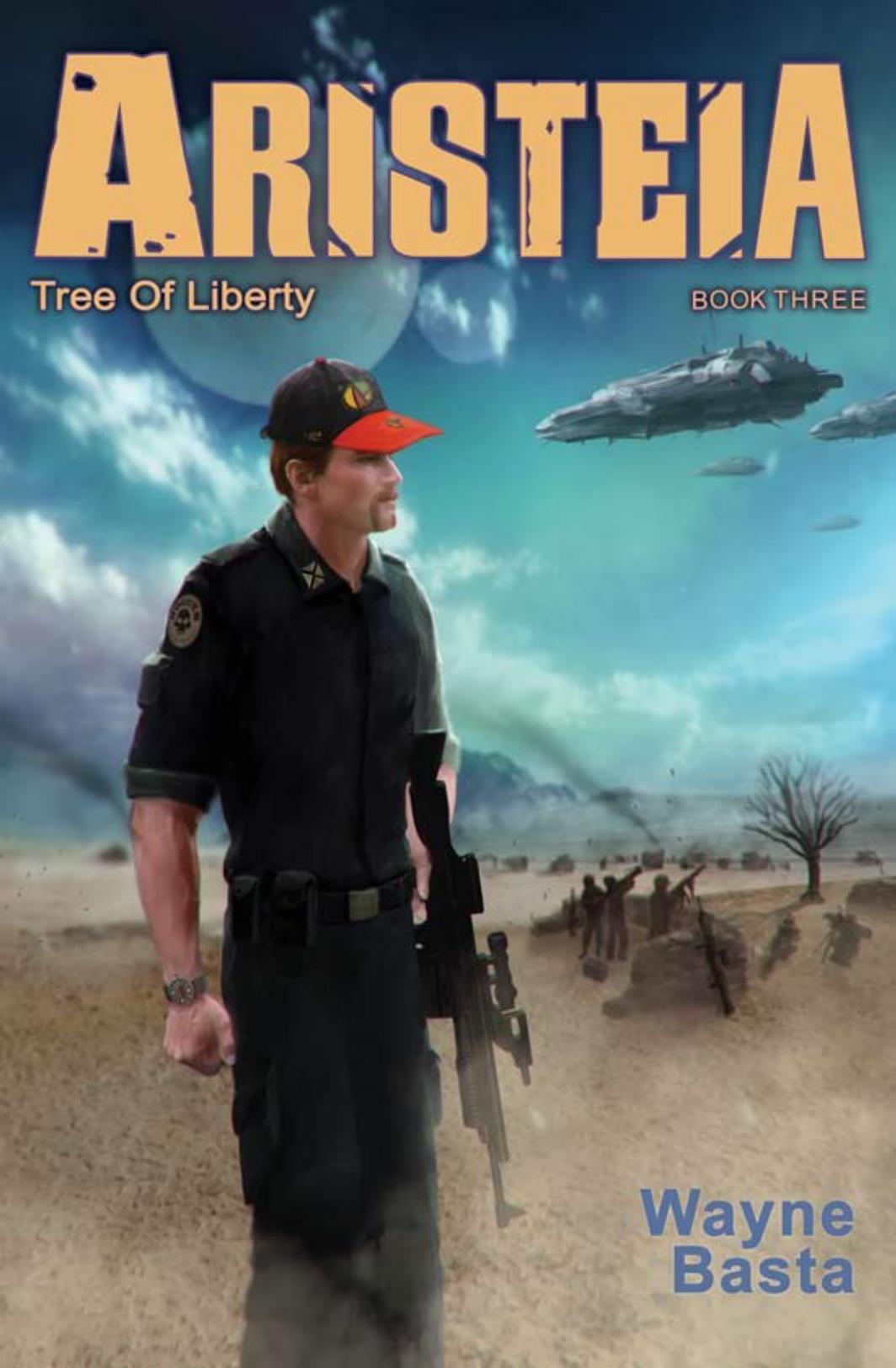


ARISTEIA



Tree Of Liberty

BOOK THREE

Wayne
Basta

ARISTEIA

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TREE OF LIBERTY

BY WAYNE BASTA



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To Eric, Beth, Chad and Liesl.

Great friends in any universe.

“The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”

--Thomas Jefferson

PROLOGUE

Pain. That was the first thought that came to Maarkean Ocaitchi's mind. His entire body ached. Welts and bruises covered every part of him. If he could have seen himself in a mirror, he felt sure his purple clan screfa would have been indistinguishable from the bruising on his face.

With difficulty, Maarkean forced himself to sit up. He had no idea how long ago he had been brought back to his cell. It could have been minutes or days. But he did know the longer he lay still, the more he would hurt later. That just meant he had to hurt a lot right now.

Forcing himself to resist the urge to collapse back onto the cell's cot, Maarkean slowly started to ease into the Ni'jar stretching techniques he usually started his morning with. After all the abuse his body had been put through at the hands of the Alliance interrogators, even simple stretches were agonizing. It was only the combination of his Braz tradition for meditation along with the advanced Ni'jar techniques that Gu'od had taught him that allowed him to push through the pain.

After completing his usual routine, Maarkean felt some semblance of personhood returning. He had lost track of the number of times he had woken up like this—the number of interrogation sessions he had been through. Even if he had managed to count them, he had no way of knowing how often they occurred. He'd lost all sense of time in this world of interrogation, torture, and pain.

The meditation and stretching allowed him to push the constant throbbing into the background of his mind. This allowed his sense of hunger to emerge. Looking around the small cell, he saw a bowl near

the barred door. Picking up the bowl, he started slurping the foul-tasting goo. Alliance nutrition mix—standard fare for prisoners.

The goo tasted horrible, but it did serve to calm his stomach. Feeling better than he had in a while, Maarkean surveyed his surroundings again. His cell looked like a standard Alliance brig cell, like those found on any Alliance warship or station. The accommodations were sparse: a simple, double-bunk cot built into the wall, along with a retractable toilet and wash station, and three walls. The ceiling and floor were smooth metal with no visible seams. The other wall was a set of metal bars too close together for anyone to slip through, but wide enough to allow people outside to observe him.

It was only now that Maarkean noticed the other figure resting on the upper cot. Looking up, he recognized the green carapace as belonging to Lohcja Cargon. Ronids didn't bruise the same way most other species did, so any injuries he had sustained weren't as evident. Except for the antennae bent at an unnatural angle, his friend looked like he was just sleeping.

He considered allowing Lohcja to continue resting. The Alliance tended any of their life-threatening wounds, but sleep would be their best treatment for the rest. However, he had only seen Lohcja in the cell with him on a few occasions, and those hadn't lasted long. It wouldn't be long before the Alliance came and took one or both of them to another interrogation session.

"Lohcja," Maarkean said quietly, gently touching the Ronid's arm.

A rasping hiss escaped Lohcja's lips, and then he clicked his mandibles together a few times before going quiet again. With no eyelids covering his multifaceted eyes, it was not easy to tell if Lohcja had woken up. Maarkean gently shook his friend a few more times.

Finally, with a longer groaning rasp, Lohcja stirred. "Maark?" He groaned.

"Yeah, it's me. How you holding up?"

"By the looks of you, better than you," Lohcja quipped.

That was good, Maarkean thought. His friend's sense of humor hadn't completely vanished. He tried to smile, realizing for the first time that even that hurt. "I don't have a tough carapace to absorb all the blows," Maarkean said.

"If only they would hit my carapace, I'd be fine," Lohcja said, struggling to sit up. He looked around the small cell. "How long have we been here? I've lost count of the number of times they've taken me."

“So have I,” Maarkean replied. “But it must have been a lot. They’ve stopped asking me any questions. They’re just torturing me now.”

Lohcja let out an angry-sounding noise with his mandibles. “Why would they need to ask us any questions? Kaars will tell them everything.”

Maarkean shook his head. “I don’t know Kaars all that well, but he’s a trained intelligence officer. He’ll hold up against the interrogation better than we will.”

A thud sounded through the cell as Lohcja slammed his fist into the wall. Maarkean turned to look at the Ronid, surprised to see anger overtake the previous expression of pain—and a Ronid from the warrior caste was not something you wanted to see angry.

“They don’t need to interrogate him!” Lohcja fumed. “He’s a traitor. I trusted him and called him my friend. And he betrayed us.”

Maarkean frowned. Having a traitor in their midst would explain how the Alliance had ambushed them over Sulas. They had jumped out of hyperspace at the perfect time to trap the Union fleet as they had headed toward the planet.

But the Alliance fleet was commanded by Admiral Katerina Sartori. Her reputation for cunning and tactical savvy was unmatched. Even the Dotran Confederacy respected her. Maarkean would not put it past Sartori pulling off that trick without the help of a traitor.

“We can’t jump to any conclusions. Especially in here,” Maarkean cautioned.

“Yes, we can,” Lohcja fumed. “While the *Defiant Glory* was being boarded, we were pinned down, but holding our own. And then Kaars quite literally shot you in the back. He took out you, Davidus, and me. After that, I assume the Alliance marines were able to gain control of the ship.”

Maarkean considered that chilling bit of news. The information that Kaars had provided the Union military had been invaluable. But it had also been their main source of intelligence.

“Well, even if you’re right, he can’t do any more damage now,” Maarkean said, leaning against the cell wall. “He’s back with the Alliance, but there isn’t much he can tell them. Our fleet’s destroyed and our army likely wiped out or stranded on Sulas. Nothing he can tell them will likely make that worse. He shouldn’t have known the location of Irod.”

"Maybe," Lohcja said grumpily. "But I don't see anyone else in those other cells. Where's Commander Brieni? Tadashio? La'ari? Any of the crew? Why keep us separate? Unless they're all dead."

"No," Maarkean said defiantly. "They can't all be dead. We're senior commanders. They're probably keeping the rest in a different facility."

Lohcja just shrugged. "It doesn't matter anyway. We lost."

Forcefully, Maarkean whirled toward Lohcja. "We haven't lost. Don't ever think that. Things are bad, yes. But we're alive. Congress is still safe. The Union will live on."

Those multifaceted eyes of Lohcja's stared up at him. Maarkean wished he could find some sense of what the Ronid was thinking there. But he got nothing from them, and Lohcja said nothing in reply.

The sounds of a door opening drew Maarkean's attention away. He turned back toward the cell door to see several Alliance guards outside. They held stun weapons and binders and didn't look friendly.

A junior lieutenant pointed toward Maarkean. "He looks to have recovered nicely. Take him."

The guards opened the cell door and came for him again.

"We have our orders from General Ocaitchi," Major Solyss Novastar stated, his voice rising above his normally quiet tone. "I intend to take the *Gallant* to Trepon Sector and get us the *Black Market*."

"That's crazy!" Major Fracsid Relis yelled back. "We need to hit the Alliance here. Raid their supply lines. Cut off communication. Keep them unbalanced."

Saracasi Ocaitchi remained quiet while the other two majors argued. They had had this debate more than once. She was tired of it. Fortunately, this time it was not just the three of them.

Sitting beside them in the small conference room in the UDF Inc. Headquarters building on Kol were Intelligence Officer Kaars Aerinstar and Delegates Lahkaba, Valinther, Zoeko Lide, and Lionell Mandrake. She had sent a report to the Union congress as soon as *Defiant Glory* had arrived in the orbit of Sulas under command of the suspected traitor Davidus Brieni. They had finally sent a response after several weeks, in the form of the delegates. They hadn't yet given an answer as to who would take over command of the military.

"We need to figure out who's in command," Solyss said, looking pointedly toward Lahkaba. "Then we can avoid these pointless arguments."

“First,” Saracasi said, speaking for the first time, “we need to have a trial for Commander Brieni and find out if he’s guilty of betraying us. If he isn’t, then he’s in charge.”

Valinther said, “That will not be a quick process. Congress has convened a committee to investigate any possible traitors. Unfortunately, the membership is still being chosen.”

Saracasi looked at the Kowwok, confused. “I thought that was what you four were here for.”

Lahkaba shook his head, sand sprinkling out from his white fur. “No, we’re just here to relay that Congress is looking into Brieni and will decide on a new commander in due time. We have a different mission. One we’re going to need a ship for.”

Lahkaba shared an embarrassed look with his fellow Kowwok, Valinther. Both looked ashamed of something, and Saracasi didn’t think it was Congress being slow. She waited for Lahkaba to expand on his statement, but he said nothing more. Zoeko gave the two Kowwoks an aggravated hiss but also said nothing.

Finally, Solyss asked, “What kind of ship?”

“The best we have,” Lahkaba answered. “I don’t wish to take the *Gallant* away from her mission, though. I think you should carry on with your attempt to gain support in that sector and to get us the use of the *Black Market*.”

Solyss smiled, but Saracasi interjected, “We can’t divide our forces! We’re seriously outnumbered. We need every ship we have to try to relieve our forces on Sulas and to rescue General Ocaitchi.”

Regret was evident on Lahkaba’s face when he looked at her. She decided to press forward on that. “When I was imprisoned, my brother risked everything to get me out. Now I have to do the same. With your help, he succeeded. Will you give me yours now to get him out?”

The white fur covering Lahkaba flattened and his shoulders drooped. Saracasi could tell she was getting through to him. She needed all the support she could get if she was going to take on the Alliance.

“I want to free Maarkean, Casi. Believe me, I do. Lohcja is still a prisoner as well, and he’s like a brother to me. I know what you’re feeling,” Lahkaba said.

Before Lahkaba could relent, Zoeko spoke, her Dotran voice a hiss. “We cannot engage the Alliance yet. General Numba made that mistake already. We need more support. Our mission to the Confederacy must go forward.”

Saracasi felt her eyes widen as the golden Dotran spoke. A mission to seek aid from the Dotran Confederacy? Maarkean had told her that the Dotrans had offered to take the worlds of the Kreogh sector under their protection. The recent vote for independence had been partially aimed at stopping that endeavor.

"You can't be serious," Fracsid stammered.

"I agree," Solyss said. "We cannot trade one master for another."

The regretful expression on Lahkaba's face shifted to determination. "We won't! That's why I have to go. We're seeking aid and an alliance. Not submission. We'll remain independent." Less forcefully, he continued, "But the fact remains, we need ships, troops, and equipment. The Dotran have those. Our goal is a trade and defense treaty, not to join them. A similar effort has been dispatched to the Camari Republic."

Saracasi let this news sink in. An alliance with the Dotran? What would her brother say? He would hate it, she felt sure. But if Lahkaba, whose Kowwokian people were subjugated by the Dotran, could go along with it, surely she could, too?

"In order to make a strong impression, we want to take our strongest ship. I believe that's this FX-21, that you're now calling the *Audacious*," Zoeko continued.

Before Saracasi could say anything in response, Kaars Aerinstar spoke up. "That would be foolish. The regenerative shield technology on that ship is years ahead of anything the Confederacy has. We can't risk it falling into their hands."

Saracasi nodded. "I agree. And besides that, her hyperdrive still isn't working 100%. She'll never make a journey of that distance."

"How about *Defiant Glory*?" Lahkaba asked, cutting off a comment from Zoeko.

"Repairs are underway," Saracasi said. "She was pretty banged up in the battle. We had to completely rebuild the main reactor. But she'll fly now. We're just about done with the exterior repairs, though there's quite a bit of internal work to be done."

"Good, she'll do," Lahkaba stated decisively. "It's almost a three-month journey to Confederate space. Repairs can be completed en route."

Saracasi wanted to stage a counter-attack on Sulas. But if *Defiant Glory* and *Gallant* went across the galaxy on missions to seek aid, any hope of a major assault was gone. She'd need every ship to pull that off.

"I'm not authorizing *Defiant Glory* to leave the repair yards," Saracasi said, trying to work as much authority into her voice as possible.

Lahkaba looked at her, an expression of regret on his face. "Casi, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to overrule you."

She shook her head vehemently. "You can't. Congress can decide who's in charge of the navy. But I'm the chief engineer, and certifying ships for deployment is my responsibility. Not even Maarkean could override my decision on that. He could only replace me. And until the navy has a new commander, there's no one who can do that."

The expression of regret on Lahkaba's face changed to betrayal. Saracasi regretted having to come down against him so forcefully, but she couldn't let him take *Defiant Glory* away for almost six months.

"I'm going to have to agree with her, Delegate," Solyss said. "She has that authority."

"Very well," Lahkaba said slowly. "We'll have to find civilian transport. That will be all, Majors."

Formally, Lahkaba stood, followed by the other three delegates, and left the room. Feeling like she had betrayed a friend, Saracasi leaned back in her chair with a slight frown on her face. After a moment, the room was emptied of everyone but the three remaining navy majors.

"Thank you, Solyss," Saracasi said. "I didn't like having to do that. I'm glad you had my back."

Solyss nodded. "Of course. I hope that means you'll have my back for my trip to Trepon. *Gallant's* not in the repair yards, so you can't stop me, but I'd prefer going with your support."

With a reluctant sigh, Saracasi nodded. "Let me know what you'll need. I hate to lose the ship when we need everything we have. But it looks like it's just you and me, Fracsid."

"That will be enough," Fracsid said with a confident smile. "The Lis and Ocait clans can take on the entire Alliance."

Saracasi whispered, "We may have to."

CHAPTER ONE

The explosion shattered the window above Zeric's head. *Oops*, he thought. *That wasn't intentional*. In the distance, he could just make out the light from the fire started by the explosion.

"Looks like Gu'od made his delivery," Zeric commented to the Ter-ran boy beside him.

Kumus Stryker smiled. "You said he wouldn't disappoint, General."

The reverence with which Kumus said his title still made Zeric uncomfortable. Despite having been a general for more than two months, most of that time in command of the stranded Union Army on Sulas, he still hated it. To be fair, Kumus had acted the same way when the boy had been his aide back on Enro.

Several more minutes went by, and Zeric's initial pleasure faded. By all rights, Gu'od Dos'redna, their designated bomb planter for the evening, should have made it back to them before the thing went off, taking an Alliance troop carrier with it. That the fires had already started to dwindle and there was no sign of Gu'od meant something had delayed him.

Glancing around, Zeric frowned and then nodded, making his decision. "Something's happened. We need to go look for Gu'od."

Before he could stand up, the reddish-pink Camari in their group put a hand on his arm. Speaking quietly, to avoid Kumus hearing, she said, "Sir, I don't mean to be crass, but Gu'od knew the risks. We can't risk your capture—or anyone else's—just because he's your friend. The mission was a success. We should pull back."

"You know the motto, Major, 'leave no one behind,'" Zeric replied, just as quietly. Then, louder, he spoke to the small band that was hid-

den in the alley with him. “Fan out in pairs, try to find Gu'od, but stay out of sight. The Alliance will be sending out patrols. We have five minutes to find him, and then we need to pull back. Let's be sure we don't do it without him.”

The small squad of six mixed marines and army, including Kumus, quietly acknowledged the order and spread out from the alley entrance. Zeric led Ymp down the dark street, heading toward a cross street that would give them access to the main avenue leading out of town. That road would give them a clear line of sight to the Alliance blockade that Gu'od had just bombed.

Zeric and Ymp walked the streets briskly, trying to remain unseen but also inconspicuous. While there was an Alliance-enforced curfew in effect, few citizens would report on others just walking the streets at night. But two people creeping through the shadows with guns drawn would elicit comments.

While they walked, Zeric kept expecting Ymp to comment on his decision. To her credit, she remained silent. Ymp had no hesitation about challenging every decision he made, but when the mission was on, she had his back. That was an assessment he never would have imagined making a year ago, when he still thought she wanted him dead.

They reached the intersection, and Zeric moved in against the edge of the nearest building. Peeking around the corner, he spotted the floodlights from the Alliance checkpoint. A burned-out hulk that had once been an Alliance SPC still smoldered about twenty meters away from the checkpoint where the Alliance forces had parked it.

The shockwave from their crude homemade bomb had been enough to topple the temporary hut and one of the floodlight stands. Alliance troops were buzzing around the area, a few of them tending wounded on the ground. Zeric was too far away to make out any details, so he had no idea if any of the injured was Gu'od.

As he watched, a group of figures emerged from between two buildings further down the street. Four figures guided another one between them, heading toward the checkpoint. With them in the shadows, he still couldn't make out any details, but Zeric felt confident that the middle figure was Gu'od, as he appeared to be holding his hands above his head.

Zeric drew his carbine out from under his coat and started to step around the corner.

Ymp once again reached out a hand and restrained him. Camari fingers were typically fairly limp and tentacle-like, but she made them go rigid, exerting enough force to stop him.

He once again cast a dark look at the Camari. "We've already been over this, Ymp," Zeric grumbled.

"Looking for Gu'od is one thing. The two of us charging an Alliance checkpoint that was just bombed is another," Ymp said matter-of-factly.

Zeric started to argue but stopped himself. Ymp was right. With the entire squad, they'd have a good chance at taking out the checkpoint. But reinforcements were undoubtedly on their way. Having another SPC full of troops roll up while they were in the middle of a firefight would not get them anywhere.

Another pair of figures appeared across the main avenue from them, crouching against the building just as they were. In the dim light from a nearby streetlamp, Zeric was able to make out Sergeant Obod Ocif and Kumus. The sight of the other two made him smile. He leaned in and whispered to Ymp, "Now it's not just the two of us."

To his surprise, she gave him a wicked grin. "I was thinking the same thing."

Gesturing to Obod across the street, Zeric signaled for them to target the Alliance troopers on their side. He then held up his hand, with all five fingers displayed. Ticking them off in a rhythmic pattern, he dropped his hand when he had two remaining, allowing himself and the others to finish the count in their heads. Lining up the sight on his carbine, Zeric aimed at the trooper on the right.

Two, one . . . Zeric counted and then pulled the trigger, unleashing three quick shots. Ymp did the same, and all six blasts hit the troopers they targeted. One of the other troopers dropped at the same time, leaving only one Alliance trooper guarding the figure.

Not wasting any time, the figure immediately lashed out, stripping away the gun and dropping the trooper to the ground. He then dashed toward the safety of the surrounding buildings. Zeric still couldn't tell if it was definitely Gu'od, but he felt sure he recognized the man's fluid fighting style. Either way, if the Alliance hadn't captured Gu'od, then they had surely grabbed an unlucky civilian and would have placed the blame for the explosion on his shoulders.

Shouts came from the damaged Alliance checkpoint and the floodlamps were redirected down the street. Zeric became momentarily blinded as one beam of light flashed in his face. He ducked back around

the corner of the building. As he and Ymp took off down the street at a dead run, the sounds of blaster fire could be heard behind them.

Despite the sounds of gunfire, Zeric smiled. For the first time in a long while, he felt alive.

"I still don't understand why you have to go."

"Because we need Congress to name a commander for the naval forces so we can finally start fighting back against the Alliance," Saracasi snapped. The question from Asirzi grated at Saracasi's nerves. They had discussed her need to go to Irod several times, but now she had to make a decision. She had a duty to perform.

They pair of them were in Saracasi's quarters in the barracks of the UDF shipyards. Saracasi was in the midst of packing all of her belongings into a duffle bag. No matter what the results of this meeting on Irod, she had nearly made up her mind not to return here at all.

"But why *you*?" Asirzi demanded. "You're an engineer. You should be here working on more ships. Let Fracsid command."

"I can't. It has to be me. Fracsid is a good smuggler and a good gunship commander, but he's no admiral," Saracasi said.

"And you are?" Asirzi said, her tone disbelieving.

"I'm the closest thing we've got. Aside from Dav, but, unfortunately, we can't trust him. But I've been trained by him and Maarkean. I'm the best we've got."

"That's rather conceited, don't you think?" Asirzi said, bitter truth in her tone.

Throwing her last spare uniform into the duffle bag, Saracasi zipped it up and then turned her back to Asirzi. Things had been cold between them since the battle against the Alliance task force more than two months before. During that battle, Saracasi had decided she had to become what she feared, and what Asirzi didn't want her to become: a warrior.

She had destroyed an entire Alliance escort carrier with several hundred people onboard. She had killed unknown numbers of others when she had almost destroyed a corvette. There was no going back now. She had fought, she had killed, and she had to do so again. Asirzi couldn't seem to understand that.

The fight was helping her to make up her mind. It would be best for Saracasi to make her new home aboard *Defiant Glory*, leaving Asirzi behind. She had flirted with the idea of taking her aboard, but she had

dismissed it almost as quickly. Asirzi was good at her job with Chavatwor, but she had nothing useful to do aboard a warship. Saracasi couldn't justify taking her lover aboard when no one else could.

"Maybe it is conceited," Saracasi said. "But it doesn't change the facts. And the facts are that I have to go and that my duty may not allow me to return anytime soon."

A tense silence filled the air between them. Neither woman looked directly at the other. After it seemed Asirzi wouldn't say any more, Saracasi picked up her bag and started for the door.

Before she reached it, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Not sure if she wanted to turn to face her, Saracasi allowed herself to be stopped. She reached up and covered Asirzi's hand with her own.

To her back, Asirzi said, "You said before that you were worried what fighting would do to you—that it would change you. I'm just worried that if you walk out that door, even if you survive, you'll never really come back."

Saracasi felt tears start to well up in her eyes. A part of her knew that what Asirzi said might be true. She felt no regret for the people she had been forced to kill so far in the war. Before the war, she would never have thought herself capable of that. And until recently, she had actively tried to avoid finding out.

The urge to turn around, to embrace and kiss Asirzi, almost overwhelmed her. More than anything, she wanted to allow herself that one indulgence. But it wouldn't be fair for Asirzi to sit around waiting for her. The odds were high she would be killed in combat anyway. It would be better for both of them if they accepted that.

"Then we'll just have to say that I'm dead, and that this is goodbye. Any me you see in the future will be a different person," Saracasi forced herself to say.

The sound of a sob forced back came from behind her and the hand on her shoulder slipped away. Not sure what she would do if she had to look Asirzi in the eyes, Saracasi strode through the door, not looking back.

Once in the corridor, tears started to stream down her face. She stopped in the building's stairwell, letting herself feel the sadness for a moment. For a short time, she had let herself believe the fantasy that she might live happily ever after with Asirzi. In a different time and place, they could have been together. But now, she had to be married to winning this war above all else.

The sound of a door opening on the stairwell above her brought Saracasi back to the present. She was the senior officer on this base. It wouldn't be good for anyone to see her crying in a stairwell. Wiping away the tears, she continued down to the ground floor and out into the Kol sun.

She soon joined a stream of people headed toward the landing field where shuttles waited to take them up to *Defiant Glory* in orbit. At her designated shuttle, Saracasi found Chavatwor and Lieutenant Arzesaeth Ernebee waiting for her. The Kowwok shipwright and her Ronid XO looked almost as nervous as she thought she should feel. Instead, she found she felt nothing but determination. She had shed all her other emotions with her tears over Asirzi.

"Casi," Chavatwor said by way of greeting. "I've loaded the DeeGee's old reactor as well as the extra hull plating you requested. But they're going to take up a lot of room aboard. Why do you want them?"

"I've got a little surprise waiting for the Alliance," Saracasi said, giving her friend a small smile. As much as she trusted Chavatwor, she couldn't risk revealing those details to anyone just yet. She turned to Arzesaeth. "Lieutenant, the base is yours, as is *Audacious*. Take her on patrol just as we discussed. Show the Alliance we're not to be pushed around."

"Aye, Major," Arzesaeth said, saluting. He was one of a handful of people who knew Saracasi's plan, and he would have to play his part for it to work. "We'll give the Alliance a good fight."

Saracasi returned the salute and then turned to Chavatwor. She dropped her duffle bag and relaxed her body, anticipating the Kowwok's fervent hug. Despite her suggestions that it wasn't proper, Chavatwor continued to insist that letting a friend go into danger without a hug of friendship would anger the Great One. She knew he wasn't a big follower of his people's belief system, but she didn't want to offend the few traditions he did follow. Chavatwor had done too much for the Union.

When Chavatwor released her, Saracasi straightened her uniform and picked up the duffle bag. She glanced one last time at the shipyard, only a small part of her hoping to see Asirzi one last time, before boarding the shuttle.

The sounds of the celebration still drifted through the cavernous tunnels beneath the Ba'ar city hockey arena. After the previous night's

successful raid, Zeric thought his people deserved the chance to relax, as they finally had something to celebrate. Everyone had made it home alive. Fortunately, the sounds from an ongoing hockey game being played above them covered the sounds of the Union soldiers. The massive crowds that came to the arena provided the perfect cover for the rebels.

"Now's the time to act," Zeric declared, a note of excitement in his voice. "We've been quiet for the last few months, and the Alliance thinks they've got us contained. But last night's raid shows they're just as over-confident as ever."

Standing around the table were Gu'od and Ymp. On screens along the walls were video feeds from the senior military commanders, including Pasha Alon and Jairyd Kil'dare. Spread out across the planet, they were using the stadium's live coverage of the game as a smoke-screen for their transmissions.

"I like it," Jairyd said. "If we hit them on multiple fronts, we can begin to weaken their resolve."

"Something like that." Zeric activated a tactical hologram of the planet and started pointing. "If we stage a series of strikes in these cities, we can draw off Alliance troops. Once they're distracted, we make a major push and take the military bases in Chuthor, Ba'aar, and Lashan.

"Then, we'll have strongholds to begin pushing out from to take the rest of the planet. With the planetary defense guns and base shields, we'll be able to avoid orbital bombardment."

A few of the faces on the screens nodded approvingly. None of them had been happy about abandoning their control over the guns captured during the failed invasion. Going into hiding had been a necessity they had all disliked.

"Didn't we abandon the batteries we already controlled because they made us easy targets for Alliance forces?" Jairyd asked.

Zeric nodded. "We did. But those guns were out in the middle of nowhere. We would have had no supplies and no support. They were chosen specifically because they were easy to take, which would have made them easy for the Alliance to take back. We only needed them to clear a corridor to get planet-side.

"Now, the batteries in the cities—those are a different ball game. It won't be an easy operation, but once we take them, we'll have a whole city to support us. Plus, the shields are several magnitudes stronger,

since they're intended to defend a civilian population from orbital bombardment."

"This is all ridiculous!" Jairyd exclaimed, surprising Zeric.

Jairyd had been the most vocal advocate that further action be taken. Zeric had been sure the man would support the plan. That he didn't was problematic. Technically, Zeric and Jairyd were the same rank. Zeric was in command through a minor legal trick—he had been promoted first, giving him seniority. But this was Jairyd's home planet. He was respected here and seen as a war hero.

"We'll never be able to hold the cities against an Alliance assault, assuming we can even take them in the first place," Jairyd argued. "No, what we need to do is stop these pointless and dangerous discussions and become independent resistance cells. Right now, it would be a simple matter for the Alliance to track all of us down and win the war right there.

"Once we're operating on our own, each cell can begin performing surgical strikes against Alliance facilities and personnel. Hit and run attacks. Place bombs on Alliance vehicles. Take out officers. Make them run from this planet scared for their lives."

The intensity with which Jairyd spoke about his proposal gave Zeric a shiver down his spine. Clearly, the man had been thinking about this for a while. The passion with which he spoke also appeared to have an effect on some of the others, who voiced support.

"But to what end?" Zeric asked. "Hit and run attacks like you describe are fine as tactics to use against superior forces, or to throw an enemy off balance. But as an entire strategy, it doesn't work. There needs to be a goal."

"The goal is the same as it has been for every insurgency before us. To convince the Alliance that staying is more trouble than it's worth," Jairyd said, his tone like that of a bored teacher.

"I must agree with General Kil'dare," a new voice said.

The comm system automatically brought the speaker to the main screen, revealing to Zeric an elderly Terran man. He didn't recognize the face, and while he didn't know most of the unit commanders very well, he thought he could recognize each of them. That a new person was in on the conversation without his knowing it reinforced Jairyd's point about security.

"Who the hell are you?" Zeric asked. Beside him, Ymp and Gu'od both cringed.

“Hans Kantor, Prime Minister of Sulas,” the man answered, annoyance clear in his tone. “General Kil’dare invited me into the meeting. I must agree, your plan for taking some cities sounds bold, but it’s too risky. It will put many civilian lives at risk. Better to stick with his plan of small raids against the Alliance military.”

“We’re not an insurgency,” Zeric said, getting angry.

“No,” Kantor conceded, “which is why we won’t be taking any actions that will endanger civilians. Such as full-scale battles for control of cities.”

The statement hung in the air for a moment, and Zeric was reminded of his days in school. It felt like the teacher had just explained to him how his idea was stupid in the most belittling terms. He hadn’t had very good teachers.

“However, General Dustlighter is correct about one thing. It’s too soon to completely end these discussions. So for now, we’ll give unit commanders operational autonomy and continue to discuss broad goals periodically,” Kantor said, his demeanor making it clear the matter was settled. “Now, next on the agenda, I would like to discuss some minor supply issues.”

As Kantor and Jairyd quickly took over the rest of the meeting, Zeric’s initial anger faded, replaced with a sense of relief. This was Jairyd and Kantor’s world, after all. Let them run things. That would give him the opportunity to do what he was good at—shooting people and blowing stuff up.

By the end of the meeting, Zeric felt pretty good about the turn of events. Based on the look Ymp bore into him, however, she didn’t agree. His Camari companion had her eyestalks lowered and her hands were constantly shifting from ridged to floppy, almost like a Terran flexing their fingers.

“You have to deal with that,” Ymp said as soon as the video links ended.

“Deal with what?” Zeric replied, trying to sound innocent.

“You completely let them take control. You’re in command, you can’t let that happen,” Ymp growled.

“Kantor’s the prime minister,” Zeric shot back, but he knew his tone was too defensive.

“Of Sulas, yes,” Ymp argued. “But this is a *Union* army. Your army.”

“An army I never wanted to command. Stupid Maarkean,” Zeric cursed, regretting it immediately. He still had no idea what had happened to his friend.

Beside them, Gu’od made a small noise, reminding everyone that he was there. Zeric sighed, bracing himself for one of his friend’s lectures. They weren’t a common occurrence—normally Gamaly did the lecturing—but he felt sure it was coming.

“I think Zeric’s right,” Gu’od said.

Zeric’s counter argument was left dangling on the tip of his tongue. Ymp looked equally shocked, going so far as to raise her eyestalks from their combat position, as if she had to get a really good look at Gu’od. They both remained silent for a moment.

When no one spoke, Gu’od continued, “Fighting is clearly Zeric’s Focus. Not being a general. He must do what he’s good at.”

“Thank you, Gu,” Zeric said, seizing the support. He turned a smug smile to Ymp. “See, wiser people than either of us agree with me. Now, let’s get to causing some mayhem.”

Ymp fumed for a moment but then relented and activated the map of Ba’aar and surrounding areas. As they began discussing possible targets, a small hint of guilt started whispering in the back of Zeric’s head. But just like he did every time that voice bothered him about how he was acting while trying to woo some girl, he ignored it.