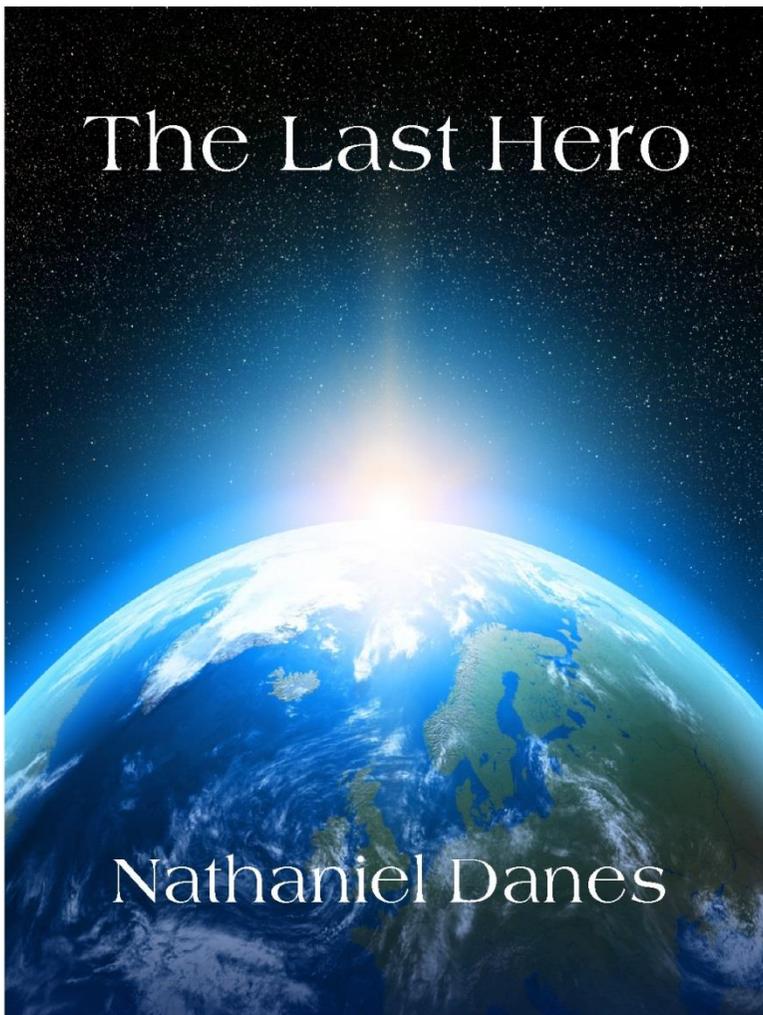


The Last Hero

Nathaniel Danes



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The Last Hero

The Last Hero Trilogy
Book 1
By
Nathaniel Danes

The Last Hero

Dedication

To my daughter, the center of my universe.

Chapter 1: Visitors

Scrolling down a sheet of e-paper Trent attempted to look up a new client's information from the comfort of his office. Another day in the insurance business, another life insurance policy sold.

Life wasn't always this exciting.

Closing his eyes, Trent briefly escaped the boring task by remembering more exciting times. A time when U.S. Army Ranger Captain Trent Maxwell led soldiers into combat.

Like he was born to do.

The thrill of the fight, exuberance of victory, and the glory it brought him were fleeting sensations in a world fast doing away with war. Still, those times left a lasting impression on a man who only ever wanted to be a soldier. The memories sustained him in this peaceful life like a reservoir.

The past is in the past.

Now he considered himself a different man. A family man who still had a client's information to look up. Opening his eyes, Trent went back to work.

Exchanging battlefield glory for his father-in-law's insurance company in Naperville, Illinois, a nice quiet commuter town, wasn't how Trent pictured his life. The final stages of the American military's disbandment in 2018 forced the issue.

At first, the slower pace stung, but five years of soft civilian life had changed Trent. Or so he thought.

The insurance business paid well and the hours allowed an abundance of family time. A commodity he now held in high regard. Quality time with his daughter, Anna, was the most important part of the day. Despite being a decorated war hero, Trent found it no chore

humbling himself to play dolls, dress up, or host an imaginary tea party with his little girl, who kept her doting father firmly wrapped around her tiny finger.

Trent stopped working again, setting the e-paper down on the leather cushion next to him. He often avoided working at his desk, preferring the comfort and view of his office's couch, which provided a pleasant setting to work on new client information, a common duty. The multiple "Salesperson of the Year" awards hanging on the tan wall testified to this fact.

Truth be told, which Trent could at least admit to himself, he wasn't half the salesperson as most of the other agents in the firm. Selling insurance came easily to him, a lingering effect of the minor celebrity status he achieved after the South Africa mission. Resentment burned in the eyes of his fellow agents, who worked harder for fewer results. He couldn't blame them, but he also wasn't about to apologize for it.

Intent on finishing the work, so he could head out at four to pick Anna up at school, he reached for the sheet of e-paper but was interrupted by Becky, the office's tall and slim receptionist.

"Trent, there are two men here to see you."

Crap, I'm not going to get out of here early.

"Are they current or perspective clients?"

"Um...I don't think they're interested in buying insurance"

Two men wearing the gray officer uniforms of the Colonial Fleet stepped around Becky and stood in the office doorway.

The term Colonial Fleet was a bit of a misnomer. They really should have been called merchant marines. The "Fleet" consisted of a few cargo ships that ran people and supplies to the colonies. And the colonies numbered just one, New Earth, founded fifteen years ago on a world the Kitright had helped humans locate.

“Captain Maxwell.”

At the reference to his former rank, Becky backed away. The gray uniformed officers of the Fleet entered Trent’s office, closing the door behind them.

Trent’s eyes darted between the two visitors. “Ummm, what can I do for you guys?”

The officer of Asian descent spoke, “Captain Maxwell, I am Commander Andersen. This is Lt. Commander Mitchell. We have an important matter to discuss with you. Before we begin, we must state that this conversation falls under the Planetary Security Act, and therefore is confidential. Repeating the contents of our discussion without our consent will be deemed treason. Do you understand?”

Trent rose, walking over to his desk and partially sitting on the edge. He crossed his arms and tightened his eyes.

“I guess so. What is this about?”

“What do you know about New Earth?” Mitchell asked

“Just what everyone else knows, I guess. It’s the first human colony located at the Bate Prime Gate. Why?”

Andersen stepped forward. “Again, this conversation cannot be repeated. Do you understand?”

Trent nodded with a confused, but concerned look.

“New Earth has been wiped out,” Andersen said pausing for a moment. “The colony has been attacked.”

“What? What are you saying? The Kitright attacked New Earth? Why would they do that?”

The Kitright were a race of pacifists. The idea of them attacking anything seemed beyond comprehension. Trent never would have considered the absurd possibility, but he also understood the short list of suspects. Besides the Kitright, humanity knew of no other race, and the Kitright claimed that after a millennia of searching space, humanity was their only discovery of intelligent life.

“It wasn’t the Kitright,” Mitchell said.

Andersen raised three fingers. “A third race attacked us and killed everyone on New Earth, from what we can tell.”

“What third race?” Trent leaned forward, his hands gripping the edge of his desk.

Mitchell said, “We were kind of hoping you could tell us that.”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Trent jerked a thumb toward Mitchell while looking at the commander. “How am I supposed to know anything about this?”

“He means you’re going to find out for us.”

Trent’s stomach did a back flip.

“Huh? What?”

Andersen shook his head. “Let me break it down for you. It’s complicated. Please bear with me.”

“Oooo-kay.”

“Two weeks ago, we received a signal from the New Earth secondary sub-space link. It relayed the colony’s emergency transponder databank through the Beta Gate to our system’s link. The emergency transponder collects all the data generated by the colony, and once activated all of that information is passed on to home world, allowing us to figure out what happened.”

Trent’s anxiety level grew with every word.

“The New Earth databank contained interrupted scans from their small orbital defense system. The interruption occurred when the source doing the recording was destroyed. We also got the feeds from their landside security holo-recorders.

“There is no mistake about it. New Earth was the deliberate target of a well planned and executed military strike by an advanced alien race unknown to us until now.” Anderson cleared his throat. “The goal of this attack wasn’t to defeat the colony, it was to kill every last human in it—a complete and total extermination.”

Andersen let the revelation settle around the room.

“Holy shit!” Trent shook his head. “Do the Kitright know anything?”

“They were the first people to see the data outside the Colonial Fleet’s High Command,” Mitchell said. “They’re just as much in the dark as we are.”

“A third race?” Trent muttered. “What do you want me for?”

“This attack, this extermination, was not just an act of war. It was a warning to humans that we aren’t welcome in this universe. In response, the Colonial Fleet as directed by the United Nations Security Council, is mobilizing for *war*.”

To Trent, it sounded as if the word rolled off Andersen’s tongue in slow motion. His heart skipped a beat in both excitement and fear.

War. Could it really be war?

Decades ago, after the Kitright unexpectedly jumped through the Alpha Prime Dark Matter Gate with their message of peace and intergalactic solitude, humanity finally began to make peace with itself.

The South Africa mission, where Trent’s legend was born, was the American military’s last hurrah at the tail end of a long, deliberate decline. It, along with every other combat force on Earth, disbanded. Outside a modest automated orbital defense grid and beefed up police forces, Earth was defenseless.

Faced with this current threat, those idealistic choices looked shortsighted.

“Captain Maxwell,” Andersen said, breaking Trent out of his daze. “You are an important part of our war preparation plans.”

“How? What am I supposed to do? I was in the Army. I don’t know the first thing about space flight. I can do a war bond sales tour if you want.”

“Your Army experience is exactly what we’re looking for. Very few people alive today have the right experience for what we are planning. Even fewer of those are young enough to accomplish the mission.”\

Trent paced from one end of desk to the other.

“Get to the point, Commander. What mission?”

Andersen smiled. “It’s going to take Earth years to mobilize. We have to recruit and train an army, and design and build a fleet of warships. We can’t sit around and do nothing for the next decade, particularly since we know almost nothing about the enemy. We need you to lead a mission in advance of a Fleet strike force, to gather intelligence, and then lead the ground assault against an alien base.

“You’re perfect for the mission. You have combat experience operating behind enemy lines, and your Ranger training has prepared you to fight in any environment—an environment on Earth that is.”

“I...I don’t know, gentleman.”

Andersen said, “Captain, it has to be you to lead this mission for reasons beyond your rare experience.”

“What are you taking about?”

Andersen took a deep breath. “It goes without saying that we’ve withheld this information from the public. We don’t want them to know about the attack until we can present them with a concrete plan of action, to not only protect humanity but also take the war to the enemy.

“When we break the news in two days’ time, the public is going to shit a collective brick. Hell, it could get as bad as it did in the weeks leading up to the Kitright landing. The markets could crash, and the economy could stall. We can’t have that just as we’re trying to get ready to fight a new kind of war. We need to instill confidence in the public right from the beginning.

“*You* are a war hero, the last war hero. Your participation in this operation will give the public a sense of

security.” Raising a hand high, Andersen waved it slowly as he spoke, as if pitching the headline. “The last Medal of Honor recipient comes out of retirement to fight again to save Earth. It might very well be a false sense of security, but that will do for now. And honestly,” Andersen said in a calmer, more somber tone. “All of that PR bullshit aside. Can you look me in the eye and tell me you’re not the best man for the job?”

“I have a family, a little girl who needs her daddy.” Trent pleaded, though more to himself than to these men. His warrior’s soul ached to get into the fight, but his father’s heart pushed back.

Andersen said, “This is a world full of little girls, and this is a war for their very existence, for their right to live. In the end, you’re right. Your little girl does need her daddy, she needs him to be a soldier again. She needs him to fight the monsters.” He glanced at his companion. “Show him.”

Mitchell set a holoplate on the coffee table in front of Trent. After a few seconds, the device displayed gruesome images from the New Earth recorders.

Beasts as large as bears, yet looking more like lions, tore apart any human they came across: men, woman, and children, the old as well as the already wounded and unarmed. It didn’t matter. Whomever the beasts came across met a terrible fate of blood, claws, and teeth.

Andersen was right. It was an extermination rather than a battle.

Trent looked away. Andersen shut the holoplate off.

“This time, the monsters are real. If they get here...if we don’t stop them, then no one’s little girl will be safe.”

Trent paled.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. The Army was a long time ago. I’m a new man now. There must be someone else, someone better?”

“You’re the same man who led the Ranger team in South Africa. I know that for certain. I’ve read your file. You never wanted to be anything other than a soldier from the moment you were born. War is what you were meant for. That doesn’t go away because you were forced to live this lie.” Anderson waved an arm around the office. “An insurance salesman? Really? Don’t tell me that you don’t wake up every day feeling like something is missing in your life.”

The truth hurt. There wasn’t a day that went by where Trent didn’t ache for the action he’d experienced in battle.

“It’s not just that. My daughter—I don’t want to abandon her.”

“Wars are not fought by childless men alone. You have a greater responsibility to the human race. Believe me, I’m not exaggerating when I say we’re hanging on by a thread. This new kind of war has caught us flat footed. You are the best man for the job. We need you. Mitchell, play the holo again.”

Trent held up his palm.

“Don’t.” He knew deep down that Andersen was right. Victory would require sacrifices from many in this high stakes war. “I’ll need to talk to my wife. Will...I never...Will I ever see my family again?” A part of him rejoiced the return to active duty. His true self could live again.

“We understand.” Andersen failed to hide a grin. “You have our permission to discuss this with your wife. But it’s vital that this remain a secret until the announcement, which we would like you to attend. As for your question, the laws of relativity are a bitch. There’s nothing we can do about it. A decade will pass before you return, but you should see them again. If it makes you or your wife feel any better, you really don’t have a choice in

the matter. The terms of your Army discharge allow your reactivation in the event of an emergency.”

Trent turned toward Andersen, thrusting a finger at him.

“Then what’s with the damn dog and pony show?” He hated having to feel like he was choosing to leave, choosing to abandon his family.

“We thought it best if you reached the decision on your own. We knew you would, you were born for this. This is your destiny.”

“Fuck you!” he blurted out, angrier at himself than Andersen. Resigned to his fate, Trent sat back down on the desk’s edge. “Do you know where I’m going?”

An evil smirk grew across Andersen’s face. “We know exactly where you’re going.”

Chapter 2: Home Front

The presence of two Fleet officers making a surprise visit with someone of Trent's history piqued the curiosity of more than a few co-workers. They mingled in the common area pretending to work and hoping to catch a glimpse to find out what was going on.

His door opened with the officers leading the charge out. Trent stood in the doorway to watch them leave, sweating and looking noticeably paler. Once the gray uniformed men had disappeared, he marched directly into his father-in-law's office without knocking, taking the older man by surprise.

"Dave?"

"Yeah, Trent?"

"Something has come up, an emergency. Can you do a huge favor for me? Pick Anna up at school and let her hang out at your place till after dinner?"

"Why? What's going on? You don't look so well. You getting sick?"

"No, I am fine. I know it sounds weird, but I can't tell you just yet. I really need to talk to Madison alone tonight."

Dave became concerned, as well as confused about the secrecy. He had missed the arrival of the Fleet officers. The look in Trent's eyes convinced him that he needed to do as asked.

"Sure, whatever you need. I'll pick her up. Give me a call when I can drop her off at your place."

Trent turned to rush out when it dawned on him this was probably the last time he would ever be in this office. He paused before exiting, turning to again face Dave. Here was a man who had always treated him with respect and kindness, despite the fact that he knocked-up his daughter on a one-night stand. Trent felt confident that he wouldn't

have been so nice if the shoe was on the other foot with Anna.

“Dave,” Trent said in a somber tone. “I just want to say thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to spend some time with the little pistol.”

“No. Not about that. Thank you for everything, for the opportunity here with your firm. Most of all, thanks for welcoming me into your family. You always made me feel welcome.”

“You’re starting to scare me. Are you sure there isn’t something you want to tell me?”

“It will all make sense in two days.”

With that, Trent went to his office to gather a few things and left with a dozen sets of eyes watching his every move.

As he pulled into the driveway, Trent took extra care to examine every centimeter of his yard and home. The perfect green genetically engineered grass never needed mowing. A modest home constructed of recycled carbon fiber composite material required little maintenance. Sure it made the house fire proof, flood proof, and nearly tornado proof, but it lacked the character of older homes built back when people still used wood.

Just that morning, the world had seemed so simple. He thought he had a pretty good idea of how his life would turn out. Sell insurance, raise Anna, spend time with Madison, and then play with his grandchildren.

Now his future held either a violent death on some alien planet, or losing his life to the ravages of physics. The more he thought about it, the more he wished that he could go back to the fantasy world he lived in that morning.

Madison wasn’t due home for another half an hour. He grabbed a bottle of bourbon out of the liquor cabinet and sat at the kitchen table to wait.

How the hell do you tell your wife that her husband and the father of her child is leaving both of them to fight a war in space?

Trent knew that Andersen was right about everything. He was the best man for the mission, from both a military standpoint and public relations. He remembered the chaos of the days before the Kitright arrived. The mass panic nearly destroyed entire cities.

If humanity needed to fight an interstellar war, they couldn't afford such disruptions. His presence could help calm the fears of a public terrified of the unknown again. Andersen was even right about him not really having a choice. The government would be well within their legal rights to force him back into the military.

What bothered Trent was that Andersen didn't need to force him to do anything. A soldier's life was all he ever wanted. It flowed through his veins as thick as red blood cells. A big part of him wanted to go, wanted to fight, no matter what the personal cost. Though he couldn't deny it, he also wanted to see his little girl grow up and walk her down the aisle on her wedding day.

None of that would happen if those beasts made it to Earth, and he was the best man to lead the first counter-strike. The monsters were real, and it was the job of every father to keep the monsters away. *Sitting on the sidelines isn't an option.*

Trapped in deep thought, Trent didn't hear Madison come in.

"What are you doing home? I thought you were picking up Anna?" She glanced at the bottle of bourbon and glass in his hand. "What's going on?"

"Sit down, honey."

"Where's Anna?"

"Your dad picked her up for me. She's having dinner with them. Please sit."

Madison looked into her husband's tormented eyes, seeing the fear and pain.

"What's going on? You don't look right."

He waited for her to take a seat, studying her form intently. Madison's wavy red hair and milky white skin had always attracted him. She placed a hand on top of his to provide a small token of comfort. He looked into her caring brown eyes and remembered their time together. It didn't start like some Disney movie.

After the mission in South Africa, the government had paraded Trent around like a national hero. The celebrity and warrior image brought with it a seemingly endless supply of beautiful women eager to bed the Trent Maxwell, "*The Last American Hero*," as the newsnet had called him. He didn't think it polite to disappoint any of them.

Madison started out as one of the groupies, just another one-night stand. But she ended up pregnant. Trent stopped the excessive fornicating to explore an actual relationship with the mother of his child. To everyone's surprise, including his, the two hit it off. Refusing to look like a beached whale in her wedding photos for all eternity, she had insisted that the wedding take place after Anna's birth.

Despite the awkward beginning, the marriage worked. Trent's insides churned at the thought of leaving her. She deserved better.

"There is no easy way to say this. So I'm just going to lay out the facts."

"I'm listening."

You poor thing, I'm so sorry.

"Two Colonial Fleet officers came to see me today. New Earth has been wiped out. All of the colonists were killed. Murdered."

"Oh my God!" Her hand retracted from his. "What happened?"

“They were attacked by a new alien race. A race we know almost nothing about. The Kitrights don’t know anything about them. They didn’t just attack the colony, Madison, they exterminated...everyone.”

Madison leaned back in her chair to absorb the information.

“When did this happen?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“Why isn’t this on the news? Why did they come to see you, to tell you this?” she said more than asked.

Trent took a big gulp of whiskey. The liquid courage burned on the way down.

“They’re making the announcement in two days. It’s a high-level state secret till then, so don’t tell anyone. Not a soul. They don’t want to tell the public until they can also announce a plan of action, hoping it will help keep people calm.”

“But why tell—” the answer to her question hit her like a bolt of lightning. She slapped a hand over her mouth. “You’re part of their plan. Aren’t you?”

She stood, sending her chair squeaking across the kitchen floor. Madison thrust a finger at him.

“Of course, they have to send the big war hero. Don’t worry everyone...we’re going to throw my husband on some planet so he can get himself killed. Then all of you can sleep a little better tonight. Fuck that! You’re not going anywhere!”

“Madison, please sit down. Talk to me about this.”

“What is there to talk about? You’re not going anywhere. You’re no longer a soldier. You sell insurance for Christ’s sake.” She tossed her hands into the air. “Are they going to have you bore them to death by explaining the details of a term life policy?”

“Honey, please calm down. I’m one of a handful of people in the whole world who has the actual combat experience to do this. You know that. In two days, there

will be a press conference. I'll be there. I don't have a choice."

"Bullshit!" Madison paced wildly. "Why are you defending them? You didn't say that you were going, did you? What do you mean you don't have a choice?"

Trent stood to try and calm Madison down by reaching out to her. She refused his embrace.

"When I was discharged, the fine print said the government can call me back into service in cases of emergency. They'll classify this as an emergency. After the Secretary General of the UN explains what happened to New Earth, he'll inform the world we're in a state of war. Do you get it? An entire planet at war, and not with itself. Nothing like this has ever happened. He'll also announce preparations for a counter-attack are already underway. And that I'm leading the strike force."

"*No you're not!*" Madison yelled. She punched Trent squarely in the chest. "Ouch!" she complained, mourning her wrist.

"You okay?"

She nodded, rubbing her injured joint.

Trent continued, "I either fight, or I go to prison."

She slumped into the chair. Her whole body defined defeat, from the downcast expression on her face, to how she seemed to crumple forward.

"Why aren't you mad? Why are you defending them for taking you away from your family?"

Tears welled up in her lovely brown eyes. He rushed forward to try embracing her again. This time she allowed it.

"It's not that I want to go. It's that I *have* to go."

"I don't understand."

"There's something you need to see."

Trent stepped away and walked around the table. He pulled a holoplate out of his bag. Andersen let him keep

it, so his wife could truly see why he must go to war. He placed the plate in front of Madison.

“This is a holo of the attack on New Earth. Once you watch it, I hope you understand. I warn you, this is something you can’t un-see. It’s...very troubling.”

Madison wiped away tears to prepare herself to press play. Once ready, the holo began.

Trent didn’t watch. He concentrated on his wife. The frightful images danced off her wide-open eyes as she found herself unable to blink or look away. Seeing people, particularly children, ripped apart kills a little of your soul. He stood there watching his wife and mourned the part of her that he witnessed die.

The holo ended.

Madison sat perfectly still, not saying a word for a minute. Then she jumped up, sprinted to the kitchen sink, and vomited as her body fruitlessly tried to expel the images recently burned into her mind.

“You see, I have to fight. I’m the best man for the job. I can’t let those things, these beasts get here.”

Madison didn’t say anything. Tears dripped down her face. The silence was louder than if she had screamed at him.

That night, Trent tucked a sleepy little angel into bed. He took extra time to study her face...the squirming movements of her tiny body...the delightful smell of the bubble bath she loved...the sound of her sweet voice. He tried to commit everything about her to memory.

Scanning the pink walls dotted with ribbons and painted flowers, he attempted to soak in the innocence of a little girl’s room.

Anna’s childish world of imagination, candy, dolls, playmates, and spoiling grandparents was for all purposes, perfect. His spirit sank. He was about to shatter that world.

“Daddy?”

Her voice pulled him back to her.

“Yes, Anna.”

“Why is Mommy sad?”

“Oh, honey.” He pulled her covers up over her princess pajamas. “Sometimes mommies and daddies get sad.”

“Did I make Mommy sad?”

“Oh, no honey.” His heart broke. “Mommy isn’t sad because of you. You make Mommy happy.”

“Okay.” She smiled.

“Now you get some sleep. We’re going to have a fun day tomorrow.”

Trent planted a gentle kiss on Anna’s forehead. He stood to walk out, but she stopped him.

“Sing to me.”

Her simple request warmed Trent’s heart.

“You are my sunshine
My only sunshine
You make me happy
When the skies are grey.
You’ll never know dear
How much I love you
Please don’t take
My sunshine away
The other night dear,
As I lay sleeping
I dreamed I held you in my arms
When I awoke dear
I was mistaken
So I hung
My head
And I cried”

Chapter 3: The Pentagon

“**W**hat time is the press conference?” Trent asked.

They were in a government car, riding through the streets of Washington D.C. Those strolling along the sidewalks barely gave them a glance. Street vendors called out their wares, people spoke to each other as they waited for traffic signals to change, an absolutely normal world was outside the confines of this vehicle he wanted to abandon.

“It’s in four hours in front of the Pentagon” Commander Andersen replied. “You cut it real close getting here. Wish you had come in the night before.”

“I just told my wife that our marriage was pretty much over, and she would soon be a single mother. You can take your concern and shove it.”

“Now, now, Major. That’s no way for an Earth Legion officer to talk.”

Trent turned his head to look at Andersen. After a second, when the higher ranking officer didn’t back off his outrageous response, Trent returned his attention to the Potomac River they were now crossing.

“It’s nice to be promoted already, but what the hell is the Earth Legion?”

“It’s what the army is going to be called. There is the Colonial Fleet, and now the Earth Legion. The structure is going to be roughly based on the Roman model. Legion for division, cohort for regiment, centuries for companies, and so on.”

Trent replied, “Stupid question. Why the hell does the army of the future reach back a couple thousand years for its name and structure?”

“It’s a sound model. Honestly, the real reason is all PR.”

“Seems to be a trend these days.”

“Tell me about it. I would much rather have one of the new warships they’re planning to build than deal with this crap all the time. Although, the logic behind it does make some sense.

“For the first several years of this war, it will pretty much be an American effort. Our forces were the most powerful the world ever knew, naturally we’re the best equipped to get this whole thing started. Plus, our draw down wasn’t as complete as advertised.” He winked at Trent. “We left some pieces of military infrastructure in place and have been quietly bringing it back to life. That’s why the Pentagon is being repurposed, back to military use. It will be the nerve center for the Fleet and Legion.

“This is a global effort. We’ll be drawing on the resources of the whole planet. We’re doing some cosmetic things to make it look less American.”

The car pulled into the Pentagon parking lot, stopping in front of the main entrance.

“Let’s get you ready for the press.”

“What am I supposed to do at this thing?”

“Look tough, like you can’t wait to start fighting again.”

Trent didn’t know if he looked tough. He spent the entire press conference standing behind the Secretary General, trying not to sweat too much under the late June sun in his brand new, all black, Legion uniform.

At first sight, it reminded him of the Nazi SS uniforms used in World War II. He hoped no one else would make the same connection. *Not exactly the smartest PR decision for a bunch of people who seemed consumed by little more.*

When the Secretary mentioned him by name, Trent stepped forward into a blizzard of bright lights emanating from a phalanx of holo recorders focused on him. Other than that, he stood there trying to look tough.

Whatever the hell that means.

For now, the bullshit part of his new assignment was over. It was time to start building an army, or legion for that matter. Man would once again don the cloak of warrior. Trent felt excited to be part of it. The thrill of returning to military service also made him feel guilty. He already missed Madison and Anna.

“Let’s get started,” said an older black man with silver hair. He stood at the front of the large wooden conference table surrounded by men and woman in black and gray uniforms. The room was buried deep within the bowels of the Pentagon.

Trent knew the man as General Fairbanks, the last Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Now he was the top commander of a military force that could just about fit into the meeting room where he stood.

Not one for meetings and anxious to get to the heart of matters concerning his mission, Trent raised his hand.

“Yes, Major?” Fairbanks said. His deep voice alone commanded respect.

“Sorry if I’m jumping the gun here, but...my mission. Who is on my team and where are we going, sir?”

“Have no fear, Major. Your mission is our top priority. We want to get you and your unit off planet in two months.”

“Two months! Sir...if I may? That seems like an awfully short timetable. I have no idea who is on my team. It will take us time to train and develop some type of unit cohesion, and that’s after we form.”

“Your team is being formed as we speak. They should be here in five days...”

“Who are they?” Trent asked.

“I was getting to that, *Major*,” Fairbanks shot back, reminding Trent of his place in the reformed military hierarchy. “They’ll all be former military. We’re trying to recruit several members of your team from South Africa.

We won't know how many of them take us up on the offer for a couple of days. The rest will come from a variety of other countries. I'm told it will send a nice message if the first legion unit is composed of several different nations."

Trent was glad to detect the general's disdain for PR.

"Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, but I still don't know the where."

"Ahh, yes, the where." Fairbanks strolled around the table. "Computer, bring up sector 00159-2."

The holo display function of the conference table kicked in. First, it showed the galaxy and then the scene rapidly zoomed in on the specific solar system Fairbanks' numbers referred to.

"Computer, highlight the fourth planet."

The display enlarged the planet. Trent stared at it, and it seemed to stare back at him. It was beautiful in its own way. It looked a lot like Mars, but with massive oceans and white clouds.

"This is where you're going. We strongly believe there's an enemy base on this world. Your mission will be to drop in in advance of the Fleet strike force, gather intel on the enemy, and aid in the primary assault."

"If I may, sir? How do we know there is an enemy base on this planet? We learned about this race only after they attacked New Earth. I leave in two months. What strike force? There's no way the Fleet will have warships by then."

"All questions I would ask if I was in your shoes. As you know, we have hundreds of probes out in deep space mapping the universe. After New Earth, we shot commands to all of them through the gate, ordering them to report back immediately with all of their data. Specifically, we were looking for a type of signal the New Earth defense grid detected. It's a marker for their tech. Find the signal,

you've found their tech; find their tech and you've found them.”

Fairbanks finished a slow walk around the table and again stood at its head.

“You're exactly right about the Fleet or the Legion for that matter. It's going to take a decade to get Earth on a proper war footing. That's why this little piece of space is so special, so right for this mission.

“Computer, back out to system map, wide view. See here?” Fairbanks pointed at a clump of dark matter. “This is a gate right on top of the planet. We believe they have it heavily fortified. Come through there, and you have a fight on your hands. We could have a ship heading through that gate in a year. But we don't have a Fleet, and more importantly we don't know a damn thing about the enemy.

“Over here.” Fairbanks shifted his finger to deep space, outside the system. “Is a gate ten light years from the planet. It's unusual to find a planet with two gates so close together. Either the enemy doesn't know about the other gate, or they don't consider it a threat because of its location. This is the gate you will jump through.”

“Excuse me...it's ten light years away,” Trent said.

Fairbanks chuckled. “Don't worry, Major. This is a rare situation where relativity comes in handy. You jump through the gate and then make your way to the system. The ten years of travel near the speed of light will only seem like a month. Once you get to the system's outskirts, your ship will drop you off in a shuttle. From there, you will sneak up on the target using the other planets and asteroid belts as cover. That will take you another two months.

“You'll drop in and survey the enemy base, gathering all the intel you can about them. After two weeks, you beam all of the data you collect through the sub-space link at the far gate. That is relayed through the gate to Alpha, where your intel will find a waiting armada of

warships and legionnaires that we spend the next ten years building.”

“Then what?”

“Then we take two days to quickly review the data before we jump through the gate near the planet with guns blazing. Once that happens, I suggest that you start killing as many of the enemy as you can.”

All the moving parts of the plan made Trent nervous.

“I just hope the enemy will still be there when we arrive, or the base isn’t so well defended that you can’t punch through.”

“War is never without its risks, Major. Now...any more questions?”

“Just one.”

Fairbanks cocked his head to one side, surprised the major didn’t fully appreciate the tone in which he asked if he had any more questions. Trent got the tone all right. He just didn’t care. By the time he got back, if he came back, Fairbanks would be retired again.

“What now?”

“The enemy? What are we calling them?”

“Oh. We’ve taken to calling them Bearcats.”