



WAYWARD SOLDIERS

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A FIRE Drake PRESS E-BOOK

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PROLOGUE

I've always found it somewhat disconcerting how little I feel during combat – how everything gets reduced to stark, clinical terms and how when any normal person would be losing their shit, my conscious mind seems to fade into the background while my instincts take over.

Scan. Breathe.

Scan. Breathe.

Movement left. Muzzle flashes.

Aim. Exhale.

My rifle spits small tongues of flame and I watch the target go down but don't recall squeezing the trigger.

Scan. Breathe.

Scan. Breathe.

I move on.

Weaving my way carefully through the ruins of

this murdered city, I reached the platoon sergeant, who was hunkered down behind a ragged chunk of concrete and rebar that looked like it might have once been part of a skyscraper. He turned at the sound of my boots crunching over the rubble.

“Young, sitrep!”

I shook my head. “Not looking good, Sergeant. The Ell-Tee’s down and we’re cut off from the extraction point. This grid’s too hot for dropships, so we’re on our own down here.”

A grimace flickered briefly across his face. “Shit. Who’s left?”

“Just us, Sergeant,” I said, indicating the six other men of our squad, trading fire with our tenacious neighbors just a few hundred meters up the street who had somehow managed to get hold of an armored infantry fighting vehicle, “All other units are either dead or have been extracted already.”

The IFV picked that moment to open up with its .50 caliber rotary cannon, chewing up our cover and sending jagged shards of concrete zipping towards us.

“Ah, fuck.” This time, the Sergeant’s face really screwed itself up, spitting out the syllable like something rotten he’d bitten into.

“What do we do, Sergeant?”

He was silent for a moment. “Perez, get over here!”

A whistle and a wave later, Perez jogged over, his body hunched low, both to keep as much of it behind cover as possible, as well as under the weight of the combat net hyperband transceiver strapped to his back.

“Sergeant?” Perez said. He was barely able to get the word out before the Sergeant turned him around bodily and snatched the handset off his back.

“Archangel, Archangel, this is Renegade 2-1... er, Renegade 2 Actual, over,” he hollered into the handset. His throat seemed to catch slightly as he did so, the grim weight of command settling onto his shoulders with the loss of the lieutenant.

“Renegade, Archangel. Go ahead, over.”

I could barely make out the words coming in through the speaker over the chatter of rifles and the *rrrrrip* of the IFV’s fifty-cal.

“We’re pinned down by hostile fire at grid... Sierra November zero-five-niner,” the Sergeant reported, checking the map on his wrist-mounted CrossLINK gauntlet, “We’ve taken heavy casualties and are unable to make the extraction point! Request close air support, over!”

“Roger, Renegade. Wait one.”

A pause that felt like hours...

“Renegade, Archangel,” the voice came back, “Knight Squadron is inbound. ETA two minutes, over.”

Breathing a collective sigh of relief, neither myself nor Perez could hold back a grin as the Sergeant thumbed the transmit button. “Roger, solid copy. Painting the target! Renegade out.”

Shouldering my rifle, I flicked on the laser target designator mounted on the barrel and aimed it up the street at the IFV, all the while ticking away precious seconds in my head.

What began as a barely-audible buzz soon evolved

into the roar of engines as a pair of strike fighters shrieked overhead, unleashing a duo of short-range missiles at the enemy position.

“Take cover!” The sergeant called as twin explosions rocked the ground beneath our boots.

A wave of sudden, intense heat swept over us and I instantly went deaf, feeling more than hearing the debris pattering down onto my helmet as I kissed the pitted asphalt. Once the tinnitus had faded and my hearing gradually returned, I noticed that the sound of rifles had ceased. The hyperband bleated.

“Renegade 2, this is Knight Leader. I say again, verify delivery of ordnance on target, over.”

The Sergeant poked his head over the chunk of concrete we’d been hunkering behind and when he wasn’t immediately picked off by a sniper, I joined him. We were greeted by a smoldering crater two meters deep and at least ten wide, smack dab where the IFV used to be.

He fumbled for the handset and mashed down the button. “Knight Leader, Renegade 2. Dead on! Target neutralized, over!”

“Copy that,” the pilot drawled as the two fighters swooped back up into the stratosphere with the grace of homesick angels. “Happy hunting, Renegade. Knight Leader out.”

Two grueling hours later, we made it to the extraction point with our dead and wounded in tow. Hunkering down among the foundations of a ruined building, those of us still standing did our best to secure the perimeter. We scanned the skies for the

dropship that was to be our ride home and popped colored smoke when we heard it approaching overhead.

Touching down with a whine of down-spinning engines and kicking up a cloud of dust, the bird's loading ramp whined open and we emerged from cover, carrying our casualties quickly over to the beckoning loadmaster. I averted my eyes as the blanket-draped form of the lieutenant was taken aboard, figuring that if I wasn't watching, it wasn't happening. I couldn't help but notice that most of the others were doing the same.

When we'd all finally clambered aboard the tiny craft, I managed to find a space on one of the narrow webbed nylon benches and strapped in. The dropship shuddered slightly as we dusted off, jostling the bodies on the floor up against my boot tips. A rueful grin tugged at the corners of my mouth with the realization that I'd survived, just so I could do it all again tomorrow.

Welcome to the shit.

CHAPTER ONE

The Stardust Lounge was my kind of bar – clean, dark and just crowded enough to lose yourself in. Perched on the outermost ring of Coleridge Station, a civilian facility orbiting nine hundred kilometers above the surface of Sanction, the lounge’s massive canted viewports and transparent sections of floor made for great stargazing onto an alien sky. I hadn’t come here for the view, though.

Nobody had said much during our ride back to the ship and as soon as we’d touched down, we dispersed, each of us trying to find some way to come to grips with the loss of the lieutenant. My reaction had been to hole up in the squad’s bunk room, surrounded by the empty racks, and try to reconcile my *why-him?* angst with my *better-him-than-me* instincts. It hadn’t helped me feel any better about it, so I decided to settle for the next best thing.

I wasn’t surprised to find the majority of my

squadmates here. Bars attract infantrymen like flies to shit, especially bars like this one where you can leave your rank at the door. I hadn't joined them at their table though, instead grabbing a small booth in a dark corner as far from the bar as possible. I wanted some time alone to think.

There's a very old lie that goes, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. It is sweet and glorious to die for your country. I used to believe it, but now... well, I wonder what the lieutenant would have to say about that. The truth is, it's all bullshit. The things worth fighting for aren't always worth dying for, but try explaining that to a kid fresh out of college who's itching to get in on the action.

I had enlisted only a few short weeks after the impact event, thinking that I owed it to my friends, my family and everyone else who'd died. I remember being scared that I'd let them down – that I'd miss my chance to make things right.

It was my best friend, Nate, who'd finally tipped the scales for me. He'd been a corporal back then, serving in the Colonial Forces Auxiliary to pay for school. When the Legion dropped the asteroid on Earth, he volunteered for the Albion Expeditionary Force and shipped out.

My girlfriend Sarah and I enlisted together, though I managed to convince her to take the safer route and join the Fleet instead of following me and Nate into the poor bloody Infantry. Of course, neither of us was too worried since the Legion was made up of untrained and disorganized amateurs, more willing to fight than take orders. The war would be over in no time, right? Well, we paid for

our arrogance the hard way.

In the span of two months, the Colonial Forces lost almost three hundred soldiers as the Legion unleashed a torrent of brutal hit-and-run attacks on Protectorate outposts and facilities. It was a devastating wake-up call. We'd seriously underestimated their capabilities and their fanatical devotion to their cause.

Nate and I had been looking forward to evening up the score a bit but he didn't even live long enough to see me graduate. I should have known his death wouldn't be the end by far. Not a year later, I lost Sarah too. Her ship went down with all hands, burned up in the atmosphere above Albion, the Legion's homeworld. I'd been light-years away at the time...

I couldn't save her.

I don't really remember how long it's been since then. Everything blurs into an endless routine. Day after day, sortie after sortie... But at least it keeps me going. I know that nothing I do can bring her back, but every Legion soldier I kill brings me one step closer to peace.

"John?"

I glanced up with mild irritation to see who'd disturbed me. A woman stood there with a drink in hand, dressed in the uniform of a Fleet lieutenant, junior grade. Her face was tantalizingly familiar but her name escaped me. My confusion must have showed.

"Aw, you forgot my name," She teased with a wounded look that didn't help my recall abilities any. "I'm very hurt! But I'll give you a hint. It starts

with a K.”

Of course! She had been Sarah’s roommate from the Academy. She’d always graciously left the room whenever I went to visit, never failing to flash us a wink as she slipped out the door.

“Kate!” I said quickly, “Your name is Kate!”

She laughed and clapped her hand lightly against her glass. “Hooray!”

“Wow, how’re you doing?” I said. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

She nodded. “Yeah, not since…” She trailed off, catching her slip just a tad too late.

I finished the thought for her. “Since Sarah’s funeral. Yeah.”

She nodded awkwardly. “Sorry.”

I gave her as convincing a grin as I could muster. “Don’t worry about it. You want to sit down?”

I gestured at the empty seat across the table from me and she took it, placing her drink down in front of her.

“Thanks. So, how are you?”

I shrugged. “Ah, not too bad. Still alive. You?”

“Same here,” she said, returning the shrug with a smirk. “Can’t complain about that, huh?”

“Nope.”

We sat silently for a few moments, sipping our drinks before I patted my chest where, on her uniform, was pinned her polished golden lieutenant’s insignia.

“So, I see you made O-2. Congratulations.”

She beamed. “Thanks! More time-in-grade than anything, though, I’m afraid.”

I shrugged. “Hey, a promotion’s a promotion.”

“That’s true.” A pause as she took another sip. “So, where are you stationed now? Are you staying long?”

“I’m on the *Passchendaele*,” I said. “And we’re just passing through. Saw some action down on the surface this morning. A Legion strike force raided one of the armories. I’m sure you must’ve heard.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I think some of our guys were down there. Heard it was pretty rough.”

I barked a short laugh, harsher than I’d intended. “I’ll say. We lost our lieutenant today. And we always thought he was too tough to kill.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh...”

“Yeah... Two of our guys tripped an IED. The Ell-Tee went out to try and get them when he ate a bullet. One of us is going to have to write to his wife and tell her that. We’re drawing straws later.”

She looked away. “Sorry to hear that.”

I took a sip of my drink, waved dismissively. “Ah, what can you do? No one wants to live forever.”

Her mouth tightened fractionally. “Mm, I guess not.” There was a short pause, then she lifted her glass in a toast. “Well, here’s to the lieutenant, then. Another soldier to guard the gates of Heaven.”

I smiled, raised my own glass. “Hear, hear.”

Another few moments of silence passed, slightly awkward this time.

“Sorry,” I said, “That was a total downer, huh?” I racked my brain for some way to change the subject. “Have you heard any good news from back home?”

She brightened up almost instantly. “Well, my sister and her husband just had a baby! A healthy

little boy. Last I heard, though, they still hadn't been able to agree on a name yet."

I grinned. "Well, either way, that's wonderful news! Pass on my congratulations next time you talk to her. Not that she knows who I am, but what the hell?"

"I'm sure she'll be grateful either way," she laughed. "Anyway, what about you? Surely your life can't be all doom and gloom."

That brought out a genuine smile from me. She was right, the whole mopey angst thing didn't suit me at all. "Well, no, I—"

My CrossLINK trilled, indicating the arrival of a priority message. I glanced down, then looked back up at her apologetically. "Sorry, excuse me."

"No worries," she said, smiling sympathetically. No doubt she too was intimately familiar with the inescapable bureaucracy that plagued the armed forces. Looking back down at the screen, I tapped the flashing mail icon. Whatever I'd been expecting, it sure as hell wasn't *this*.

***** ORDERS *** ORDERS *** ORDERS *****

THE FOLLOWING NAMED PERSONNEL:

Young, John CPL [IN-968491018]
2 PLT K C0 3 BTN 1 INF DIV

ARE HEREBY REASSIGNED TO:

Operational Test & Evaluation
Command

DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES:

Participate in developmental
testing, independent operational
testing, independent evaluations,

assessments, and experiments of warfighting materials and equipment.

THE ABOVE NAMED PERSONNEL WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO LOCAL TRANSPORTATION BATTALION TO BE MANIFESTED TO:
Camp Forming, Foundry.

ISSUED CF/1298-8684-1450/15 JUN CC228 BY AUTHORIZATION INFCOM Commander.

***** ORDERS *** ORDERS *** ORDERS *****

"Shit," I said, stunned.

Kate's brow furrowed. "What is it?"

"New orders," I said after a long pause. "I've been transferred to a non-combat unit."

Her face lit up with a wide, radiant smile. "That's wonderful!" The smile faltered when she saw that I didn't share her enthusiasm. She blinked and tilted her head to one side. "Isn't it?"

I shrugged. "A Fleet girl like you wouldn't understand. It's an Infantry thing."

"A macho thing, you mean," she said, rolling her eyes, "You're right, I don't think I'll ever understand why you grunts are all so eager to be in the shit. Most of us are happy when we're not being shot at." She sighed an exaggerated sigh and shook her head with mock disdain. "So, when do you have to leave?"

I had to consult the CrossLINK for that. "Next flight departs in an hour."

"So soon?" I couldn't be sure but I thought I detected a hint of disappointment in her tone.

I sighed, getting to my feet. "The war doesn't

wait. Guess I'd better get packing. Listen, thanks for the company. It was great seeing you again."

She flashed me a smile. "Same here. You take care of yourself now, okay?"

"Will do," I promised. "See you around!"

And I left.

CHAPTER TWO

The week-long flight out to Foundry was uneventful but I didn't complain. I'd been assigned a berth on a modestly-sized military freighter that had been converted to house several passengers along with its cargo. It certainly wasn't a Capricorn-class starliner but it was a fair sight better than a lot of the places where I've had to bed down while deep in hostile territory.

When we arrived at Foundry, slipping under the protective umbrella of the planet's orbital defense batteries, I transferred to a smaller landing craft that brought me down right outside Camp Forming's headquarters and administration building, nestled securely at the northeast corner of the almost seven hundred square kilometer training facility.

I walked in, grateful to be out of the light drizzle and found myself in a spacious atrium. To my left was the information desk, behind which sat a bored-looking attendant. I walked over, a hard copy of my

orders in hand.

“Hi, welcome to Camp Forming,” he said, his manner superficially cordial. “How can I help you today?”

“I’m reporting in,” I said, handing him my orders.

He gave them a quick once-over. “Corporal John Young?”

“That’s me.”

“Okay, I’ll need to scan your PIC tag,” he said, producing a portable scanner.

I unzipped my uniform jacket and tugged the collar of my undershirt down to reveal the barcode tattoo on my breastbone and the implanted Personnel Identification Chip under it. The attendant waved the scanner over the area and it beeped, a green diode flashing to life on its readout.

“Okay, everything checks out,” he said. “You’ll be issued a bunk as soon as your assignment is verified by the system, which could take up to thirty minutes. In the meantime, feel free to grab some food. The commissary’s just down the hall.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said.

As I stepped away from the desk, another man entered the atrium, headed in my direction. He looked familiar and as he neared, I made out the name VASEK embroidered in dark letters over the right chest pocket of his uniform jacket. I grinned, wondering if he would recognize me even as I called to him.

“Vasek, you son of a bitch!”

He stopped, looked up and then stared at me blankly for a moment before recognition dawned in his eyes. “John? Fuck, man! How the hell are you?”

I dropped my duffel and we exchanged a hug. He pulled back afterwards and took a good look at me.

“Goddamn, it’s good to see you!”

I nodded. “And you! It’s been too long.”

We’d met during Basic Combat Training but had gradually lost touch since graduation.

“Jesus,” he shook his head, “How long’s it been? Three years? Shit, what’ve you been doing with yourself?”

“Oh, you know. Putting boot to ass for the Protectorate. The usual.”

He grinned. “I hear that. Hey, did they get you squared away yet?”

“Not yet,” I said, retrieving my duffel from where I’d dropped it. “In case you haven’t noticed, I only just got here.”

“Oh, well then, follow me,” he said, gesturing grandly. “You can stow that in my room ‘til yours is ready. You eaten yet? I was just on my way to chow.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

The mess hall thundered with hundreds of voices as Vasek and I took our place in the chow line. Pushing our trays along, we emerged out the other end, our plates piled high with pasta, potatoes, mixed greens and roasted whatever-the-fuck-passes-for-chicken-on-Foundry.

“So, you got shipped out here too, huh?” Vasek asked as we searched for seats. “What rock did they find you under?”

“The *Passchendaele*,” I said. “How about you? Still

on the *Modesto*?”

He grew serious. “Actually, no. We lost the *Modesto* during the Sunder Campaign. My platoon was stranded for a week planetside before they could send anyone in to get us.”

My eyebrows rose. “No shit? I hadn’t heard.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I’m not surprised, considering how slowly word gets around out here. But anyway, I was transferred to the *Tarawa*. Served there almost a year.”

“And then the next thing you know, you find yourself high and dry out here?”

He laughed ruefully. “Right! And the timing couldn’t have been worse, either! I mean, I was *this* close to finally baggin’ the cute little assistant astrogation officer!”

“Sorry to hear that,” I said, laughing too. Back in Basic, we’d called him ‘Tails,’ what with the way he pursued women with all the eagerness of a dog chasing its own rear end.

He shrugged dismissively. “Ah, there’s more where she came from.”

I spotted two empty bench spaces across from one another at one of the packed tables and we both made a beeline for them, dropping our trays on the table and hurriedly seating ourselves. Beside us, two other troopers were eating while talking animatedly, or at least one of them was. He gesticulated wildly while his friend sat listening with a skeptical expression on her face. I couldn’t help but listen in.

“I’m telling you, it makes sense!” He said, with desperate conviction. “It’s all a cover-up!”

She rolled her eyes. “Christ, not this again.”

“No, really, think about it!” He implored. “Droids don’t get tired, they don’t need to be fed, they can take way more physical punishment and they follow orders without question. They’ve had the technology to replace us all for years! They’re doing it bit by bit, but of course they don’t tell the troops ‘cause that would be a killer blow to morale.”

“But they *don’t* have the technology!” The woman said, obviously not interested in the course the discussion had taken but compelled to make her point. “Human instincts and reflexes are way too complex to program into a machine, not to mention our decision-making and morality. Even if they *did* field a battalion of droids, they’d still need real, live humans behind the controls.”

The guy grinned and took a breath.

“And don’t give me that cyborg brain transplant shit,” she continued before he could speak, “Because that’s just stupid. If anyone figured out a way to do that, it’d be all over the news.”

Her refuter’s eyes lit up. “Not necessarily. I mean, think about it! How do we spread information out here?”

She sighed. “Shift drones?”

“Exactly! Without any real-time interstellar communications, we’re essentially left blind, deaf and dumb, waiting on the news like it’s the goddamn Pony Express.”

She rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated. “So?”

“So, who’s in charge of routing the drones?”

“The Colonial Authority?”

He snapped his fingers and extended them

towards her like a pair of cocked pistols. "Got it in one! All interstellar communications have to go through the Authority, so if anyone tries to blow the whistle, they're in the perfect position to squelch it before anyone hears."

Satisfied that he'd made his point, the man folded his arms across his chest and leaned back. The woman continued to eye him strangely.

"You seriously need to stop reading those conspiracy rags," she said, finally. "They're making you stupid."

"They're not rags," he said, indignantly. "Just because they aren't as well-funded as what the Man wants you to read doesn't mean they're of lesser quality than anything else in the so-called free press!"

She sighed again, heavier this time. "Whatever. Are you even listening to yourself? You're not only implying that the Authority is screening every scrap of mail sent between Earth and the colonies, but that they're doing it over something that anyone could see is totally ridiculous."

"It's *not* ridiculous!" He insisted, "An autonomous robotic soldier would be the military's Holy Grail! They'd be stronger, faster and better than you or me in every way imaginable and if you don't think they'd take advantage of that, then *you're* the delusional one! As far as they're concerned, we're obsolete! Why aren't you outraged by this? I mean, is this what we're fighting for? So that someday we'll all be replaced by robots?"

She shook her head tiredly. "Could we please talk about something else for a change?"

I caught the mischievous glint in Vasek's eye and before I could stop him, he leaned over, affecting a look of deep concern that creased his face.

"Hey, buddy," he said to the conspiracy nut, deathly serious. "You should keep your voice down. Anyone else finds out you know about Project TINMAN and it'd be bad news all around."

This only served to set the man off again and as his companion buried her face in her hands, I went back to my food.

CHAPTER THREE

When reveille sounded at 0530 the next morning, I still hadn't received any word about my expected duties. I was reminded of a half-joke I'd heard upon arrival at my first posting after Basic. *I am but a mushroom – kept in the dark and fed bullshit.*

Since I had no orders, I figured I was free to do whatever I wanted. For the hell of it, I decided to join the PT formation and take advantage of the fresh air, something I couldn't get when stationed aboard a ship. It beat sitting on my hands.

After the run, I grabbed a quick shower and was just on my way to get some breakfast when I received orders to report to one of the briefing rooms at 0800 hours.

Fuck. I was already late.

I double-timed it over to the briefing room and slipped inside. There were only about a dozen or so others already seated, scattered in ones and twos around the room among the rows of simple

auditorium-style folding chairs. I noticed Conspiracy Guy and Skeptic Chick down near the front and Vasek by himself in back, picking at his teeth with a fingernail. I slid into the seat beside him and he smirked.

“Cutting it a bit close, are we?”

I opened my mouth to tell him to fuck off but just then, one of the doors at the front of the room swung open and a stocky man with close-cropped ginger hair and a staff sergeant’s insignia pinned to his uniform stepped in carrying a digital tablet. We all stood to attention as he set up behind the podium. Casually flicking a glance up at us, his eyes darted around the room before returning to, and lingering on, his tablet. We remained at attention.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he said finally, eyes still riveted to his tablet.

“Good morning, Staff Sergeant!” We chorused.

He finally looked up. “Take your seats.”

After some brief rustling of uniforms and squeaking of chairs, we were all seated. He studied us detachedly from behind the podium, then took a breath.

“Now, you’re all probably wondering why you’ve been transferred from your respective combat units to this miserable hunk of rock in the ass-end of Protectorate space.”

He paused just long enough for his eyes to sweep around the room again. “Rest assured that all your questions will be answered but before going any further, I have to inform you that everything you’re about to hear is classified under the Official Secrets Act. None of it leaves the confines of this room

under threat of treason. If any of you don't feel fit to keep your mouth shut, there's no shame in leaving now. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," we said, probably sounding more than a little confused. The sergeant didn't seem to notice or care.

"Good," he said when nobody moved. "In that case, let's begin."

With that, the main doors were closed and locked, and the blinds over the windows lowered. The door at the front of the room opened again and in walked another man I didn't recognize, wearing the uniform and insignia of an Infantry major. We all snapped to attention and saluted.

"As you were, gentlemen," the major said, returning the salute. "Please, take your seats."

We sat.

He stepped up to the podium and leaned forward on his elbows, gravely studying the assembled faces. "I'm Major Calabrese, Military Intelligence Corps, and I have a confession to make. Your reassignment to this garrison was a cover story we set up in order to assemble you all here covertly. We've got a critical operation in the works and you each met a set of very stringent criteria in order to be considered for a part in the mission. You should all be extremely proud of yourselves."

Picking up a remote control off the podium in front of him, the major aimed it at a holo-projector set up nearby and pressed a button. Imaging mist descended from the ceiling as the projector hummed to life and displayed a three-dimensional image of a planet with two orbiting moons.

“This is the colony world of Albion,” he began, “Located 21.7 light-years from Earth, and home to the rebels we’ve been fighting for the past few years. Albion has two moons, Caliburn and Clarent, and the planet itself is approximately a hundred and twenty-five percent Earth’s size. A day on Albion lasts just under thirty-two Earth hours and a year lasts three hundred and twenty-three days.”

Most of this I already knew, but of course a corporal didn’t interrupt a major unless he wanted to flush his career away. Darting a glance over at Vasek, he shot me an exaggerated eye roll.

“Recently,” the major continued, “One of our embedded operatives here pointed us in the direction of a captured CF frigate being used as a mobile Legion supply depot. A small contingent of Colonial Rangers managed to retake control of it, and after sifting through the contents of its databanks, we discovered an encrypted Legion communiqué. The exact nature of the message is unclear, but it seems to center around something referred to as SWORDSTONE, which we believe to be a codeword of some kind. None of our assets on Albion have been able to uncover anything more about it, and our own intelligence analysts can’t make anything of it either.”

I sat up a little straighter. This was getting good.

“This brings us to your mission. Your primary objective is to discover the meaning of this codeword and the extent of any Legion operations attached to it. If there are any military, scientific or intelligence implications behind it, we want to know.” A short pause. “The secondary objective is

to extract our operative for debriefing.”

Another click of the remote brought up a slowly-rotating 3D wireframe schematic of a starship. “This is the *CFV Iroquois*, most recently refitted with our latest sensor jamming packages and all the detection countermeasures we’ve got. She will be your ride to Albion.”

He clicked the remote again and the image zoomed in on the side of the ship. A hatch irised open and a small, squared-off-teardrop-shaped object was ejected. It flew away from the ship, then the image froze, reorienting itself on the teardrop. I smiled.

The M6-series ‘Stardiver’ capsule was an entry vehicle I’d always been fascinated by but never had a chance to try for myself. They were expensive and single-use only, so they tended to be reserved for the more elite forces while regular grunts like me were shuttled down in dropships. My grin widened. This was going to be fucking awesome!

“You’ll be delivered to the planet’s surface via standard M6A1 ‘Stardiver’ Orbital Entry Capsules,” Calabrese said, confirming my hunch. “The *Iroquois* will do a quick pass over Albion and make the drop on the fly.”

Another click and the image of Albion and its moons returned. This time, the image zoomed in on the planet, coming to a stop at a vantage point several kilometers above a forested area on the planet’s surface.

“This is your LZ, a few hundred kilometers outside of Avalon, the new capital. Once you land, your CrossLINK gauntlets will automatically send out a

pre-arranged coded message, informing our agents of your arrival. From there, you'll set up camp and wait for them to contact you. Over the course of your mission, intelligence will be provided via secure burst transmission to your CrossLINKs." He put down the remote and looked back over at us. "Are there any questions?"

One of the troops in front raised his hand and the major nodded at him in acknowledgement.

"Sir," he said, "You've told us about our insertion but what about our extraction?"

He didn't answer right away.

Uh oh.

Instead, he pressed his lips together thoughtfully for a few seconds. "That's where things get tricky," he said finally. "We can't keep the *Iroquois* in orbit, that's why we opted for the drop pods. Instead, the *Iroquois* will wait for you in orbit around Bastion, about two and a half light-years away. When you complete your mission, you'll have to arrange your own passage to Bastion."

Vasek and I exchanged worried glances. I had a sneaking suspicion that the most important of the major's stringent criteria was in fact, 'no next of kin.' I kept that thought to myself.

"Are there any other questions?" The major asked.

"Why us, sir?" Vasek asked suddenly. "This sounds like another one for the Rangers."

It was way out of line and I shot him a *shut-the-fuck-up* look, but Calabrese, surprisingly, remained calm.

"That's true," he said. "There's no point in trying

to sugarcoat this. The cold reality of it is, you aren't the first ones to attempt this mission. Both of our previous attempts indeed went to the Rangers, but as you can probably guess, it didn't end well."

He took a deep breath. "Both times the mission was compromised. Our first run never even made it dirtside, they were lit up within minutes of entering the system. On take two, we found out that the Legion has obtained complete dossiers on every active and retired Ranger we have. They were all captured on sight.

"This time, then, we had to get creative. We kept everything off the grid, set up a cover to assemble viable candidates and chose to go with a small team instead of a full platoon. We're going through the same motions at three other facilities – prepping ships, requisitioning equipment, all to make it harder for the enemy to see where we'll be coming from. That's where you come in. We tossed a coin and you won. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, sir," Vasek said solemnly.

"Good," Calabrese nodded and returned his attention to the rest of the room. "Now, do I need to remind you all of the confidential nature of this information?"

"No, sir!" We said.

"Excellent. Report to the south pad for dust off in thirty mikes. Your callsign for this mission will be Task Force Harbinger. Good luck. Dismissed."

We stood and saluted, a gesture the major returned crisply. Then, without another word, we filed out of the briefing room.

If you enjoyed this sample from *Wayward Soldiers*, would you consider giving me some feedback and/or constructive criticism? It would help me grow and develop as a writer and would also be greatly appreciated. You can e-mail your feedback to:

mike [at] firedrakecreative [dot] com

Thanks for your time!

- Mike Tam