



ISLE OF THE BLESSED

Book One

Chapter 4: A New War

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***The Fox's Den, The Mountain
New Avalon, Crucis March
Federated Suns
9 December 3072***

Jackson Davion's boots echoed loudly in the cavernous vehicle bay. He'd had the bay cleared of all personnel, even his security contingent.

Even after all this time there were still hard feelings.

The woman who climbed out of the jeep looked far older than Davion remembered. It wasn't the strands of silver mixed in with her raven hair nor the few extra kilos added to her slender frame.

What had aged her in Davion's eyes was the expression on her lovely face, a certain hardness, as if the universe had shown her more truth than she was quite ready to see.

No doubt that was true.

After all that had happened he couldn't believe he was looking at Lieutenant General Annette Leyland of the Fifth FedCom RCT.

Atomic Annie.

She climbed out of the jeep. Nodded to him. "Marshal."

Davion hesitated. And then he snapped, "I'm not quite sure how to address you. You sure as hell don't deserve the title, 'General.' Would you prefer 'Atomic Annie?'" He stopped abruptly, surprised at his own bitterness.

For a second Leyland's mouth made a wounded "oh" and then the hurt flashed to anger. "That *is* not my name. That's just what Victor's little pets called me."

"It seems like they got that part right," said Davion roughly.

"You seem to forget, Marshal, we were on the same side."

"We were never on the same side," said Davion coldly.

"We both supported Katrina."

"*You* supported Katrina. *I* served the Federated Suns."

"History has been kind to you, Jackson Davion," Leyland said acidly. "It gave you the opportunity to be noble."

"So bitter," he said. He shook his head. "How can I trust you? After what you did before."

"The Black Rats have changed, Jackson." She gestured angrily. "My God," she said, her voice rising. "We came *back*. To stand beside you. What more proof do you want?"

"And as soon as you came back, what did you do? Use WMD again—as your very first act."

"I just saved you," she snarled. "I *saved* you." She was turning red. "I cleared out a *Riga*-class WarShip with my horrible, immoral nukes and all you can do is stand there and complain about how I did it."

She jabbed an angry finger at him. "Look, I did what I had to do. Sometimes war requires uncomfortable choices, Jackson. You'd know that if you fought it from the front lines rather than tucked snugly inside the Fox's Den."

"What do you want?" An arctic chill ran through Davion's words.

"My regiment is here to fight under the banner of the Federated Suns. We want nothing more than to free New Avalon from Word of Blake."

No, Davion thought, you want a little more than that. You want redemption. And you'll start by forcing me to compromise my own morals. *War requires uncomfortable choices.*

"You turned atomic weapons on your own countrymen."

"Sometimes the rules don't apply," she snapped.

She was wrong, Davion knew. The rules *always* applied. When things were going badly wrong, when the temptation to compromise was at its zenith, *that* was the time when the rules mattered most.

Still, something made him take a step forward and say, "You will surrender all your nuclear weapons to me."

She scowled. "You didn't seem to mind them when they were destroying the Wobbie WarShips."

"This is not a negotiation," said Davion tightly. "General."



He looked at her and she looked at him.

She shrugged, palms up. "I have no more nukes. I used them all against the Wobblies."

Davion said nothing, considering. Intel said Atomic Annie had six nuclear weapons remaining when she slipped into the mists of history with the Black Rats. She'd used at least three on the WarShips. Had the other three been vaporized along with the *Stingrays* carrying them or launched fruitlessly into space?

It seemed a likely scenario. Some of those fighters must've been lost trying to punch through the Wobbie defenses.

Davion still didn't believe it. He just couldn't make himself believe she was telling the truth.

He pursed his lips. "Very well," he said, giving Atomic Annie both things that she wanted even though she'd only asked for one.

She came to attention and saluted.

Davion did a perfect about face without returning her salute.

The rules *always* applied and Davion had just shattered one of the big ones. He'd enlisted the help of war criminals.

And at that moment he knew he'd sacrifice far more than his life to save New Avalon from Word of Blake.

He'd sacrifice his very soul.



Camp Alpha Drop Point
200 Kilometers Southeast of Avalon City
20 December 3072

The molten orange limb of New Avalon's sun peeked above the horizon, coloring the eastern sky a pretty tangerine. Zucker stood on a low ridge and drew in the clean smell of dew-kissed grass.

Below him, a wide, flat plain had been taken over by DropShips. The vessels sat in rings of blackened grass where the backwash from their thrusters had burned away the green.

The field was crammed with debarking 'Mechs, armor, and vehicles. The peaceful sounds of morning—bird song, the whistles and clicks of insects, the wind rustling through the brush—gave way to the clank of heavy machinery, the shouts of angry loadmasters.

Below, the Forty-Fourth Shadow Division was debarking, backed up by Bronson's Horde. Zucker told himself he should be happy. Perhaps, at last, they had the numbers to take charge of this grinding stalemate. Geist was promising it would be the final battle for New Avalon, though Zucker had his doubts.

He watched a *Grand Titan* debark from a *Union*. This machine was not painted in the clean white of the true ComStar. It started out pure ebony at the bottom of its blocky feet and slowly faded to a smoky gray at the top of its heavily armored head, the whole thing shaded with an unholy orange that called to mind perdition's flame.

Worse was the emblem on the monster's chest: a downward thrust black broadsword with flaming batwings superimposed over an inverted red triangle and the number "44."

Avitue's Avenging Angels.

Zucker licked his lips.

Avitue. No one had seen her yet, but there were plenty of stories. She carried the name of a dark angel from Tamuldic lore. Avitue was an alias for another unholy name.

Lilith.

The *Titan's* paint job suggested that the name was not an accident.

For this woman, this *Avitue*, was *Manei Domini*—a “Hand of the Master”—a creature cybernetically enhanced to serve the Word, a being that was neither quite machine nor quite human, but perhaps something more.

Zucker shuddered.

The wind shifted and he could smell the odor of burning grass.



BATTLECORPS

Camp Alpha Drop Point
200 Kilometers Southeast of Avalon City
3 January 3073

Sergeant Timothy Saxon of the New Avalon Cavaliers had no idea what to expect after he was captured by Word of Blake. He imagined all kinds of torture and depravity, nights of sleepless terror and pain. Of course he was wrong.

It was far worse than he could've imagined.

They began by binding his arms and legs and blindfolding him. They carried him to a shuttle and tied him down. When the shuttle lifted, he slid sideways until the next prisoner. When the shuttle suddenly changed course his stomach did a flip-flop and he threw up all over himself.

That's how he rode to Valiant, muscles aching, jammed against his fellow soldiers, and covered in his own vomit.

The next thing he knew he was being jerked to his feet, still blindfolded. He was shoved forward. Pins and needles rippled through his sleeping legs and he stumbled, earning himself a vicious cuff to the back of his head.

Somehow he staggered forward.

Until a hatch opened and he smelled an outhouse. Hands pushed him in the back.

He tripped over the hatch's combing and slammed into the steel deck, face first.

And a voice said, "Welcome to Hotel Toaster."



He could tell she'd been an aerospace pilot by the khaki g-suit she still wore, though her right pant leg was stained black with dried blood and the left side of the g-suit had been ripped to reveal a generous helping of breast. Saxon didn't ask how that happened.

He didn't want to know.

Maybe she had been pretty once. Saxon wasn't sure. He'd lost all perspective. Her shoulder-length hair was the color of choco-

late. Her eyes were a translucent brown. But the right side of her face from jaw line to her cheekbone was swallowed by an ugly bruise just starting to yellow.

She was sitting on the deck, back against the far bulkhead, knees pulled up to her chest. Their prison was some kind of maintenance space, barely four meters by three. It was painted haze gray, and it was absolutely empty, except for the young woman sitting against the wall and a stinking pile of filth in the corner.

It was roasting, at least thirty-five degrees and humid, which only made it worse, like he was swimming through a sewage tank. Saxon felt the thrum of machinery through the deck.

"I'd like to talk to the manager," he croaked, "I have a few complaints."

She laughed and her laugh was musical. He felt a sudden surge of hope at the sound, so startling that his breath caught.

She said, "I'm afraid Hotel Toaster isn't much on customer service." She stood up and shook his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Paula Kent."

"Sergeant Timothy Saxon."

She nodded. "So I'm senior."

He snorted. "I don't, uh..." He shook his head. "Does that really matter here?"

She frowned. "It matters here more than anywhere."

He just stared at her.

"Look. The Wobbies are going to do everything they can to strip you of your humanity." She pointed at the pile of shit in the corner. "No toilets. Food at irregular hours. They wake you in the middle of the night. There are beatings." She faltered. Then she swallowed and straightened her shoulders. "And worse."

He took a deep breath.

"They're trying to turn us into animals. And why?"

And though Saxon had never considered the precepts of psychological warfare before, he suddenly understood. "Because animals can be domesticated."



She smiled and for the first time since being captured Saxon thought he might make it.

“That’s right. Sergeant, you and I are a fighting force of the Federated Suns. I want you to remember that. Because as long as we believe it here,” she tapped her forehead with an index finger, “it doesn’t matter what they do to us.”

And after that she got him through the terror, the uncertainty of being a prisoner of Word of Blake, days grinding into a week, and then starting a second.

Until one evening when he awoke to the sound of her sobbing softly to herself.



BATTLECORPS

14 January 3073

The sound of Lieutenant Kent crying scared him more than anything else could have. She'd always been the strong one, always certain of what to do, even in the face of the Wobbie's worst abuses.

His mouth tasted dry. After what she'd been through he couldn't imagine what could've broken her.

It was pitch black, which Saxon supposed meant it was night, though their captors didn't follow any obvious patterns when turning the lights on and off.

He crawled over to the sound of her voice, touched her shoulder. She pulled away, but he pulled her to him, wrapped his arms around her. "Shhh," he whispered.

She buried her face into his neck. He felt the slickness of her tears against his skin, the heat of her breath. Her body shook as she cried.

"What is it, Paula?" he whispered. "What's wrong?"

He would've been very surprised to learn he'd just used her first name.

She drew in a deep, shuddery breath. In the darkness, he gently stroked her hair.

"I h-heard two guards talking."

He could feel her shaking her head.

"They got Jackson Davion, Tim. They *killed* him."

He shook his head. "No. That can't be. Ol' Jackson is safe in the Fox's Den."

"No. No, he's been moving. They said they ambushed him. He's *dead*, Tim."

He felt a sudden coldness in his guts. Jackson Davion dead? And suddenly Saxon understood how much of his own hopes had been pinned on the wily old man. With Victor gone, with Yvonne missing, Jackson was the one Davion still standing.

And now he was dead.



Suddenly his right hand was trembling. He closed it into a fist to steady it. *No*, he thought fiercely. There is more to us than just one man. *There has to be.*

"There's always hope," he said.

"No," she whispered.

And then there in the darkness, feeling her despair in the tremors that wracked her slender body, he leaned down and touched her ear with his lips. Speaking a word, a single word, so softly that no bug could possibly pick it up.

"Legion," he said.

Because it was pitch black, he couldn't see the smile that stole across her face.



**Camp Alpha, Word of Blake Headquarters
200 Kilometers Southeast of Avalon City
16 January 3073**

Geoffrey Zucker was just bringing what was left of his Level III back from another pointless battle with the Black Rats, when he got word that Geist wanted to see him. The message sent a chill running down his back. Geist had never been a nice man, but since the destruction of *Red Angel* he'd become crazy-strange. Zucker heard whispers. Of prisoners tortured and murdered.

Raped.

He suspected Geist had suffered a psychotic break.

And now he wanted to see Zucker.

He strode down a sidewalk, dark thoughts chasing around his head despite the pretty spring day. The camp, such as it was, was an old AFFS armory. It had long been empty of ordnance, of course, but some of the buildings were still standing. Most importantly, it lay only a few clicks from the M11 and easy access to Avalon City.

So far Avitue had done nothing but sit aboard *Mordred*. There was no sign that she knew or cared about the battle, which had devolved into an occasional skirmish with Fed units when they could find them, and lots of nerve-wracking waiting when they couldn't. And she hadn't done anything about Geist either.

Zucker wasn't sure how to feel about that. Geist was a problem, but Avitue just might be worse. Had Blake *really* forseen the Manei Domini? Were they really a step down the path of righteousness?

Zucker turned a corner and strode toward a white-washed stucco building that had all the charm of a brick. He double-timed up the dozen steps and went straight to Geist's office.

The pretty young acolyte at the desk nodded at him and said, "Go right in." She was maybe nineteen, blond, and built. But the thing that bothered Zucker most about her was her accent: pure New Avalon. So Geist was pressing locals into service—just exactly what *kind* of service was best not contemplated.

Zucker rapped at the door and then pushed through. He caught sight of another pretty young acolyte in a white robe sitting in

one of the two visitor chairs facing Geist's blond ash desk, but he didn't spend a lot of time looking at her.

Geist sat behind the desk, hunched forward over some papers, head bowed as if deep in thought.

Zucker came to attention. "Demi-Precentor Zucker reporting as ordered, sir."

Nothing. Geist didn't move, didn't even look up.

"Sir?"

No response.

Suddenly Zucker realized that the papers on Geist's desk were stained with an irregular splotch of red. Zucker lunged across the desk and jerked Geist's head up. Sightless eyes stared through him.

Someone had drilled a neat hole right through the center of his forehead.

Zucker heard a clunk behind him as if something heavy and metal had been set on wood.

He dropped Geist, whose head hit the desk with a clunk, wheeled, and saw a black slug-thrower sitting on the corner of the desk, the acolyte's right hand resting on the weapon. He met her eyes.

And then she said in a perfectly steady voice, "I'm afraid Precentor Geist just wasn't working out."

She was beautiful. Not the brassy beauty of the young thing in the reception area, more of a wholesome girl-next-door beauty. She wore her dark hair long, touching her shoulders. Her eyes were translucent brown. And she had lovely skin the color of cream, except on the right side of her face where a monstrous bruise was starting to yellow.

"Avitue," he whispered.

She bowed her head in acknowledgment. "You *are* perceptive."

Zucker turned to look at the body of the former commander of Word of Blake forces in New Avalon. "You murdered him."

"He lost two WarShips and failed to bring the planet under control. And his...appetites bring discredit upon our order. Surely you've noticed."



Zucker said nothing.

She leaned back in her chair. "It was a problem you could not solve and I solved it for you. Why do you object?"

"Because—" he stopped, shook his head. "Shouldn't you be having this conversation with Precentor McQuinn of the Thirty-First? Or one of the XO's?"

She snorted. "They are fools, Zucker. All of them. If they are quite fortunate they will not end up buried in the same unmarked grave as this one." She jerked her head at Geist's motionless body.

His mouth tasted dry. "But I'm different?"

She nodded. "Yes. You're smart. And more importantly you may yet prove to be useful."

He frowned. "How do you know?"

She fixed him with a grave look. "All Manie Domini have an auxiliary brain implanted here—" she touched her abdomen just below her left breast, "—used for processing impressions about human behavior."

Zucker's eyes widened. "Really?"

For a second Avitue looked every bit the dark angel her name suggested, and then she burst out laughing.

Right then Zucker knew she was different than Geist. She would be ruthless, but not because she was cruel. She would do it because she had to.

"No, of course not," she said. "I found out about you the same way anyone would—by asking and listening." Her voice dropped a notch. "I do hope you will eventually come to appreciate my special abilities," she said. "As I respect yours."

The only thing Zucker could think to say to that was, "Yes, Precentor."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Now. Tell me how this war is going."

"I, uh—" Zucker took a deep breath to steady himself. "Y-you want me to—"

"Any time before the Third Transfer would be fine," said Avitue.



Zucker swallowed. "Yes Precentor. We still control the skies, but barely. *Red Angel* is gone and *Divine Forgiveness* hasn't had a regular maintenance upkeep in four years. Systems are starting to fail. She spends two orbits out of three laid up in dock."

"We still have *Mordred*," said Avitue.

"Yes, but it's a big world. And Jackson Davion knows it better than we."

"Jackson Davion," she whispered.

"He's safe in the Den. We can't get to him." Zucker shook his head. "Not with effectively one WarShip to hold the system and watch the planet."

"So we are forced into a guerilla war with an evenly-matched force that knows the territory far better than we and has the support of the native population. Is that the way you see things, Demi-Precentor?"

Was she trying to pin him down, make a case for disloyalty? Had Geist told her something about his father? Zucker swallowed, glanced at Geist's body. No. Avitue didn't seem to be too concerned about making cases. "Yes, Ma'am," he said softly.

"So what is your prognosis?"

It was a trap, Zucker knew it was a trap. But he didn't know how not to answer.

"We can't win this war," he said stiffly.

She nodded. "Yes, that's exactly right. That's why we're done fighting *this* war. It's time to fight another."

The Fox's Den, The Mountain **17 January 3073**

Keeping the Den supplied had turned into a nearly impossible task. There had been a time when Captain Rolf Dreier had considered himself a logistics officer. Now he thought of himself as a smuggler.

"Subaltern Tian," Dreier called out to the khaki back retreating down the long, empty hallway.

The young woman turned. "Yes, sir?"

"Subaltern, it has come to my attention that we are short on fresh milk, eggs, chicken, bread—"

"Sir, the merchants left in the City don't want to ship to us. No one wants to have a truck confiscated."

Dreier blinked. "So? We're in the middle of the bread basket, are we not? Negotiate directly with the farmers and have them deliver in small shipments that aren't so obviously intended for military use. Do I have to think of everything myself?"

"Yessir," said Tian. "I mean, no sir."

She turned to leave, but Dreier stopped her. "Listen. I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself."

She looked at him expectantly.

"I need you to scrounge up a couple bottles of Hebridan Estates Merlot, 3015. It needs to be delivered to the Cantor site by the twentieth."

Her jaw dropped open. "Hebridan Estates— Why don't you just ask for an *Aegis*-class WarShip."

Dreier fixed her with a steely gaze. "Can you deliver an *Aegis*-class WarShip?"

"Well, I, don't, uh—"

"Then may I suggest, Subaltern, that you refrain from making promises you can't honor and instead focus on your duties."

The young woman licked her lips. "But this is impossible."

Dreier drew a deep breath and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "The wine is a surprise for Marshal Davion. He's carrying the entire burden of New Avalon's defense on his shoulders and now the Wobblers are chasing him out of the Den. The least we can do is provide him with a few comforts."

"But—"

"Look, Tian. You and I will never pilot a 'Mech. We may never even pick up a rifle. But we make it possible for the warriors to do what they do. So don't complain about impossibilities. We are logistics officers. The impossible is our business." Then he turned and swept away.

"Yes sir," she muttered. Then, shoulders slumped, she turned to go.

Neither of them noticed the corporal stacking boxes in a storage room just off the passageway.

