



CASE WHITE: ALPHA

Phaedra M. Weldon

TerraSec Command and Control
Geneva, Terra
Word of Blake Protectorate
13 March 3068

"Precentor Alsace, we're receiving an Omega-Prime Priority signal. Real-time HPG..." a comm tech said in a voice nearly downgraded to a whisper with shock.

My head was one of many heads turning to look at the surprised tech. She focused wide eyes on me. *Real-time HPGs are so rare—*. I knitted my eyebrows together and gave her a single nod, meant to convey confidence. "Where is it originating from?"

The tech replied, "Transit Point. Looks like a relay through New Earth—Lyrans space."

I heard the doors to the command and control room open; heard the echoing clack of her heels on the buffed, tiled floor.

She was coming.

A tall, looming figure in white robes stepped through the safety doors.

In the years of my service I'd only heard rumors of the Manei Domini—the Hands of the Master. Manei Domini—a chosen few—handpicked to bear the marks of obedience and belief. A mixture of cybernetic enhancements and flesh, rumored to have been wedded to their very souls. Fear them, believe in them, follow them.

And until the first blow was struck against the unbelievers, I thought such a sect a myth to frighten away doubt and insolence.

Until I met Azrael.

I knew fear at that moment, though my deep-seated prejudices barely called Azrael a man. Precentor Azrael, the Master's Hand on Terra. I feared them. I feared him—Azrael—most of all, feared his calm stare, tranquil voice, and quick temper.

Until *she* took his place as Azrael's presence in the control room.

Demi-Precentor, Lamashti.

I watched the cloaked figure gracefully take her place on the dais

above my own, her face deep within the hood. The Ghost Adepts were implanted with communication technology years in advance of anything I could understand. And hearing. A whisper across a room would could not escape her.

It was rumored Lamashti could hear one's very thoughts.

And maybe that was why she had taken over as the leader of Terra's defense. She was watching me. Watching us all. And listening to see whose loyalty would break during the oncoming storm.

I wasn't dull—not in the least. I knew she'd been left here to watch *me*, to listen to *me*, to weigh *my* actions. All for Precentor ROM Alexander Kernoff, the man who could order my replacement.

Permanently.

Lamashti glanced at me from her position upon the highest podium. The seat of the precentor. "Receive incoming HPG," she said in her smooth, velvety voice. Every holovid within the control and command room went dark, if only for a few seconds, before being replaced with—

I tightened my jaw so that I wouldn't react, wouldn't make a sound. Several of my people weren't as quick, and when I glanced at Lamashti to see how she reacted to their responses, her only acknowledgement was a blissful smile.

The image on the holovid was grainy, but no amount of static could blur away the horror of the face before us. It was a man—or the facsimile of one. The entire right side was nothing more than a series of shiny, metal plates, myomer bundles, and a cybernetic eye. It glowed a soft, piercing green.

The fleshy part of his head was clean shaven, so much like Lamashti's, save for the dark eyebrow over his left eye, which appeared to be jet black. I narrowed my eyes at the image, my mind trying to pinpoint the heritage of the face—with the dark skin-tone and slight fold to his natural eye—perhaps Polynesian?

His neck and torso were clothed in deep, blood red robes, leaving what lay beneath to the imagination. I did not want to know—I had only glimpsed an image of this man once before.

I did not need an introduction.

"Apollyon," Lamashti said in her silky voice. She bowed her head and then collapsed her entire frame forward. I was sure if the con-

trol console had not been before her, she would have groveled on her knees.

Taking our cue from the Ghost Adept we did as she did—each afraid to do anything else.

“Brothers and Sisters of the Word,” the half-man on the screen intoned. His deep, strangely accented voice was filled with strength and authority. “You face a sacred challenge today. The heretics have declared a holy war upon Blessed Terra and all those who defend her. Know that the Master is with you, and that you shall not fail. No matter the means—no matter the cost—the traitors to humanity shall not stain Terra with their presence again....”

Lamashti gave a strong nod.

I frowned at first, unsure of what the message could mean—until the first perimeter klaxon rang out. It was just after midnight. The ComStar fleet was no longer on approach.

They were here.

“All hands—we’re green,” came the voice of a male tech to my right.

“Lamashti,” Apollyon’s image continued, snapping all eyes back to his, “know also that I shall soon be coming to humanity’s cradle personally. Should you seize any of these foolish infidels alive, present a list to me before my arrival. I will alert Azrael myself.”

The Ghost Adept bowed deeply again, and was rewarded by the same gesture from the man-machine on the viewscreen, right before his image—thankfully—dissolved. The screens returned to their wire-framed grid of the space surrounding Terra.

I scanned the holovids as they popped up one by one, twenty-by-seventeen centimeter wireframe grid-patterned tacticals of the space surrounding Terra, giving me a three hundred and sixty degree image with me at the center. A feeder rested snugly in my ear, attached to a fiber-optic mic centimeters from my lips. From here I would watch and give aid to the planet’s defense.

To Lamashti.

I looked at each of my people, at the mixed expressions of fear and determination. Win we would—but at what costs? And how many lives? How many of us here had lost family and loved ones to this war already? Lost our humanity?

I shook my head. Such thoughts! Heresy Lamashti would claim if she could truly hear them.

My first feed of information disproved the previous intel of thirty Com Guard WarShips.

There were only twenty.

I suffered myself a slight smile. *So some of the ROM reports were lacking. Azrael doesn't know everything, does he?* But it didn't matter. Twenty, thirty, or even forty—they would all disappear soon enough. To die on a fool's mission.

It was my turn to initiate the systematic silencing of HPG stations, closing of spaceports and severing of radio broadcasts. Lamashti gave the order to attack even as her own screens came into view and settled eye-level.

Cheers rang out amid the faithful as the first of the Com Guard Warships, *Avenging Sword*, faded before winking out of existence. Their first victory—and most certainly not their last.

I watched the maneuvering of the Com Guard as they regrouped, pursed my lips as hundreds of aerospace ships engaged, fired, and died. *This isn't going to last long. It'll all be over with the blink of an eye.*

My com rang in my ear and I listened intently to the battle even though I had no direct control. I could observe, but not interfere. I heard Lamashti's calm, soft orders to each ship, which I knew would be relayed by the command. And each order would be handled efficiently.

"Hollings York has been destroyed," Lamashti said.

Another cheer went up within the room, this one louder than before. Whether it was a fully-felt emotion, or simply a show for the Manei Domini, I didn't know. It seemed a secret fire now smoldered within the room—perhaps it was fed by Apollyon's words.

I switched the wireframe tactical to camera angles provided by thousands of satellites on orbit around the Clark Belt. Several more of the ComStar fleet were in trouble, glowing red from multiple hits of damage, the fires extinguishing just as quickly as the oxygen inside each of the ships burned.

"Praise be to Blake, Alsace" Lamashti said as she turned her face to me.

I looked up at her. It was her eyes that bothered me.

She was beautiful—exquisite. She gently pulled her hood back, exposing her bare head. Porcelain skin glowed beneath the fluorescent lights. Even the curve of her skull was intoxicating.

The absence of facial hair only enhanced the silver orbs that danced in her eyes where her pupils should be. I'd heard not all of the Ghost Adepts accept the optic enhanced lenses—some of them reportedly even went blind—and kept to the sonic cybernetics only. *I wonder if she actually risked blindness for those silver disks just for effect, rather than for use. They gave her an unearthly opposing figure.*

I schooled my features into my old familiar mask of piety and nodded to her in agreement. So far her tactical command had proven correct. Not one of the WarShips would survive.

"Precentor," came a soft voice in my left ear where my receiver rested. "You have a private message."

Private message?

I glanced around the control room. Which acolyte had risked their lives to feed in a personal call?

"Thank you," I said absently into the mic and moved my fingers deftly over the communication controls as I sat back in the chair. "Alsace," I said.

"David," came a familiar voice. Beth, my wife of three years and best friend. "They're here, aren't they? We can see the battle in the sky."

I took a deep breath. "Yes." I inwardly cursed myself for making my wife my confidant—I should never have loosened my own belief in security. Yet since losing Katie, my first love, eighteen years ago... I had been a lonely man before finding Beth Harris, marrying her, and starting a family. In this crazy world gone mad, she was my port of sanity.

But it had been unfair to burden her with the same worries I shouldered day to day as the Precentor of Terran Security. Even if the job held little more than a title as long as creatures like the Manei Domini existed.

Aware Lamashti was close, I spoke in code to my wife. "The battle is going well—perhaps you could get a better view of it in

Carentan." My family had been vacationing in France with her family. I wanted her to stay there, and stay away from Geneva.

"I want to be in Geneva with you." She paused. "Whoa—the baby kicked. See? Even he's unhappy unless he's with his daddy."

The thought of my son, still growing strong inside his mother's womb, warmed me. I kept my voice low, still speaking in the secret code we had worked out years earlier. "Is the shuttle nearby?"

"She's playing in the other room," Beth said about their two year old. "She's picking up French pretty good."

"Alsace," Lamamshti said. The smooth voice channeled directly into my personal com. "We have a battle to win, do we not?" I cringed at the petty insolence in Lamashti's voice. I looked up at the holovids, switched from camera back to tactical. The remaining Com Guard ships were closing in on the Word's line. An alarm rang out as smaller red triangles, dozens of them, appeared around the blinking and pulsing WarShips.

DropShips.

"Precentor, I have to go—" I smiled to imply the caller at the other end did not wish to hang up. "The battle is escalating." I kept my eyes on the vid in front of me. "Yes, yes—Carentan is the best place," and I disconnected.

I made a point of focusing on the fight as well, checking the position of the red icons representing the Com Guard and the position of our forces.

So *many* DropShips.

I understood their tactic. Desperation had prompted them to converge, to rush at the line. Throw a hundred darts at the target in hope that one will stick. I switched my view from grid to camera.

I saw a potential problem and turned to look up at Lamashti.

But she was already on her feet, her gaze narrowing as she watched the vids, the tacticals, listening to something.

"We have confirmation," one of the com techs said in a panicked voice. "DropShips have entered the atmosphere."

I turned back to my own vids. "They're getting through!" someone yelled from the command floor.

“Impossible,” Lamashti said, her voice rising even as she rose from her chair. I did not like look of obvious disbelief on her face. And I knew—she’d never considered any contingencies.

Never allowed for failure.

And here was my main complaint with the Manei Domini. So pious, so full of their own superiority—they never considered a mistake possible. She couldn’t believe a single DropShip could ram itself through.

Not possible.

But it *was* possible, and it was happening. I couldn’t see it for myself, but I could imagine it from the ground. Innocent people looking up into the skies, and seeing through the clouds the massive, spherical DropShips of the enemy barreling down on them.

“We have two confirmed DropShips on Terran soil,” came the panicked voice of an Adept. “Two DropShips in lower North America.”

I felt my stomach twist.

I looked to Lamashti as any good follower would.

Her expression was blank, her silver eyes distant. Either she was in communication with her maker or she’d tuned out. She’d never calculated for a mistake.

Luckily I had.

I switched com channels and stood, moving down the stairs to be with the Acolytes and Adepts. “Willams—I want exact locations and times of every DropShip. I want to know where it lands and how close are the nearest troops. Badar—get me a communiqué on every available Precentor not fighting on the line. Tell them to scramble all available ground forces—”

“We have more confirmations of DropShips,” came another voice from the command floor.

And thus it went. I knew in reality it was only minutes but anxiety has a way of growing time—of pulling it like taffy until one’s nerves are made of the weakest points and snap.

I grouped the intel gathered by my people and focused it on the largest screen in the center of the room. Red dots indicated confirmed reports of enemy DropShips.

Ground troops.

'Mechs.

Lamashti had sat back down, her silver eyes wide, her face stone.

"One more in North America. Two more in Europe—Germany."

Germany. I put my hands to my chin. Oh God—oh please not France. Please—stay away from France. I keyed the information up as it was fed in.

The enemy was in Germany.

"Latvia! They've landed in Latvia!" I knew that voice—it belonged to the same acolyte that had piped in Beth's message to me.

Several more Com Guard icons vanished from the grids.

But no one was paying attention to the battle in space.

"There are a few more," came the first voice.

My chest tightened. Oh God...

"Confirmation from France. DropShips have landed in Northern France."

France.

I gripped the console in front of me.

Beth was in France.

As well as my unborn son and daughter.

Silence came slowly—if there were more reports of DropShip landings, I didn't hear them. I called up the reports the acolytes were reading and searched through the cities of Northern France.

So close....

I took in a deep breath and turned to Lamashti. "Demi-Precentor."

She blinked. Once. Looked down at me.

"We must mobilize the ground forces. We only have—" I bit back cutting words. They burned my throat when I swallowed. "I have to get my units moving. Do you think you can handle things from

here?" If she were paying attention to me—truly listening to the acid in my voice—she might have struck me down. Instead, she only nodded.

I turned, mentally tallying the defenses on-world.

Enough?

We were alone.

And with that I moved quickly out of the control and command room, my boots stomping on the polished tiled floor.

ComStar was no longer on approach.

They were here.

