

OUTPOST 217

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Chapter One

As Admiral Redstone debarked from his transport he was appalled by the condition of the station. There had been no communications from Outpost 217 for almost nine days, and his transit convoy from the front lines back to HQ had been, annoyingly, but also worryingly, diverted to investigate. Even admirals had to sometimes bend to necessity, and Outpost 217 *was* a very important part of the border defense network, so, on an impulse he didn't understand, Redstone decided to make the trip himself.

As he stepped off the stairs with his aide he was confronted by a sergeant in a filthy uniform with smudges on his face, who, to give the youngster his due, snapped off a perfect salute, which was returned with a senior officers casualness.

Holding out an ID pad the disheveled sergeant said, in a voice raised slightly over the cacophony of banging, welding and other noises created by the copious repair work, "Welcome aboard, sir. Please identify yourself."

Suppressing a smile Redstone semi-barked, "Don't you know who I am, soldier?"

"I know who you appear to be, sir, but we are on a level one security protocol, and everyone who enters the station must be identified."

"And if I refuse?"

The Sergeant looked over his shoulder and shouted "Security alert!" The supposed honor guard of four privates behind him immediately drew their weapons. Two of the privates pointed their weapons at the Admiral and his aide while the others covered door of the transport.

Although his aide looked panicked, Redstone simply raised his voice slightly saying, "Stand down, Sarines," placed his hand on the ID pad, firmly intoning as he had done thousands of times before, "Redstone, Maxwell P., Fleet Admiral, Sirius Sector Command."

The Sergeant looked at the pad, which blinked that the ID was valid and said, “Thank you, Admiral. Protocol requires that we also ID your aide and the crew of your transport, sir.”

“Very well.” Redstone looked at his aide. “Commander, ID yourself.” As Commander Wall sullenly placed his hand on the ID pad, the Admiral touched the comm unit at his left ear. “Redstone here. Captain, you and your crew need to be IDed by station personal. Please cooperate. That’s correct. Thank you, Captain.” He clicked off his earpiece and patiently waited in blank-faced silence, although his eyes were very busy.

Sergeant James McCall ordered his detail to safe and holster their weapons, then handed the ID pad to one of the privates, instructing her to ID the crew. Despite his outward demeanor Sergeant McCall had been almost paralyzed by the appearance of the legendary Fleet Admiral Maxwell “Mad Max” Redstone. A stocky man with a bulldog face, grizzled hair and hard, ocean grey eyes, Redstone was one of the greatest battle commanders the fleet had ever known. Angering this man was a sure way to destroy your career. But disobeying orders would have the same effect. McCall was sharp enough to bet that following his orders would be smarter than caving in.

Private Lawrence emerged from the vessel a few moments later and gave a nod. Relieved, McCall said politely, “Thank you for your cooperation, Admiral. How may we be of assistance, sir?”

“You can have someone take me to your CO. I need to know what happened here.”

McCall looked over his shoulder and, to his great relief, saw a now-familiar figure rushing unhurriedly across the hanger bay towards the recently arrived transport. Numerous pads in her left hand, Lieutenant (j.g.) Hannah Stillwell’s eyes widened a bit as she saw the insignia of a senior admiral, but stopped to attention and gave an adequate salute.

“Welcome to Outpost 217, Admiral. I’m Lieutenant Stillwell; how may I be of service?”

Once again returning the salute casually while giving her a surreptitious look up and down, Redstone repeated, “I need to speak to your CO.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “If you would please follow me, sir.”

As Stillwell turned on her heel to walk across the hanger bay Redstone said, “Sergeant?” McCall turned to look at Mad Max, and before he could even respond with a “Yes, sir?” got a small but firm nod and a faint smile, the Redstone seal of approval. Sergeant McCall breathed an inner sigh of relief and felt a twinge of pride at the acknowledgment of one of the fleets most famous officers.

Redstone noted that, unlike his aide, Lieutenant Stillwell had waited for him without any visible impatience. He also noted without a change of expression that, despite the untidy uniform, the dirt on her face and the tired eyes, the young officer was quite attractive, commenting to himself that he was turning into a dirty old man. Well, at least he wasn’t so old that he couldn’t appreciate a pretty face.

“The CO’s quarters are this way, sir,” indicating that the senior officer was to precede her.

“Walk with me, Lieutenant.” Stillwell wasn’t sure how to take this, but did as the bulldog-faced Admiral ordered. “What the hell happened here, Lieutenant?” Redstone asked in a quietly commanding voice.

As they and the trailing aide skirted a work detail she replied, “I don’t really know sir.”

“You don’t know?” he inquired. “How can you not know?”

Taking a deep breath, the wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant explained, “Sir, about ten weeks ago I was seconded to the Fleet from the Bureau of Commerce. We were given three weeks of basic training and two more weeks to familiarize us with the basic protocols and procedures pertaining to military records keeping. I spent six days in transit and arrived here 18 days ago. I spent my time since arrival in a room full of ’puters and pads reviewing, organizing, indexing and collating logs, inventories, reports and personnel files, and logging comm records. Eight days ago I was in the Data Bay with Lieutenant Otani when there was a series of explosions and we suddenly found ourselves on the floor half way across a dark room with sparks flying all over the place. Somehow Lex and I managed to get the hatch open and there was fire and screaming and bodies everywhere. All I know is that a strike force went out and got slaughtered, then we were attacked here. We spent the next couple of days just trying to stay alive and have been working our, uh, tails off ever since. I can give you facts and figures, but I am still ignorant when it comes to the military situation. Excuse me, sir.”

While dodging around another work party Redstone just gave her a curt nod of acknowledgment. He was a bit surprised by the lengthy explanation; not at the explanation itself, but by the honesty and length of such a discourse coming from a very

junior officer. He had to remind himself that she wasn't Fleet, but a co-opted civilian. Unless ordered to do so you were supposed to ask permission first before you spoke at length.

Stillwell twisted the handle of a supposedly airtight hatch and asked, "If you would give me a hand, please, sir?"

Commander Jackson Wall was appalled. Asking an admiral to do menial work? He rushed over to help the insolent brat of a lieutenant – a junior, at that! - but was brought up short by his admirals annoyed, "I've got it."

The door had obviously been twisted and wrenched during the attack, and just as obviously crudely repaired. The green junior and the fabled senior officer struggled a bit but managed to open the hatch, which protested with a metallic shriek. They stepped through, followed by Commander Wall.

Stillwell turned around to shut the hatch, but Redstone almost barked at his trailing aide, "Close it."

Wall, knowing that particular tone in his boss's voice, turned and gave the door an ineffectual push. He then leaned his shoulder into the balky hatch, braced himself, pushed hard and managed to shut the recalcitrant semi-oval, which gave another metallic groan as he did so. As he turned to follow his boss and the insolent junior lieutenant, Commander Wall distastefully brushed dirt off of his formerly spotless uniform.

They walked along a corridor littered with debris, noisily crunching pieces of plastic and metal under their feet. The lighting was erratic, dark in some sections, brighter in others, sometimes randomly blinking with an annoying buzz. They turned down another corridor, which was only marginally cleaner though somewhat better lit, walking past numerous open hatches to the far end of the corridor where they found an ensign standing in front a closed hatch.

Stillwell spoke before she thought, and regretted it before she completed saying, "Hi Kelly."

"Hey there, Hannah. How...." As she turned to greet her newest friend, Ensign Kelly Bowman noticed that Stillwell was accompanied by two senior officers, one of whom was a fleet admiral. She snapped to attention, gave a very precise salute and said, "Please excuse me, Admiral." She stayed stiffly at attention until this most senior officer casually returned her salute.

Indicating Mad Max, Stillwell said, “Admiral Redstone would like to speak with the CO.”

Flustered a bit to be confronted by such a high-ranking personage, but determined to carry out her self appointed duty, Ensign Kelly Bowman took a breath and said, “It’s an honor to meet you Admiral. The CO should be out in just a minute or two.”

The statement hung there for a moment. Commander Wall, already incensed by the, in his opinion, most un-military behavior of the personnel at this filthy, disorganized station, and embarrassed by his admirals curt attitude back at the inadequately repaired hatchway, nearly shouted, “You insolent little twit! This is Fleet Admiral Redstone! How dare you...”

They all turned as Walls tirade was cut short by the loud grating squeal of an opening hatch. It opened a few centimeters, then fingers appeared. Stillwell and Bowman both turned and pushed at the door, which opened suddenly as whatever had been preventing the CO’s egress gave way.

Stepping into the corridor, the CO said, “Thanks, Kelly. I’ll be glad when we finally get around to fixing...” then snapped to military parade attention and smartly saluted as he noticed his eminent caller. “Admiral Redstone!”

Fleet Admiral Maxwell P. Redstone returned the salute with equal precision, then offered his hand. “Sanchez! What in the names of all the Great Gods of the Galaxy are you doing in command of this outpost?” To say Redstone was surprised would have been an understatement. They had encountered each other before, and in very similar circumstances.

“Sir, it’s a long and complicated story. What are you doing here, Admiral?”

To say Commander Wall was nonplussed understated his emotions by cube roots. He and his admiral had been held at gunpoint and forced to ID themselves, even though it was plainly obvious who they were; some pipsqueak of a junior lieutenant speaks candidly to his admiral as if she had the right to do so; then she asks the most famous of admirals to open a door, which was *clearly* menial labor; then Wall himself being *ordered* to close a door; ensigns calling lieutenants by their first name; some squirt of a little girl ensign telling a fleet admiral to wait upon the convenience of a lieutenant commander? And then to find out that the Admiral knew this loser? To make matters worse, his esteemed boss, Fleet Admiral Maxwell P. Redstone, Commander of the Sirius Sector, victor of numerous key battles in several wars, recipient of many of the highest commendations available, had responded to the parade ground salute with one of his

own! And to top it all off, one of the most celebrated people in the Republic smiles and offers his hand to this fool? What was going on here?

In a conversational tone, which further confounded his aide, the Admiral responded, “Well, son, I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d take a little side trip.”

“That was very thoughtful of you, Sir. I just wish you’d called ahead so we could have tidied up a bit. If I may be so bold as to ask, sir, how is Mrs. Redstone? And your sons?”

“Grace is doing just fine. With this lull I actually get to see her once or twice a month. Greg and Kyle are out with the fleet. Greg’s got a fighter squadron, and Kyle is working Intelligence for Admiral Hudak.”

“Outstanding, sir. Please send them my best.”

Getting down to business, Redstone’s face changed. “What happened out here, Commander? You said it’s long and complicated. See if you can shorten and simplify it for me.”

Before Sanchez could answer Stillwell politely interrupted them. “Please excuse me, Admiral, but I need to update the Commander on a few things.”

Redstone gave a thoughtful nod and said, “Go ahead, Lieutenant,” adding more fuel to his aide’s ire. Commander Wall was indignant at the interruption. How *dare* she interrupt an admiral? Especially *his* admiral!

Lieutenant Commander Sanchez took the offered pad and studied it for a moment or two. He handed it to Ensign Bowman who read what was there. Avoiding a sigh, Sanchez said, “Please tell Chief Jardine that I understand and to do the best he can. Tell him to see if it’s possible to strip another... No, he’s probably done that already. Tell him to let us know if there’s anything we can do for him.” Sanchez reflected for a moment. “Hannah, how much coffee do we have left?”

Stillwell consulted one of her pads, tapped a few times and responded, “We’ve got enough left to make about 40 or so gallons, sir.”

Sanchez thought for another moment, then looked at Ensign Bowman. “Send them a big pot. They’ve earned it.”

Handing the pad back to her friend, Bowman replied, “Aye aye, sir. Admiral, if you will excuse me, please?” Accepting the slight nod from this awesome man as permission, she turned and headed down the corridor.

She had only gone a few steps when her new CO called, “And Kelly?”

The ensign turned back expectantly, “Yes, sir?”

With a weary smile Zeo Sanchez said, “Tell the Chief to stick his elbow in his ear.”

As Bowman turned with a chuckle, she almost exclaimed, “Aye aye, *SIR!*” and hurried down the trash strewn hallway.

Mad Max looked at the under-ranked CO of Outpost 217 quizzically and asked, “What the blazes was *that* all about? And what’s all this about coffee?”

“Admiral, it’s one of the Chiefs favorite expressions. ‘It’s about as easy as putting your elbow in your ear.’ It’s sort of become sort of a joke around here, and the Gods know we can use a little levity, sir.” Sanchez even had a slight smile on his face despite his haggard look.

“And the coffee?” Mad Max asked.

“Sir, we’re down to distilled, recycled water from a bunch of field units Corporal Bormon cobbled together and we’re eating field rations. The water tastes terrible, but there’s a Sarine Gunny who can make the field rations almost edible,” Sanchez replied. Mad Max nodded his head.

Lieutenant Commander Wall was growing more resentful by the minute. Who was this guy that he should be so chummy with Fleet Admiral Maxwell P. Redstone? Wasn’t he, Commander Jackson Wall, the admirals personal aide? The Admiral had never been that friendly with Wall, who outranked this clown. Feeling he had been ignored long enough, Wall interjected, “But you didn’t answer the Admirals question about the coffee.”

As the Admirals aide Wall had seen the him annoyed often, irritated only slightly less frequently, had seen him angry a few times, very angry once or twice, and could only guess at the pulsar that had to be lurking underneath. But the cold, icy look that the renowned Fleet Admiral Maxwell P. Redstone gave him with those deep, grey eyes made him fear for his life.

Lieutenant junior grade Hannah Stillwell watched as the Admirals aide shrank to about three sizes too small for his uniform and as sweat suddenly poured down his face. She had seen the look in the admirals eyes, and, despite her inexperience, knew immediately, without actually knowing *how* she knew, why Admiral Redstone was such great battle commander.

Wall quailed as the look hardened even more. “Commander Wall, you will please remove yourself to the transport. Once there you will proceed to your quarters and sit at attention until you are called for. Do you understand me, commander?”

The quiet way those words were tonelessly spoken, almost whispered, was the most terrifying aspect of it all. With the pathetic squeak of a doomed prey animal Wall whimpered, “Yes, sir.”

“I – SAID – DO – YOU – UN – DER – STAND – ME????!!!”

Wall cringed even more and piteously shouted, “Yes, Sir!”

After another long, venomous look Redstone calmly told the now completely crushed officer, “Get the blazes out of my sight.” Wall turned and half ran, half staggered down the dimly lit corridor.

The Admiral watched his pathetic aide for a moment, shifted his feet and stared at the bulkhead. He closed his eyes, took a long, slow, deep breath, and just as slowly exhaled. He did it again, and yet a third time. Sanchez recognized the technique. He had used it many times himself.

As he turned back to the two young officers Redstone said, “My apologies, Commander, Lieutenant.” Stillwell was stunned. The Admiral sounded genuinely contrite.

Giving the Admiral a small, slightly sad smile, Sanchez said calmly, “I understand, sir. No apology is needed. The war is getting to us all.”

Already fascinated by what had transpired over the last several minutes, Stillwell was further astounded by the fact that the Admiral responded to the comment with a sincere look of profound gratitude.

After taking another long breath, Redstone collected himself and said almost casually, “Okay, we’ve had our chit-chat and some entertainment. Let’s get down to cases. What happened out here, son?”

“Well sir, 15 days ago all the Outposts got orders to harass the enemy wherever we could. We sent out a flock of snoopers next day and caught a whiff four, five days later. Eight days ago Captain Carstairs left the station with a strike force of two destroyers and forty fighter-bombers to ambush an enemy supply column.” Sanchez paused and took another breath. “They got mauled, sir. We’ve been trying to piece it all together, but it seems to have been a major relief convoy, not just a supply column. We lost the destroyer commanded by Captain Carstairs and 26 fighters. Commander Marquette managed to get the Emerson home, but it’s a total loss, sir; we’ve been stripping her for parts. Marquette is in the medical bay. We still don’t know if he’s going to make it. No matter what, he’ll never fly again, he’s too badly busted up. I’d like him to get a commendation for getting his bird home, sir.”

“Write it up. I’ll endorse it.”

“Thank you, sir. We were still recovering our birds when the enemy attack force came in. They caught us with five of our bay doors open. Three of the bays were totally trashed, sir; the other two took substantial damage. Eleven more birds were totaled, all the rest took new or additional damage. We took a lot of shock damage as well.”

“When they appeared our BARCOP engaged, then we hit them as hard as we could with our cannon and guns. We took out nine bandits, and one or two took some obvious damage; I don’t know about the rest, sir.”

“I’d say they hit us with somewhere between 20 and 30 fighter-bombers. Our sensors didn’t pick them up until they were almost on top of us. My guess is they followed the remnants of our attack force home.”

“Our main computer is down, comms are shot. One salvo hit our store rooms, got most of our food plus a big chunk of our ammo and spare parts. The water lines are sprung, electric’s a mess. Three cannon are a total loss, seven more are damaged; I’m told we should have three or four of them operational in a day or so, the other ten are still on-line. The rest of the guns are fine. We spent two days patching holes just to keep the air in; Chief Jardine and Chief Nordsiek have worked miracles keeping life support on line. We’ve been trying to effect repairs, but we’re short on everything, sir. Jardine and Nordsiek and their people have been keeping us going with spit and chicken wire. I’d like them to get commendations as well, sir.”

As Lieutenant Commander Sanchez completed his report the enormity of this catastrophe started to sink into the Admirals awareness. All this from an ambush? How was that possible? He needed more information. But now he had to get to the hardest question. He looked at the over-burdened fledgling Commanding Officer of Outpost 217 and gently asked, “Casualties?”

A look of anguished grief passed over Sanchez's face. He drew another of those deep breaths and tonelessly informed his Admiral, "All five bays had full crews when they hit us, sir. At last count we had 165 dead, 11 missing and 83 wounded."

The Admiral was shocked. That was more than half of the stations compliment, even if it was fully staffed, which few units were these days. The war was going badly, which explained why they were quick-training civilians to handle non-combat roles. Redstone cast a glance at Lieutenant Stillwell. Non-combat roles. Sure. Right. Tell that to Stillwell, and all the others like her.

The three of them stood in silence, each with their own thoughts. The moment was broken by the return of Ensign Bowman crunching her way down the passageway. She stopped and snapped off a salute to the Admiral. He returned the courtesy with more than his usual casualness and said, "We can dispense with the formalities people, we've got too much work to do. What do you need, Ensign?"

"Thank you, Admiral. Commander, Chief Nordsiek needs to see you in Ops as soon as you can. Lieutenant Otani wants to know if he can strip anything out of the trashed fighters. Sergeant McCall needs to know what you want him and his people to work on next." She paused, then continued, "Oh, Chief Jardine says they need cream and sugar," completing her litany with a little laugh.

"All right, let's go." Sanchez started to walk down the corridor then halted. "Sorry, sir. With your permission?"

"Get busy, son. You've got a lot on your plate." With one of his faint smiles, Redstone added, "Pretend I'm not here."

With a tired smile of his own Sanchez responded, "Not possible sir; but thank you," and the four officers started their trek back to the hanger bay.

As they walked down the littered corridors Stillwell handed her CO a pad, which he read and tapped, followed by another and yet one more. By this time they had reached the recalcitrant hatchway, which, the Admiral found out, was a lot harder to pull than to push. As it noisily opened they were greeted by the unmusical dissonance of the continuing repair work in Hanger Bay Seven.

As Stillwell and Bowman struggled to shut the hatch Redstone said, his voice raised above the noise, "Go about your business Commander. If you don't mind, since my aide is, uh, indisposed, I'll borrow Ensign Bowman here and take a walk about the station."

“Of course, Admiral,” Sanchez replied. Giving Bowman a serious look he almost ordered, “Take good care of our guest, Kelly,” followed by a, “Sir,” with a respectful nod to the Admiral. He then said, “Let’s go Hannah,” who briefly stood at attention and echoed her CO’s nodding “Sir.” Then they set off at a brisk pace that belied their obvious weariness.