

## Chapter One

*Milky Way galaxy  
Outside of Saturn, 2061*

"Major, I'm under attack!" Static crackled over the com-link, but didn't hide the panic in Private Jenkins' voice. "...requesting back-up!"

Rick Keenan depressed the talk button on his handheld com-link. "Where are you?" He'd made the decision to send the lieutenant out alone. The man had escaped from trickier situations than this before. It shouldn't have been a problem.

Another long period of static broke the response. "...castle... couldn't see... Oh, my God!" The static gave way to a man's terror-filled scream.

Rick's gut clenched. "Be there as soon as we can. Hold on." He glanced around the *Redemption's* interior. Auxiliary power flooded the cramped space with anemic white light. Hoses hung from a few built-in compartments while the crystal panel gave off intermittent flickers then finally blinked off. *We're so screwed.*

"Reigen, what do we need to get this bird back in the air?" Rick barked out the question as he strode to the crystal panel. Down a power source, they'd be sitting ducks to any being—dangerous or otherwise—on the planet.

"Without a whole crystal array replacement, we're not going anywhere. Power core's busted, but I think we can get moving, given enough time." The wiry, red-haired man turned to face him, his long face tight with stress. "Core's needed for hyperspace; crystals are needed to get airborne. You choose which you want more. I'll figure out how long we'll survive without both."

"No time to argue. Grab your gear. We're going after Jenkins." Barely waiting for an acknowledgement, Rick strapped a dagger to his right thigh. "If we're lucky, we'll find someone who can help us."

"And if we're not?"

"Then we'll have a fight on our hands."

So far, the mission had been a bust. He shoved the disappointment from his mind in the face of the new plan. *Find Jenkins. Fix the damn ship. Get home to Earth—and settle into boring bureaucratic red tape.*

Reigen slammed a Beretta pistol into his shoulder holster. "Looks like we're inside some sort of environmental shield."

"Yup. Good thing that damn tractor beam pulled us in. It was the only way into the portal, I'm betting." Which was strange and a blessing. Without the "rescue" they would have been floating and helpless, but it prompted another set of questions. Who had operated the thing and why?

"Oxygen level on the outside, sir? Do we need the suits?"

Rick darted to the control panel and jabbed a few keys. "The atmosphere's a ninety-eight percent match to Earth. We're good to go."

Once free of the beam's pull, they'd been forced to crash land on the moon they'd identified as M-281 outside of Saturn. For all practical purposes, it'd been designated one of that planet's irregular satellite moons. A routine patrol of the area had resulted in their shuttle being hit by space debris and disabling the engines. Now, as he and Reigen jumped out of the shuttle, a glance at the area confirmed what their computerized recon had suggested—this wasn't a moon as much as it was a large chunk of a planet that had been pulled into Saturn's gravitational field—which would explain why sections of it were surrounded by a biosphere. Some of the

more ragged parts probably couldn't sustain life, yet other parts were intact and habitable. From the looks of the forested area around them, much of it was deserted.

*Yup, this will go a long way into convincing the powers-that-be in our government to overturn disbanding the space program.*

"Which way, Major?" Reigen held his FN P90 tight in his right hand. "We have no idea where Jenkins went."

"Yeah, I know." Rick peered through the overcast gloom. Nothing but heavy forest as far as the eye could see. In the distance, a collection of foothills rose out of a gray mist. "There. In those hills. Looks like some sort of fortress or compound. He probably went there searching for alien life." The rolling fog obscured the structure from view. So much for visual confirmation. "He said castle. That comes close."

Reigen nodded. "This place gives me the creeps."

"Just consider it an impromptu vacation to the rainforest of your choice." He hefted his own P90 and started off through the dense underbrush that reminded him of the Amazon back home.

"No thanks. On my time off I have a beer, my ass on the beach and a woman in a bikini on my lap."

"I hear that. The sun would be a nice addition to this Godforsaken world." Something about the overcast sky sent tremors down his spine. Most likely midday and already cold enough to see his breath on the air, he wondered how far the temps would drop after nightfall. For a simulated environment, it was cold. They'd be out of luck without shelter or proper gear. "Let's pick up the pace. I want to get in and out before dark." No way in hell would he be trapped here.

He plunged onward. Reigen crashed through the plant life behind him. Dripping moisture on the bracken beaded on Rick's clothes. Not an ideal situation but one he'd have to endure to rescue Jenkins. No one got left behind. Especially now, on this last mission.

Long minutes slid by without communication between them or further calls from Jenkins. Unseen animals in the canopy chattered overhead. Once he saw the dart of a small rodent-like animal through the brush. No other life forms presented themselves.

"You think this place is inhabited?" Reigen adjusted the bill of his dark green hat. "Looks too lonely for anyone to live here, and why would you want to? It's not exactly welcoming."

"Something took Jenkins, so it's a good bet it's not alone." Though he supposed the creature who had the other member of his team could be the last of their kind. It wasn't outside the bounds of possibility, especially here on an abandoned planet fragment. He'd seen too many unbelievable things during his time with the exploration program.

As they gained the top of a hill, Rick gazed down into the valley below. "There's your answer. It's inhabited." He gestured to a sprawling village with the nose of his gun. A few curls of smoke drifted from chimneys. The faint scent of roasting meat wafted on the air—a clear indication of life. Farther off and securely nestled in more hills was the castle-like fortress he'd seen earlier. "Let's see what kind of welcome we'll get."

Plant fronds snapped as he and Reigen hustled down the slope. The sharp scents of wet dirt and growing flora hit Rick's nose, immediately putting thoughts in his mind of home. Growing up in the Midwest, he'd spent many summers tilling the family garden or riding the lawn mower over the couple of acres they owned. Not rich and not poor, he'd learned middle-class values, the glory of working hard for what you wanted, and the satisfaction of going to bed exhausted at the end of a long day.

He slashed at a low-lying fern. His life pre-military and now were almost the same, except for the endless frustration of having to follow orders he necessarily didn't agree with.

"Major, looks like we got a welcoming party." Reigen's excitement-riddled voice cut through Rick's musings.

He followed the direction his teammate indicated. At the edge of the village, an older man in brown robes stood with arms crossed and a grim expression on his face. A young woman, probably not more than nineteen, waited next to the older man. Unlike him, her eyes reflected curiosity and fear. "Turn on the universal translators." Rick quickly pressed a tiny button on the device that rested along the curve of his left ear. Reigen did the same. Rick then relaxed his right arm and let the machine gun dangle at his side as a sign of peace. Thank God they were human. "Good afternoon, folks."

They gazed at him, silent.

He sighed. "Okay, I guess we're not exactly making the best impression." Unless they needed a universal translator. He had an extra one in his utility vest, but he'd hold off parting with it until he knew for sure. He darted a glance at his teammate, who shrugged. Rick trained his attention on his hosts. "I'm Major Rick Keenan and this is Lieutenant Jon Reigen. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The man nodded. "My people have been taught the languages from Earth. Proceed."

Thank God. "We're explorers from the planet Earth. Our shuttle was pulled through the shield." He paused in case they'd offer commentary. When they didn't, he continued. "Our engines are damaged and we need replacement crystals to get her off the ground."

"I am Sharn. This is my daughter, Elisa. Welcome to Oolita, the village of the damned." The man rubbed a shaking hand along his forehead.

"Damned?" Rick narrowed his eyes. "How do you figure?" He made another sweep of the medieval-style village and assessed his hosts' period clothing. *This planet's not as advanced as Earth. Fantastic. Won't be able to grab some guys from the village to help with repairs.*

Elisa took a step forward. "There are beings who hunt these woods. If we do not bring them offerings or they are not interested in what we give, they come to kill. The victim is drained of blood and left as a soulless shell."

What could you say to that? He glanced at Reigen. "Well, that doesn't sound good."

Sharn laid a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Forgive Elisa. The stories still fascinate her. The monsters have not come to the village for months."

"Maybe they found a new hunting ground." Reigen shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"No. It is said after they feed, they are satisfied for days before the need arises again and there are many villages scattered in the jungle."

Rick shook his head. "Be that as it may, we're here for a couple of things. First, do you have any idea where we can find one of these?" He reached into a pocket on his utility vest and pulled out a flat, square crystal, holding it up for Sharn to see. "We're also missing a crew member. He'd be wearing clothes like us. Have you seen him?"

Sharn shook his head. "Anything we find of value we take to the *ackarn orcha*."

"And that means?"

"Place of death or place of infinite sorrow. Both are interchangeable." Sharn crossed his arms over his chest, hiding his hands in the robe's wide sleeves. "We have not seen a man such as you. If he is lost, the monsters may have taken him."

"Thanks." Rick tapped his thumb on his weapon. "Any idea how long it takes to get to this place of death?"

\*\*\*EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE OF FRACTURED\*\*\*

Elisa gasped. "Two hours on foot, but no one goes there without an offering."

"I never did believe in monsters." Rick shrugged and nodded to his teammate. "We'll just have to wing it and pray the 'monster' will go for my boyish charm." He chuckled at the joke, but when the villagers merely stared at him, he sighed. "Okay, obviously stand-up comedy is before your time."

Again, his gaze was drawn to the mist-shrouded fortress. Finally, the mission had a purpose. Maybe the monster would be an alien race they could begin relations with and use that dialogue to convince the president the space program wasn't a waste of resources.