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TROUBLE IN THREES

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In Demian Brackett's experience, the further out from Earth he was stationed, the more likely he was to run into troublemakers. People joined the Colonial Marines for a variety of reasons: some out of a sense of honor and duty, others to escape the patterns of their pasts, and still others because they had violence inside them and didn't want to hurt the people they loved.

What he'd found was that no matter what their rationale for enlisting, once they were in the Corps, they either turned into good marines or walking trouble. Whatever their intentions had been in the beginning, he'd found that most people had the capacity to go in either direction once they immersed themselves in a life as part of the Corps.

The other thing he'd observed over time was that the further from Earth a squad was assigned, the more freedom its troublemakers felt they had to stir things up.

Within forty-five minutes of his arrival on Acheron,

Capt. Brackett had stowed his gear in his quarters, held a preliminary meet-and-greet with Al Simpson and the colony's senior support staff, and begun his first squad briefing. The Colonial Marines had a small muster room at their disposal, but it was large enough for the twenty-one men and women now gathered there.

Brackett stood at the front of the room, leaning on a podium that made him think of some sort of religious service, and studied the marines who stood before him. There were chairs stacked against one wall, but since this was his first meeting with the squad, he didn't want them getting comfortable.

Better for them all to stand, himself included.

Brackett kept it simple. Basic introduction and expectations, a hope that they would help him get up to speed, a firm instruction to adhere to protocol, and an appreciation of the welcome he'd already received from Lt. Paris and Sgt. Coughlin, who stood to one side, both slightly apart from the rest of the squad. As he spoke, he watched their eyes. Most of the squad seemed attentive, even curious about their new CO, just there to do their jobs. Several of them, however, did not seem quite as open.

One man in particular kept his eyes slightly narrowed, the corner of his mouth upturned, as if he might sneer at any moment. Pale and thin, with a hawk-like nose, the man radiated rebellion. Brackett had seen the sort before—defiant and hostile, the kind of man who would snicker and whisper and grumble. Hawk-Nose would warrant some attention, but he wasn't Brackett's only concern.

There were three others who stood nearby. While they didn't quite share Hawk-Nose's sneer, Brackett saw the tension and stiffness in them, and thought he caught several silent exchanges.

There were dangers on Acheron, but it ought to have been a relatively simple assignment. Brackett intended to make sure Hawk-Nose and his friends didn't complicate things for him.

"All right, that'll do for now," the captain said, surveying his squad. A tough-looking bunch, most of them alert and responsive. "Over the next few days I'll want to meet briefly with each of you. If we're going to be spending all this time together in paradise, I want to know who I've got watching my back, and I want you all to know that I've got your backs."

It might've been his imagination, but he was sure the slight sneer on the left side of Hawk-Nose's mouth deepened a bit.

"That's all. Dismissed." Brackett glanced to his right. "Lieutenant Paris. Sergeant Coughlin. Stick around a minute, please."

He waited while the squad filed out of the room, several of them unable to wait even until they reached the corridor before the quiet muttering began. Brackett wouldn't hold it against them. They had just met their new CO—it was natural for them to speculate about how much of a pain in the ass he was likely to become. He watched until the last of them had exited, and found himself alone with Paris and Coughlin.

"How did I do?" he asked, turning to them.

"You did fine, Captain," Paris said. "They don't know what to make of you yet, but they'll unclench soon enough."

"Not sure I want them to," Brackett replied thoughtfully. He frowned deeply. "The guy with the hawk-nose... what's his story?"

Paris cocked her head curiously. "Hawk-nose?"

Coughlin knew who he meant.

"That's Stamovich. Not much of a story to him, but

if you're asking if he's going to give you a hard time—"

"The answer's 'maybe,'" Paris interrupted, and Coughlin nodded. "Stamovich is a prickly son of a bitch, probably punched his way out of his momma's womb, but he'll behave himself unless Draper tells him otherwise."

"Sergeant Marvin Draper?" Brackett asked, and his eyes narrowed. "I read his file. He's got a couple of black marks for insubordination, but that was years ago. Should I be worried about him, then? I mean, if he's the guy who might tell Pvt. Stamovich what to do..."

"Draper can be managed," Paris said. "He knows he's floating on an ugly little rock in space, and that pissing off the CO is a bad idea. As long as he doesn't directly disobey orders, best bet is to just ignore him as best you can."

Brackett frowned.

"If this sergeant has Stamovich on some sort of a leash, then how am I supposed to re—"

"Not just Stamovich, Cap," Coughlin cut in. "There are a few others who follow Draper's lead."

Eyes still narrowed, Brackett turned to study the muster room, repopulating it in his mind. He tried to summon the faces of his squad, remember where they had all been standing.

"Which one was Draper?" he asked.

Paris shook her head. "None of them. He and Yousseff are out with a survey team."

"Why's that?"

"Standard procedure, sir," Paris replied. "Every time admin sends out a survey team, two of our people accompany them."

Brackett blinked. "Why are Colonial Marines needed on civilian excursions? The colonists have their jobs, and we have ours. We're meant to maintain security for the colony itself, not personal safety for each of its residents."

Paris glanced at Coughlin, but the stout little man just shrugged.

"Just SOP, Cap," Coughlin said. "Been that way since I got here."

"Al Simpson's been here from the beginning," Paris said. "If anyone has an answer to that, it'd be him."

Brackett took a deep breath. He hadn't intended to rock the boat on his first day, but it didn't sit right with him to think that marines were risking their lives on a daily basis, in ways that weren't part of their mission.

"Go about your duties," he said. "I'm going to talk to Simpson, and then get myself settled. Meet me back here at 1300."

Paris and Coughlin saluted, but Brackett barely noticed. His thoughts were on the absent Sgt. Draper. Had his superiors failed to sufficiently brief him on his posting on Acheron, or was the colonial administration utilizing the marines for corporate purposes without the authorization to do so?

He left the muster room and started to retrace his steps toward the administrative hub. The last thing he wanted was to get off on the wrong foot with Al Simpson on the first day of his deployment, but he hadn't spent years with the Colonial Marines—from firefights to bug hunts—and been awarded a Galactic Cross just so he could be some corporate lapdog in the ass-end of the universe.

Brow furrowed, lost in thought, he took a wrong turn and nearly collided with a man and woman headed the other direction.

"Pardon me," he mumbled.

The words were barely out of his mouth when he registered the little gasp that escaped the woman's lips. Initially, Brackett thought the near-collision had startled her, and he began to apologize again. He caught the

strange look her companion gave her, but only when he refocused did he realize that her gasp had been one of shocked recognition.

"Demian?" she said, features blossoming into a brilliant smile. "What are *you* doing here?"

All of the tension and frustration slipped away. Brackett returned her smile and gave a delighted little laugh. One hundred and fifty-eight colonists at Hadley's Hope, not even counting the marines, and already he'd practically run her down.

"Hello, Anne," he said.

I'd forgotten how beautiful you are, he almost added. But then he cut his gaze to the left, caught the confused expression on her companion's face, and made the connection that had momentarily eluded him.

Brackett held out a hand.

"You must be Russell Jorden."

"Russ," the man said warily, shaking his hand.

"Captain Demian Brackett, Russ. Very pleased to meet the man worthy of being this one's husband."

"Yeah... thanks," Russ said carefully, but the caution behind his eyes did not disappear. Brackett couldn't blame him—husbands tended not to love having their wives' exes around.

For her part, Anne still wore her smile, but it had gone from bright to mystified.

"Seriously, Demian," she said. "What are you doing on Acheron? I never thought I'd see you again."

In the years since he'd seen her, age had added a few crinkles around her eyes, and the time she'd spent in the savage wilderness of deep space had made her seem somehow wilder herself. But time had only made her more beautiful to him. Tangled curls framed her face, and hard work had made her lean and powerful. Her eyes

were alight with the intrepid determination inherent to those who chose life's more challenging paths.

She's another man's wife, he reminded himself. Not that he needed much of a reminder with the way Russ Jordan now studied him from behind slitted, almost reptilian eyes.

"This is my new post," Brackett explained. "The marines at Hadley's Hope are under my command."

"That's... that's..." Anne fumbled.

"Amazing," Russ said, now wearing a polite mask of a smile. "Welcome aboard, Brackett. It's rough living, but we've been out here so long that it just seems like home to us. I guess wherever your children grow up, that's always going to be home, right?"

"So I'm told," Brackett replied. "No kids myself, but I envy you two."

Anne glanced from Brackett to her husband, and a rigid sort of awkwardness descended upon them all. She looked as if she was searching for the right combination of words to alleviate that discomfort, when a voice called along the corridor.

"Captain Brackett, there you are!"

Brackett turned to see Al Simpson lumbering toward them. The man seemed afflicted with a permanent air of disapproval.

"I was just on my way to see you," Brackett said, letting his own tone inform the administrator that disapproval was an emotion available to both of them.

"Good timing, then," Simpson replied. If he'd caught the annoyance in the captain's voice, he didn't show it. "Look, we've got a small crisis on our hands, and it involves some of your people. I've called a meeting in the conference room, and you should be there."

"When's this?" Brackett asked.

"Now."

Anne glanced worriedly at her husband.

"Is this about Otto and Curtis?" Russ asked Simpson.

"We were just coming to talk to you."

A flicker of panic passed over Simpson's face.

"The Finch brothers are fine. The storm is hitting hard in that sector, but they've taken shelter. All's well. Now, if you'll excuse us, I need Captain Brackett's consultation on a matter regarding his squad."

Simpson took Brackett by the elbow and abruptly steered him toward the administrative hub. The captain glanced back at the Jordens. Russ was staring after them, but Anne had turned her gaze to her husband, looking worried and pale. For an instant, Brackett regretted having accepted the post on Acheron, but then he shook off the feeling. He hadn't come to Hadley's Hope just to see Anne Jordan again.

Had he?

He shook off Simpson's arm and gave the man a sidelong glance as they hurried along the corridor, across a hallway junction, and into view of the busy, glassed-in administrative hub of the command block.

"You're not a good liar," Brackett said.

"Excuse me?" Simpson snapped, his face pinched with annoyance.

"I don't know who the Finch brothers are, but whoever they are, they're not fine." He paused, then added, "I seriously doubt Anne believed you either."

"She doesn't have to believe me," Simpson said. "She works for me. So why don't you let me worry about my people, and you can worry about yours?"

As they passed the command block and rounded a corner, Brackett studied him more closely. On the surface, the guy seemed like a hundred other low-level management monkeys he'd met, yet he wondered if

Simpson was smarter than he looked.

A short way down the hall they paused at a door marked RESEARCH: NO UNAUTHORIZED ADMITTANCE, and Simpson punched numbers into a keypad that admitted them.

"You bring up an interesting subject," Brackett said, "the line that separates your people from mine."

Simpson made sure the door swung shut behind them and the lock engaged, then he set off for a white door a dozen feet along the hall, obviously expecting Brackett to follow.

"Whatever you've got to say, save it," the administrator sniffed. "We've got bigger problems at the moment than whatever dick-waving contest you feel like having to assert your authority."

Brackett quickened his pace, fighting the urge to grab Simpson by the scruff of his neck and smash his face into the doorframe. Then they were inside the white-doored room, and there were too many witnesses for him to do anything. He wouldn't have done it anyway—probably—but he sure as hell wasn't going to bloody the admin's nose in front of some young wide-eyed lab assistants in white coats and several older researchers in civilian clothes.

The lab coats clustered around the trio of older researchers, including a silver-haired Japanese man, a grim-eyed white guy with a wine-dark birthmark on his throat and jaw, and a sixtyish woman so slender that she reminded Brackett of the stick figures he'd drawn as a child.

The only guy in the room who didn't look like a scientist stood a distance back from the table, a deep frown creasing his forehead. An air of disapproval hung over him, like a man waiting for his children to get tired at a playground so he can take them home.

"Captain Brackett, meet Doctors Mori, Reese, and Hidalgo, and their team of brainiacs."

The doctors nodded. Simpson gestured to the guy standing away from the table.

"The moper in the corner there is Derrick Russell, who's in charge of our ongoing terraforming operations."

"Captain," Russell said with a nod.

Brackett approached the table for a proper round of handshakes.

"Welcome to Hadley's Hope, Captain—" Dr. Mori began.

"Enough of that," the grim-eyed doctor said, his birthmark flushing darker. "We haven't got time for niceties. Dr. Hidalgo, please bring the captain up to speed."

The stick figure sat up a bit straighter. Brackett noticed she had kind eyes. Worried eyes, at the moment.

"Two of our surveyors, Otto and Curtis Finch, encountered a level five atmospheric storm. They're fairly rare and localized, and the duration is hard to predict," Dr. Hidalgo said. "The Finchs and their marine escort were forced to abandon their vehicle and take shelter in an atmosphere processor."

Here, she shot a withering glance at Russell.

"This processor hasn't been serviced in at least six months," she continued. "Records are unclear—"

Brackett grimaced and held up a hand.

"Look, I'm not even sure why my people are out there to begin with, but—"

"Later, Captain," Dr. Reese said.

Brackett glanced at Simpson.

"Later," the administrator agreed.

"They're in trouble," Derrick Russell said, emphasizing the last word to make sure they all had their priorities straight. "The processor is malfunctioning—clogged—and the storm is making it worse. Curtis Finch is the only one with any engineering training among them, and he's injured."

Brackett tensed. "How long before the unit blows?"

"We can't be sure from here," Simpson said. "The storm's interfering, not just with communications, but with the monitoring signal from the processor. That's why we didn't know it had malfunctioned. It's not critical yet, but as far as we can tell, it's getting there."

Brackett stared at him. "You have a heavy-crawler, don't you? Why are we even talking about this? Get someone out there!"

Dr. Mori and Dr. Hidalgo exchanged an indecipherable glance.

Dr. Reese's smile reminded Brackett of a shark's.

"That's why you're here, Captain," Reese said. "There are two Colonial Marines out there, and you people never leave one of your own behind. We assumed that you and your squad would want to mount the rescue yourselves."

Brackett hadn't been at Hadley's Hope for half a day, and already he wanted to throttle most of the people he'd met.

"So, you send marines out to do your errands," he said, "and now you expect us to do your dirty work as well?"

Dr. Mori smoothed the jagged-cut lapels of his tailored jacket.

"While you're out there," he said, "the company would appreciate you retrieving whatever samples the team gathered before this mishap began."

Brackett stared at him, but remained silent. He'd wanted to hit Simpson earlier. Now he gritted his teeth and reminded himself that assaulting an aging Weyland-Yutani scientist would be frowned upon by his superiors.

"Mishap," he said, the word sounding like profanity to his ears.

Blank-faced, all of the scientists in the room just stared back at him. Only Russell and Dr. Hidalgo had

the good sense to look slightly uncomfortable.

Brackett turned to Simpson.

"Get the heavy-crawler outside."

"It's ready to go," Simpson replied.

"Fine. Call Sergeant Coughlin. Tell him he's got three minutes to pick five marines and meet me at my quarters."

He turned and strode back into the corridor.

Mishap, he thought.

Welcome to Acheron, indeed.