

Opening Shots

Book 3 of the Fierce Girls at War Series

Michael Adams

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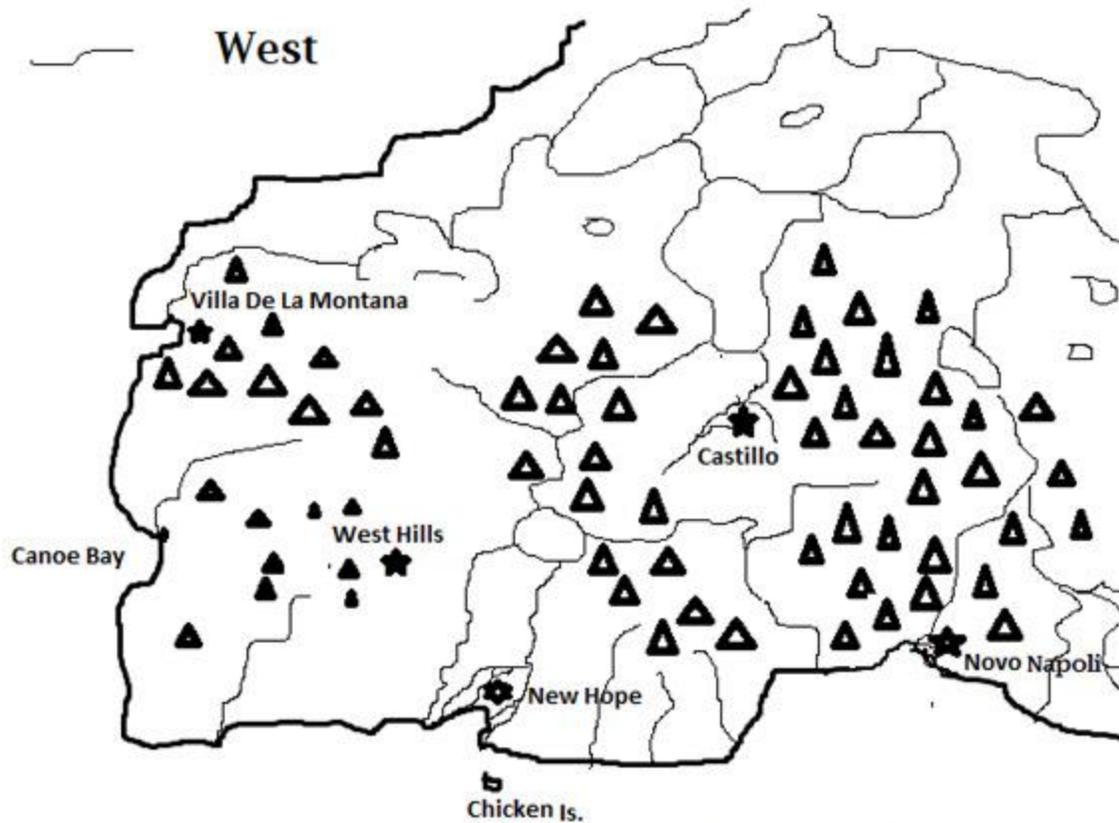
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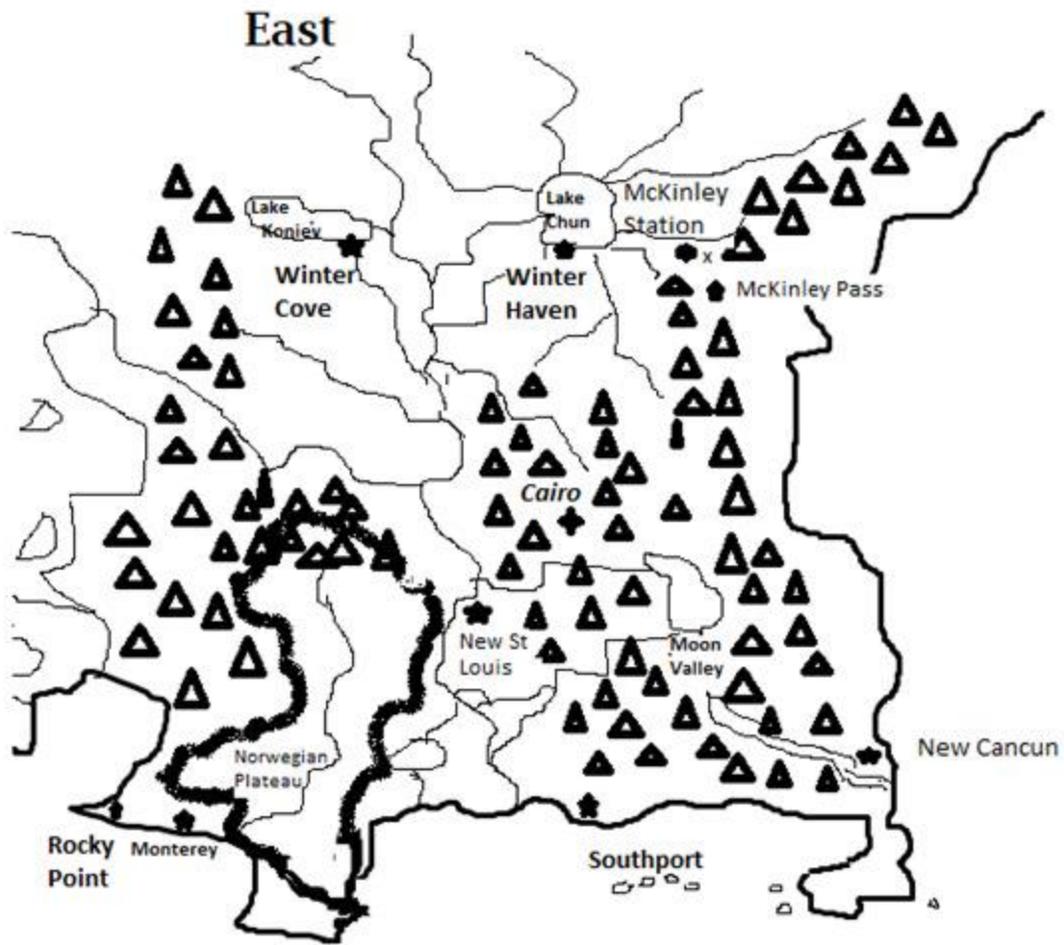
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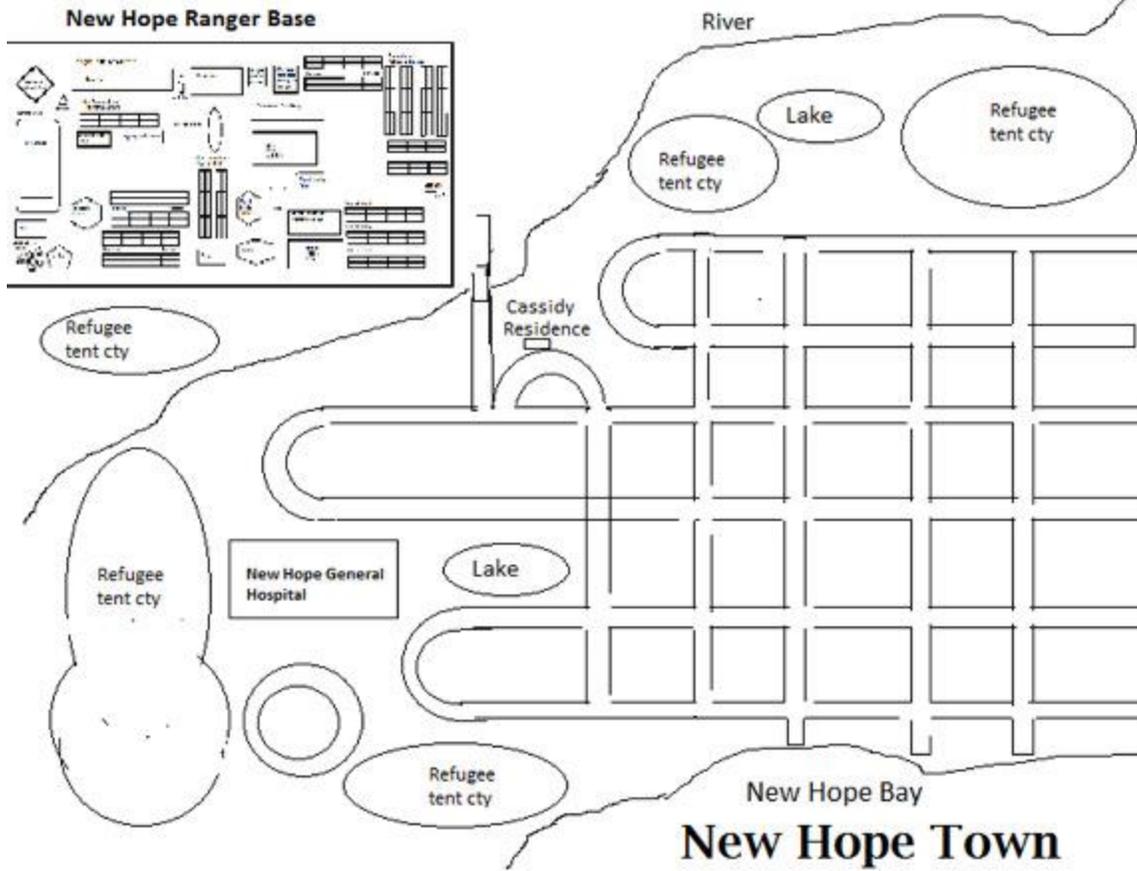
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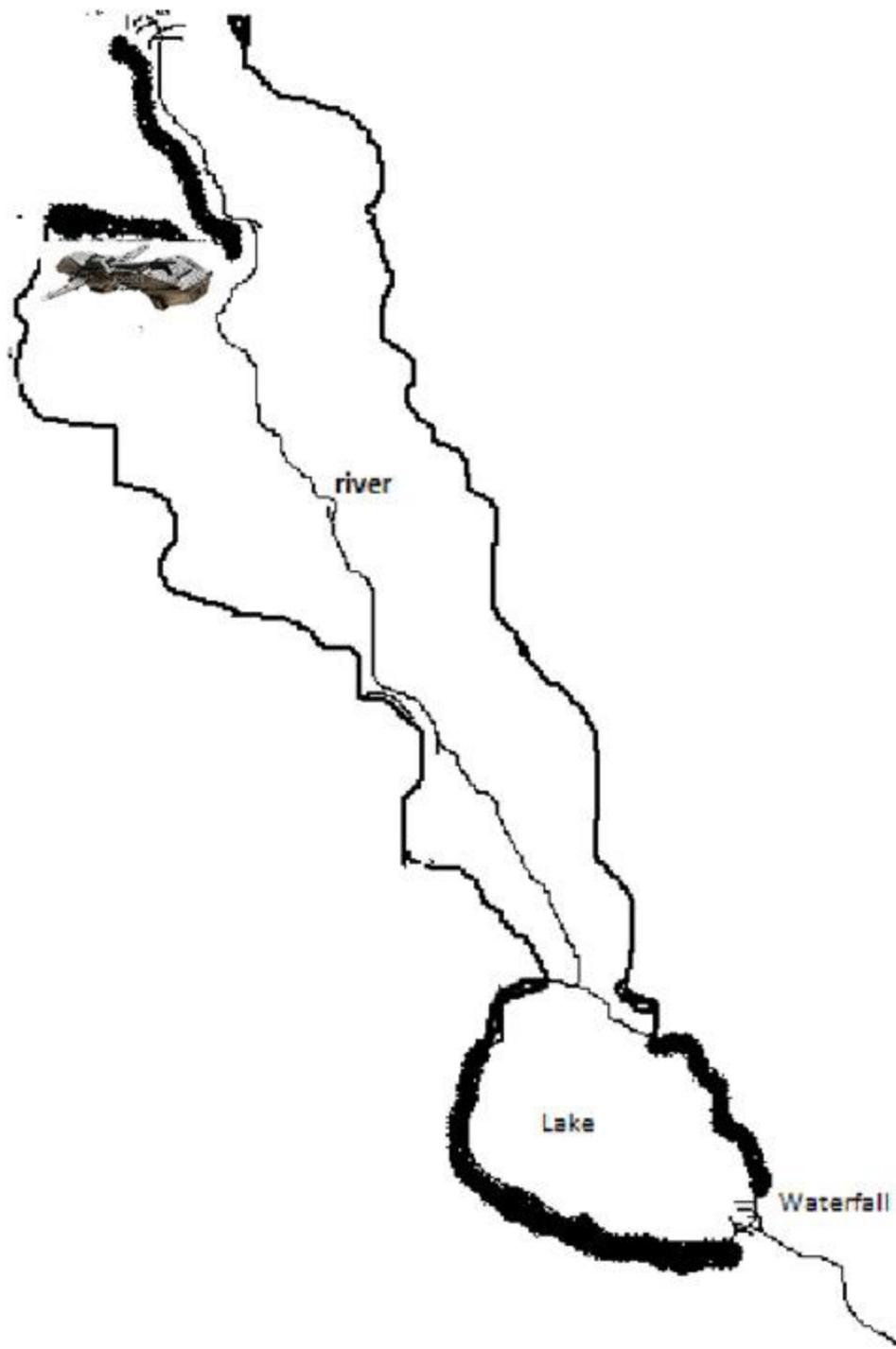


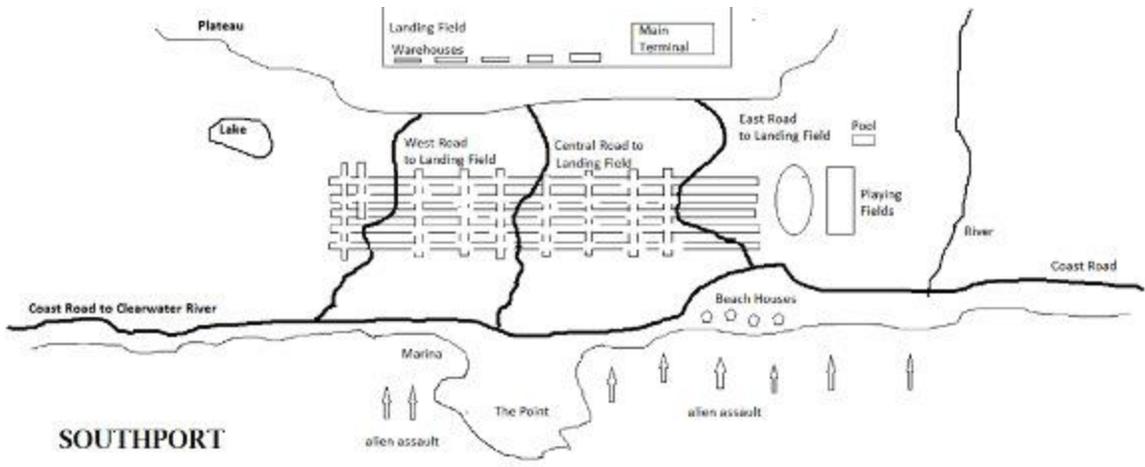
New Hope Colony 2126





Cargo Transport Lander *Cairo* Crash Site





Chapter 1

Gabriella Tomei

August 2123

Dolomite Mountains, Northern Italy

“Cazzo!” Shuttle flight engineer Second Lieutenant Giancarlo Aiello was looking at the three climbers trapped on the imposing north face of Mount Cima Grande in the Dolomite Mountains in northern Italy. “If they hadn’t been spotted by that SAR shuttle we wouldn’t even know they were out here.”

“Sergeant Ruggiero!” called the pilot Italian Air Force Lieutenant Gabriella Tomei to the crew chief.

“Si, Tenente?” the crew chief replied over the comm.

“Are you seeing this?” Master Sergeant Pietro Ruggiero came forward and peered over Tomei’s shoulder, the crew medic Sergeant Raffaello Napolitano was right behind him.

“Accidenti!” he murmured as the antigravity shuttle was pummeled by gale force winds making it difficult to hold a stable position. They were nose on to the lowest of the three climbers who desperately looked at the shuttle for their salvation. All they could do was hold on to their single remaining climbing line as the wind blew them back and forth across the granite rock face. They had been stuck there for six hours with no way up and no way down and they couldn’t last much longer before the wind finally blew them off the mountain.

A strong earthquake had shaken the mountain hard and a cascade of rocks had killed the two lead climbers who’d fallen the 300 feet to the ledge below where they’d begun their climb at 9,400 feet. The north face of Cima Grande was a popular route for experienced climbers but the tremblor had shaken loose several of the anchors their lines were clipped to and their other safety lines and much of their equipment had fallen with the two leaders. A third climber, the lowest man on the remaining line had been knocked unconscious and perhaps killed by the rock fall. Unresponsive to the cries of his climbing partners he’d been cut loose two hours before to reduce the weight on the line which was threatening to pull the last two anchors out and drop them all to their deaths.

“They’re being bounced around pretty good out there,” Ruggiero observed with a grimace.

“So are we,” Aiello noted dryly as another strong gust of wind pushed them violently to the right and up then down again as Gabi tried to compensate with the armored combat shuttle’s side thrusters.

“Get ready to lower the rear hatch. We’ll have to back in a bit below them then rise up until you can grab the low man,” Tomei said without looking at the crew chief.

“Right, Tenente!” Ruggiero signaled for Napolitano to head aft; the medic grabbed his med-kit and headed to the rear of the shuttle.

“If we’re not careful we could smash into the cliff face,” Aiello noted. “Or smash into one of the climbers.”

“Si, si. So we better be careful, no?” Gabi replied, never taking her eyes off the nearby mountain.

“We won’t be able to use the aft side thrusters when we’re close to them; we’ll just blow them off the mountain,” the crew chief pointed out.

Tomei grimaced, without the aft thrusters which were located outboard to either side of the rear door it would be nearly impossible to hold position or keep the shuttle from hitting the mountain.

“Corporal Carbone, any luck making contact with those people?” she asked her communications tech Corporal Luisa Carbone who was at her station right behind Aiello.

“No, Tenente. Operations says they’ve had no contact with them in over an hour.”

“I think the low man is a female,” said Aiello.

Tomei nodded then said, “Okay. Chief, get the cargo nets ready.”

“Si, Tenente.”

“And guys, make sure your safety lines are doubled up,” she added over the comm so they would all hear her.

“Trust me, Tenente. We’ll be as safe as possible! Just don’t drop us!” Ruggiero replied as he turned to join Napolitano.

Gabi snorted then glanced quickly over her shoulder, “Luisa!”

“Si, Tenente?”

“Go back there and help them.”

“Si, Tenente.” Carbone unclipped from her comm station and made her way aft through the cargo bay to the rear hatch.

The armored shuttle was 48 feet long and its cargo compartment was 15 feet wide; it was big enough to carry up to 50 soldiers with all their weapons and gear. The smaller SAR shuttles were unarmored and it was too dangerous for them under these conditions. Their unarmored fuselages would crumple like aluminum cans if they were slammed into the mountain by the high winds which had arisen not long after the quake had stranded the climbers on the sheer face of the mountain and gotten increasingly worse as the day wore on. Trying to get to them from directly above was out of the question; a rock overhang blocked the shuttle from lowering a line and pulling the climbers out that way. Even an armored combat shuttle would be no match for the mountain if they weren’t careful; if they were damaged by a collision with the mountain the aircraft’s antigravity cells mounted along the bottom of the fuselage could be knocked off-line and cause them to lose altitude quickly, very quickly indeed.

“Giancarlo, use the external speakers to tell them what we’re going to do. The bottom climber will have to unclip quickly and grab the cargo net then hold on. Then we’ll move off a bit and pull her in. Then we’ll do the same for the others.”

“Right!”

“Systems check first. Are all systems green?”

“All systems are green,” the engineer replied. “And Ruggiero says he and his team are ready.”

Tomei took a deep breath, “Okay, let’s do this. Wait ‘til we turn around then talk to them.”

“Understood,” the engineer acknowledged.

The wind was not quite as bad away from the mountainside and at a safe distance Tomei used the forward port and starboard side thrusters to pivot the aircraft 180°. She descended about 20 feet to get below the lowest climber then she used the small maneuvering thrusters mounted under the aircraft’s short wings to slowly back them towards the cliff face until they were about 40 feet from the mountainside.

“Okay, Gio, talk to them.” Aiello used the external speakers to tell the climbers what was about to happen while Gabi fought the buffeting winds to hold her position. The strong gusts rocked them violently. “Let’s hope she understood,” she murmured to herself when the engineer was done. She told him, “Okay, put the cargo ramp down.”

“Okay.” Aiello signaled Ruggiero and the rear cargo door was lowered into its loading position. The crew chief stopped it when it was pointed straight out. It was covered with a cargo net that was secured at several points inside the aircraft. Carbone pushed the rest of the net over the sides of the ramp and gave a thumbs-up to the crew chief who signaled Aiello that they were ready.

“Okay, Gabi. They’re ready back there.”

“Right. Hang on everyone.” The three air crewmen were all secured by thin lines of spider silk that were less than 1/8 of an inch thick but were stronger than steel. They grabbed onto hold-on straps near the ramp and braced themselves.

Tomei slowly backed the shuttle until the ramp was just a few feet away from the mountain. Without the rear thrusters to help control the aircraft the shuttle rocked even more violently and the wind tried to blow them to the right as she fought to control the aircraft and keep it in position. She was trying to estimate the intervals between gusts and told her engineer, “Tell her to get ready; on a count of 10.”

“Okay, Gabi!”

Aiello used the external speaker again to warn the lowest of the three survivors then Gabi told him, “Start your countdown now.” Just then a heavy gust slammed the ramp into the cliff face. “Do it now, Gio!”

He counted down to 10 as Ruggiero and Napolitano crawled out onto the ramp, each with one hand on the safety lines clipped to the harnesses they wore, the other holding on to the cargo net. On “3” another strong gust slammed the ramp into the rock again as the pair hung on wide-eyed, the climber just above them swinging wildly and bouncing repeatedly off the unyielding mountain.

On “1” as the buffeting from the last gust subsided momentarily Tomei, watching the rear monitor that was pointed up at the climber, gave the anti-grav control a little nudge and the shuttle rose about 8 feet. Ruggiero and Napolitano jumped up the same time, letting go of their safety lines and grabbing the climber by the legs as she swung towards them. The crew chief had already noted that she would not be able to unclip herself from the line, one arm was obviously broken and she seemed barely conscious. While Napolitano held her steady the crew chief used his razor-sharp utility knife to cut her free. She dropped onto them with a cry of fear and pain. The two airmen held her tight as the ramp slammed into the rock face again before the pilot could move away from it.

“*We’ve got her, Tenente!*” Ruggiero said over the comm. “Luisa’s pulling her inside. We’re ready for the next one.”

“Bene! Get ready then!” She asked the engineer, “How are we doing?”

“Okay, but I doubt we’ll be able to pull the ramp up again. The ramp control light is red.”

“I can live with that.”

The recovery of the other two climbers was also successful and Aiello was right about the ramp; it was too damaged to close. Gabi quickly took them away from the mountain and headed back to base as the three climbers were secured to benches in the cargo bay. Aiello had already informed Base Operations that they were inbound when Carbone returned to her station.

“Tenente?”

“Si, Luisa?”

“That woman, the first one we brought in. She said it was her younger brother she had to cut loose.”

Gabi felt her face turn pale and appalled at the news she said, “Oh, God! That poor woman! She will have to find a way to live with that but she didn’t have any choice. What’s her condition?”

“She’s busted up pretty bad, they all are, but she *looks* the worst. Her right arm is broken, and I think both shoulders, her legs are damaged and she probably has internal injuries. The chief and Raffi are working on them. The last guy we brought in is unconscious. He may have a fractured skull.”

Gabi sighed, “I see. Okay, go back and do what you can to help.”

“Si, Tenente.”

The difficult rescue earned commendations for Tomei and her crew. Two of the three climbers survived; the man with a fractured skull succumbed to his injuries despite the efforts of the surgeons in the base hospital.

###

2126

Before the Cima Grande rescue Gabi Tomei had already submitted her application to do a stint with the Colonial Rangers at the New Hope colony on Tau Ceti 4 as an engineer on a cargo transport lander or as a shuttle pilot. It was one of the main reasons that she’d joined the Italian Air Force soon after graduation from the University of Bologna with a degree in aeronautical engineering. The commendation was received shortly after she learned that her application had been approved.

The approval had forced her to make a major personal decision. A few months before she’d become engaged to another Air Force pilot, Lieutenant Tomaso Mastriano. He told her that if she went to the colony then the engagement was off and he wouldn’t wait for her. She’d already anticipated this and told him that she was going anyway; she knew what she wanted and that she would hold it against him if she turned down the opportunity.

In early 2125 Lieutenant Tomei was sent for six months of training as a navigator/assistant engineer for the giant cargo transport landers that operated at the New Hope colony at the Ranger Air Assets training base in southern Spain. The 850-foot long anti-grav cargo transports were essentially flying container ships that also carried passengers and were the primary method of moving people and material around the 5000-mile wide continent known as Alpha where all of the exploration and development at the colony was taking currently place.

After completing that part of her training she attended a three-week course for Ranger Command support personnel – all aircrew, administrative, communications, medical and maintenance personnel, as well as the Colonial Security officers who served as the colony’s police force, were all designated support personnel and attended the relevant three-week course that included orientation to the New Hope colony and the colony planet Tau Ceti 4. Aircrews attended their course at the training facility outside of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Ranger training facilities were scattered all over the globe with each specialty area distributed to a different country. The distribution was designed to broaden the base of support for the colony program which was fabulously expensive and required a consortium of sponsoring nations and corporations to fund it.

The Colonial Rangers had been established in 2116 after numerous casualties among the early exploration parties which had been attacked by the planet's ferocious predators. With its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, Colonial Ranger Command was an international military force composed of field detachments of about 100 soldiers each plus all the various kinds of support personnel that were needed. These personnel came from many of the sponsoring nations and there were strict limits on how many field detachments any one country could have at the colony at the same time.

The consortium of nations and corporations developing the colony world had had trouble at first agreeing on how this military force would be put together. The politicians from some countries were concerned that one of the more powerful nations or a cabal of them might use their Ranger detachments to take over the colony and deny their share of the planet's resources to the smaller nations which had helped fund the colony program in the first place. Limiting the size of the field detachments and limiting the number of detachments there at one time made it difficult if not impossible for that to happen. With this same kind of risk aversion thinking the kinds of weapons the Rangers were allowed to use was also limited. Most military weapons were banned from the colony. The Colonial Rangers were armed with semiautomatic rifles of a type normally used by police forces in many countries. These weapons packed a much lighter punch and had a shorter range than the standard rifles almost any military unit would use in the field; this was to reduce the danger to innocent bystanders. They were adequate enough however, when used properly, for dealing with the planet's predators.

When Gabi Tomei boarded the cargo supply ship *Australia* in May 2125, there was only one other Italian officer on board, a doctor by the name of Major Lucia Abrazzi. There was already an Italian detachment at the colony and another one was not scheduled to go until 2127. There were other pilots and aircrew on board besides Gabi who was designated as a replacement officer. The navigator on the cargo transport lander *Cairo*, Captain Lorena Martino, was due to be promoted to the rank of major at which time, upon being relieved by Tomei, she would move over to the Air Operations department on the regimental staff in the colonial capital of New Hope Town.

The *Australia* arrived at New Hope Main Terminal in December of 2125 and Tomei joined the crew of the *Cairo* (CTL-9) two weeks later. On one of her first cargo runs she was introduced to Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford who was the main assistant to the Director of Logistics for the colony, Lieutenant Commander Rick Cassidy. Molly invited her over to the residence where she often stayed in New Hope Town when her husband Jason was out of town. Lieutenant Jason Ramsey was a platoon leader in the Australian detachment of Alpha Company. The five-bedroom residence turned out to be the primary home of Rick Cassidy and it had been opened as a haven for the female officers in the Regiment two years earlier after an incident in which Molly had been sexually assaulted. The beautiful but tough Marine had won that battle though; she'd put her attacker in the hospital where he'd stayed under guard until he was shipped back to Earth.

The females in the Ranger Regiment were outnumbered by a ratio of more than 3 to 1 and it was difficult for any of them to avoid being bothered at best, or harassed at worst, when they just wanted to be left alone. Rick and Molly had solved that problem, at least for anyone in New Hope Town, by giving them a safe place to go where they come relax, sleep, read, lie out in the sun or just sit around talking with friends without worrying about being spied upon. Except for Rick, and occasionally Jason if Molly was present, no other males were allowed in the residence. Gabi learned that even some of the women from the aircrews of the transport landers would go there to relax although they rarely stayed overnight since they had their own private cabins

aboard their flying cargo ships. Gabi would sometimes drop by for dinner when her ship was at the terminal and Cassidy and or Pickford were frequent passengers as their jobs often required them to accompany critical cargoes to their destination terminals.

Gabi found that she enjoyed life at the colony. The Earth-like planet was rich in resources and the Alpha continent was very mountainous, and a beautiful sight from high up. *Cairo's* commander Danish Lieutenant Colonel Mark Janssen and the Russian copilot Major Vlad Brokovich were both very competent pilots and she liked them a lot as she did her Irish boss Major Tim O'Bannon, *Cairo's* chief engineer. Including the four flight officers the transport had a crew of 27, most of whom were cargo engineers and cargo handlers led by Master Sergeant Lars Rasmussen, a Norwegian. The crew also included a seven-person detachment of Colonial Security officers. They controlled all boarding queues and made sure the passengers were secured in their crash couches prior to take-offs and landings. They also provided security for the transport in the event that a landing away from one of the established terminals was necessary. Such landings were required at the smaller destinations such as McKinley Station, Winter Cove, Monterey and Canoe Bay. None of these areas had landing fields protected from invasion by the native predators with high fences and the landing fields they did have weren't big enough handle the huge transports; there were large areas open somewhere nearby that could be used when deliveries of shipping containers were scheduled. Vehicles from these smaller outposts would then come out to meet the landers and carry their supplies back to base. The Colonial Security officers also functioned as the de facto police force for the colony and many of them had law enforcement experience back on Earth.

As the junior officer in the flight crew Tomei was also the ship's personnel officer so she became very familiar with the personal details in the files of all of the crew. Master Sergeant Guy Gilbert, a Canadian, was *Cairo's* senior engineering tech, and Japanese Corporal Miruku Nakamura was the ship's communications tech. Both had their main workstations on either side of the passageway directly aft of the flight cabin.

Nakamura had joined the crew a few months after Tomei. She'd been with a Japanese field detachment that had finished its tour and had departed on the cargo supply ship *Antarctica*. Nakamura had requested to remain at the colony and was transferred to the Regiment's communications department before being assigned to *Cairo* to replace its comm tech; she had married a civilian engineer at the colony and then requested an early departure so that they could leave and return to Earth together. That request had been granted and Nakamura was chosen to take her place. The Japanese corporal was due to be promoted to sergeant the next time they flew to New Cancun on the southeastern coast. Gabi was looking forward to the little promotion party they had planned for very competent young woman who always had a smile on.

Chapter 2

Preparing to Attack

August 2126

Rift Flagship

The many months' long wait for Expeditionary Force Commander General Bysr Osmu'a and his transports, working their way through the system undetected then hiding behind Rih'ta's single large moon, would have been interminable for most humans but then the Rift were not human. Longer lifespans had bred patience into them as did the many months spent in transit between the stars. Unlike the humans whose jump drives allowed them to cross interstellar distances very quickly, the Rift used a different technology that allowed for crossing from star to star but much more slowly. It had taken almost three Earth years for news of the invasion of Rih'ta to reach Clan Miltcar on Riftka, the Rift home world. Another year went by while Clan Miltcar came to a decision on what to do, another year to hire their Andoval troops and arrange transport to Rih'ta, and then nearly three more years in transit to bring the first half of the Expeditionary Force to Rih'ta's system on their mission to take it back from the invaders.

Ever since arriving above the planet General Osmu'a had been patiently keeping a keen eye on developments down on the surface while searching for the energy emissions given off by enemy starships entering the star system but it was only in the last few days that had there been anything truly interesting happening. His troops on the staging islands had completed the construction of the watercraft to be used for the attack on the invaders' settlements. The weather had not cooperated as much as he would have liked but the extra time this delay had forced on his troops had been less of a factor than he'd feared.

The series of late winter tropical storms that were now passing over the islands *had* made things a bit uncomfortable for the ground commanders and their troops. The Andoval were used to sleeping outside but the constant rain and wind had turned the islands into miserable little mud pits. Even some of the portable shelters the Rift personnel had set up for their own use were leaking and several had been picked up and carried away by the occasional gale force winds. The phlegmatic Andoval had simply turned many of their boats upside down and slept underneath them.

Fortunately, Osmu'a thought, the weather should improve over the next few days and the attack force assigned to conquer the alien settlement on the eastern coast can now begin moving. They would move under the cover of darkness to the small islands off the southeastern peninsula. From there they would launch hours earlier than the central and western attack forces for their longer journey up the eastern coast to the alien town.

The incoming starship had arrived in orbit as expected and begun sending down material and more of the invaders in their smaller but still huge parasite ships that had been carried inside its hull. Each day one or two of these ships would rise again from the surface, enter the mother ship for a time then proceed back down to the surface. Each of these smaller ships was more than half the size of one of his transports and unlike his ships they had the ability to leave orbit and carry massive amounts of material down to the surface and return for more.

The huge mother ship also had two even bigger spaceships docked on either side of its engineering section. Each of these two spaceships was bigger than any of his three transports and they too had the ability to land on the planet then return to the mother ship. All this was interesting but expected. *Kenone'se* had reported the same type of activity when they'd been there.

What had not been expected because they had not been reported by *Kenone'se* was that a number of these smaller ships were in use on the surface before the starship had arrived. By his count there were at least ten of the ships moving cargo and passengers around the main continent in addition to the four that had come with the starship.

The Rift transports were really large cargo vessels designed for carrying raw materials from one world to another but they could not take off from the surface with a full load. They had to be loaded while in orbit by smaller craft such as the atmospheric transfer ships they were using to move his troops down to the surface. Osmu'a envied the aliens for their ability to move so much so easily. He hoped his forces would be able to capture some of these transports intact so that his engineers could study them. One of the alien transport ships was big enough to carry almost a quarter of his entire force with all their supplies down to the surface in one trip. If he could learn the secrets of the aliens' technology it would raise him and his clan to unprecedented wealth and power among the Great Clans of the Rift Consortium.

What most concerned Osmu'a now though was the sudden interest being shown by the invaders in the islands where his troops were based and preparing to launch the coming offensive. *It is quite curious and also a bit worrying. Why is this happening all of a sudden?* he wondered. *Had that starship seen something? Or had that small aircraft simply been doing a casual flyby since the weather had improved?* The alien aircraft had entered the force shield area and a single energy blast had brought it down. Then a different kind of aircraft had come near, presumably looking for the first aircraft. *What next?* he wondered. He decided to confer with General Warsh, his Ground Force Commander, and his Sub-Force Commanders, Ocha, Therba and Aleri and get their views on what to do if more of the alien aircraft came their way. The four were all down on the surface getting their forces organized. Their visages were now on the large monitor in his private quarters.

"In my opinion, General Osmu'a," said Aleri, "these aliens have not shown that they have anything that can threaten us from the sky. The little aircraft with the spinning blade in front of it disintegrated with a low energy blast. Any more like it will be just as easily swatted from the sky. And the other, larger craft did not even try to come very close to our force. I believe it is equally fragile and represents no threat."

"You do not think they will send others to investigate?" asked Sub-Commander Therba who would command the western attack force. Aleri was the Sub-Commander of the eastern attack force.

"We have only seen those two craft approach anywhere near the islands and the second was almost certainly looking for the first," Ocha pointed out.

"It doesn't matter if they send more or not. As long as we swat them down before they see anything these, these *kafti* will be none the wiser before we are ready to move on them," Aleri replied.

Osmu'a did not like Aleri's comparison of these aliens to the small, garbage eating animals found on the Andoval home world. "If you think they are just *kafti*, Sub-commander Aleri, you may be underestimating their ability to fight back once we do begin our attack. They are

dangerous pests that need to be exterminated certainly, but do not expect them to simply lie down and wait to be slaughtered.”

Warsh was not happy that his superior had felt the need to upbraid his subordinate. He said, “All the more reason to ensure that we are not discovered before we’re ready. So far there has been no real reason to believe that the first aircraft was actively investigating our activities. If they had been, then why haven’t they sent more aircraft to look, or even have one of their very large transports simply fly over?”

“There is no way to know for sure but perhaps they are waiting to see if there is any response to those craft coming close to us,” proposed Therba.

“We must proceed cautiously but not timidly,” Ocha, the central attack force sub-commander said. “I say we simply do nothing more than we are already doing. If they send small craft then we swat them down before they get too close with low energy beams that won’t attract attention from their starship or the satellites in orbit. If they send something big then we must be ready to launch immediately before they have time to get organized.”

“I concur with Sub-Commander Ocha,” Warsh said. “We should not change our plans out of fear of what these invaders might do, only in reaction to what they actually do.”

Osmu’a considered Warsh’s recommendation and found it reasonable under the circumstances. “General Warsh, should the aliens suddenly show too much interest and force us to act, how quickly can your forces launch their assault?”

“It will take us perhaps two days to right all the ships and load the beasts and all the supplies if we have good weather, longer if not,” Warsh replied. “It is to be hoped that we will soon have better weather than we do now. We could lose many ships on the voyage to the mainland with heavy seas and high winds and the Andoval and our Rift brothers will suffer greatly, not to mention the beasts, which will greatly impair their ability to fight once they are ashore.”

“Let us hope that does not become necessary then.”

“Agreed.”

Chapter 3

The Wolf's Tooth

August 31, 2126

New Hope Academy

“Didn’t I tell you not to worry?” Nikola Dubrovski asked Anya Romanova. “Eva Johansson got to go on the tour last spring and decided to spend the time with her sister after she got out of quarantine and now Greta Hasselbeck had to drop out, so Sasha is in. Greta’s brother is still in the hospital because of allergies and they might have to send him home when the colony ship leaves in five days. She’s pretty upset. She had to wait two years for him to come here and now he might have to go right back. She said she might even leave the Academy and go back with him.”

“That’s too bad but I’m glad I’m getting to go on the tour,” Sasha said. “If she hadn’t dropped out I wouldn’t be going.”

Nikola shook her head in response and said, “I was pretty sure for the last week that she was going to drop out but you still would’ve gone if she hadn’t.”

“How is that possible? Is somebody else dropping out?” Anya wanted to know.

“Not that I know of,” Nikola replied. “But I had already told Miss Tchachenko that if Greta didn’t drop out then I wanted to stay behind and spend some time with my sister Sonja. She talked it over with Director Summerfield and he agreed to allow one extra student to go and one less intern if it came to that, so she told me that it would be okay if I really wanted to stay behind. I didn’t really want to but I would have. Now it doesn’t matter, Sasha’s going and that’s that so you both better pack your bags.”

###

“Oy!” Avril MacPherson, a red-headed Scottish lass, called out to Winter Summerfield and Naomi Winston when the two exited the New Hope Academy’s main administration building. She’d been waiting outside along with Chloe Capps, Soraya Parchami, Baylee McMahan and Tuesday Rutherford for the two English girls to escape their little counseling session with their parents. “Did they read you the riot act in there?”

“Absobloodylootely,” Naomi replied. “They seem to think we’re all wankers and ready to shag the first tosser we come across.”

“No worries, mate,” said Tuesday, a young Aussie from Sydney. “I reckon we’ll be lucky to meet anyone under thirty on this trip. Even so, I’m stoked! Two more days and we are *out* of here.”

“Too right,” said Baylee, another Australian, although from Perth.

“My dad said that if I punch anybody out on this trip I can forget about Uni after I pass my exams,” Winter said. “He can be such a plonker. I almost told him to piss off!”

“Brilliant!” said Chloe while the others laughed giddily. “Now that would really throw a spanner in the works. Come on, we’re home free now. Just behave yourself for two more days. Let’s go get a bite to eat. If I don’t eat soon I’ll be arse-or-tit. Stormy and the other Yanks are waiting for us with Gillian at The Wolf’s Tooth.”

“Come on then, I’m dying for some chips!” chirped Soraya, the Persian schoolgirl whose parents had emigrated to England from Iran when she was just 3- years-old.

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The Wolf’s Tooth Tavern was a privately run English style establishment a short distance away from the school. A popular place with the students and local residents, it offered traditional English fare such as fish and chips as well as food popular with the many Americans in the area including hamburgers and big meatball sandwiches. While the students were too young to order alcohol they did have a wide selection of other beverages to choose from. When Chloe and her friends arrived they found Stormy James, January Pierson, Rain Moon, Brooklyn Connors, Savannah Jbouri and River Sleight waiting for them along with Gillian O’Malley, the only Irish girl to make the tour. The fourteen girls were all the native English speakers going on the tour except for Montana Hernandez, Ruby McCarthy and River Jacobs who were spending the afternoon with Montana’s parents.

The group was celebrating their last free day before departure, the following day would be very busy with hours of practice for the planned concerts, packing, receiving their internship instructions and then a mandatory early lights out in the dormitory before the 0500 wake up on the day of their flight. Although there were many other native English speakers at the school and every student had learned English before coming to the colony, this group had always been particularly close. Not only were they among the top students in their respective classes, they often participated in the same extra-curricular activities including soccer, volleyball, swimming, archery and hiking. Several of them were also in the school’s music program or worked with the new auditorium/concert hall’s light and sound systems.

When January Pierson saw the British and Aussie girls enter the tavern she drew the attention of the rest of the group to the newcomers and they quickly spread out around the big wooden tables that had been pushed together to accommodate the large party. “About time! So how did it go with your dad and your mom?” she asked Winter and Naomi.

Winter just rolled her eyes and Naomi said, “They didn’t pull us off the tour, if that’s what you mean. They threatened us with chastity belts and a semester long restriction to campus if we didn’t behave, or if we got caught anyway,” she grinned. That last prompted a round of snickering from the whole group who knew both girls’ reputation for getting in trouble. It wasn’t always easy for Winter and Naomi whose parents were the two top administrators at the school; everyone there seemed to know when they were being called in on the carpet.

“No worries,” said Tuesday. “The important thing is you’re still going and now so is Rain,” she said pointing to Rain Moon who’d made the tour as an alternate when Sheila Donovan had dropped out to go on vacation with her parents and her younger brother who’d just come in on *Amundsen*.

“Absobloodylootely,” Naomi said to the smiling Rain. The two had been roommates for more than a year and Naomi was very happy that her friend was able to go.

“Well I’ll say this, you guys,” Stormy James said. “Since this will be the last tour for Chloe and me, I intend to have a *good* time on this trip.”

“Even if you can’t give Richie Haskell another bloody nose?” asked the smiling Savannah Jbouri, referring to an incident from the year before.

The whole group broke out in a cackling laugh that brought looks from the patrons at the other tables. “Bloody right,” said Chloe. “And if the little bugger doesn’t behave himself when we get back we may have to leave him with just enough working fingers to wipe his arse with!

Think he can do it with just his thumbs?" Another round of cackling laughter went around the table as the girls pictured one of the schools most disliked boys getting what he deserved. Richie Haskell had a reputation for touching certain female body parts without permission, among other nefarious things he was known for.

"If you can catch him," laughed Brooklyn Connors. "You know he runs the other way whenever he sees either one of you." Another round of chortling and snickering laughter had the girls rolling in their seats. The fact was that Richie Haskell was absolutely terrified of some of the girls, including Chloe and Stormy. But he wasn't as afraid of them as he was of Nikola Dubrovski, who along with Saki Hashimoto and Luka Teranova had caught him peeping through the window into the girls shower room. When the three caught up with him they'd bound and gagged the hapless miscreant and hung him upside down naked from one of the second-floor windows in the administration building with a warning not to tell anyone who had put him there. Unfortunately it hadn't stopped his roaming fingers and hands when it came to the younger girls who were all now on alert whenever he was around. "Besides, if those Chinese and Korean girls get to him first there won't be enough left of him to use for fish bait."

"The Chinese and Korean girls? What did the wanker do now?" asked Tuesday Rutherford. "Is this something new that we haven't heard about?"

"You mean, you haven't heard?" Brooklyn said shaking her head. "I heard this from Bailin Chow. And this happened just two days ago, before the rest the students left on their school break. Sun-Hi Kwan and some of the Chinese girls were in the shower at the gym after their gymnastics practice when Liu Sun Chu happened to look up and saw a pair of eyeballs looking down at her and the other girls through the air vent in the ceiling. Bailin said that it took like two seconds for Liu to get a boost up from one of the other girls and get right up close to that vent and she was eyeball to eyeball with Richie who jerked back and crawled away fast. And he had a mini-camera!"

"Oh my God, what a bloody tosser," said Avril. "Did they catch him?"

"Not yet. He must've crawled into a hole somewhere until it was time for his daddy to pick him up." Richie Haskell was the son of a high level manager in one of the mining companies based in Villa De La Montana and had retreated there while the school was on break for the spring.

"If he's smart he won't come back," River Sleight said, "but he's not. I'll bet they'll be waiting for him next semester. Your dad's gonna have to kick him out of the school when he finds out," she said to Winter Summerfield.

"If he finds out, you mean," Winter threw back. "And it won't do any good unless they have proof. But if any pictures get out, he's dead. He might as well look for Nikola and asked her to put him out of his misery."

"Pictures or not, those girls are going to make him pay," Brooklyn said. "And if he doesn't give it up right away they'll be pulling out his fingernails one at a time until they get the camera and all his picture files. Then he'll be done and your dad will have the evidence and no choice but to kick him out no matter how much pull his father thinks he has."

"I suppose someone could always take him camping, and sorry Mr. Haskell, poor Richie slipped and fell off a cliff," Gillian O'Malley said. "Then we can have a party in his honor. Irish wake and all," she giggled.

"Good thinking," said a chortling Winter. "Easier for everyone that way." More laughter greeted her assertion. "The banner on the school newlink will read, 'Poor Richie, the bloody punter Haskell, breaks neck trying to fly. The knob head fell while taking a piss off a cliff and

landed in the puddle of pee.’ And we can make a giant banner to hang outside in the print shop.” The uproarious laughter that followed was so loud it attracted the attention of their waitress who asked them to quiet down a bit and inquired if they were ready to order. The hungry girls agreed to keep it down and set about the serious business of stuffing their empty stomachs.