

Emissary of Illumination

Prologue

The stars passed me by as the *Trident*, a ship of the United States Navy, made its final expedition into deepest, darkest sector of the Milky Way.

I stared out at the emptiness of space, a bottle of whisky on the railing next to me and two glasses, one half full and the other almost spent—mine. I glanced over at the half-full glass, remembering this very same moment from many days in the past when I would pretend my long-time friend, Sargent Tucker, was here to drink with me. Most of the time people would walk by, assuming I was insane when I would scream into space without anyone else next to me to hear. But I knew he was there, somewhere, lost in the sea of space.

My name is Commander Wilson, and I am following a madman into the depths of the eternal abyss for an uncertain reward. Hence the reason for my calling my friend, who isn't physically here, to help me with my problem.

I refilled my glass and drank half. My head was already spinning from the last three glasses, but with my vivid imagination, I recreated Sargent Tucker in his younger form of approximately twenty years old beside me. I didn't look over at him, but I could imagine him looking me over critically. "Damn, bro," I knew he would say, "What the hell did you get yourself into?"

"Bills," I said with a slur, "they gotta be paid."

"My ass," he replied, and then took another drink of his whiskey. "You're not doing this for money—you're doing this because you think you will make a difference." He grunted and looked away, mumbling, "Naïve S.O.B."

"What of it?" I asked. Footsteps walked by behind me, but I refused to look at whoever was there. Surely they

would have been looking around, wondering who I was talking to.

“*What of it?*” he spat, slamming his glass down and cracking it. “What of the *Captain*? Patterson is going to get you and your team of engineers killed. You know this. He is not here for the Omacite, you know,” he continued, leaning in. “He is here for something more—something he is not telling you about.”

Omacite, as my friend mentioned, is the strongest metal material to be harvested from the cluster of asteroids we were seeking. Durable and tough, they allowed for the best ship building material.

Tucker slapped me on the arm, as if he actually had, and said angrily, “You need to stop following that boy around like a puppy and take charge.”

I laughed hysterically. “*That* will kill me before this mission even starts.”

Tucker drank the rest of his whiskey and turned his back to the railing, motioning with his glass to the people behind me. “Looks like you have an audience.”

I turned slowly, drinking the rest of my glass as I did. Behind me stood my engineers. All of them were dressed in their grey jumpsuits and prepared for the upcoming mission. The team leader, Michael, stepped forward and asked, “You alright, sir?”

“What are you boys doing out here?” I asked, stumbling as I turned to place my glass on the railing. I bumped into the bottle and it fell to the landing below with a loud *crash* that echoed throughout the hangar. “Crap.” *That was a perfectly good bottle of apparition—or whatever.*

Michael put a hand on my shoulder, turning me from the railing. “You should get some rest, sir.”

I threw my arm up to knock his away. “You need to get back in formation.”

He withdrew his hand and slowly backed away. "Sir, with all due respect, but what the hell are you thinking?" he asked, hostility plain in his voice.

"What?"

"The mission is only an hour or so away and you're here talking to no one and drinking yourself into a pit you can't climb out of," Michael said. He pointed to the men behind him. "These people are relying on you to get them home safely, and if you cannot do that," he reached down to the sidearm at his hip, "then perhaps someone else should—"

I immediately grabbed his right arm, twisted it behind his back, relieved him of his side arm, and thrust him at the group. "Get in line, boy." I placed the pistol on the railing and turned to face the men. "Many people want me dead, so you'll just have to wait your turn like a good soldier."

"Aye," he responded, shaking his arm to relieve himself of the ache. "That I will. In the meantime, what's your command, sir?"

I smiled half-heartedly. "We follow the Captain, but not into hell."

Chapter 1: Into Darkness

I stood at the head of Captain Patterson's desk. His finely decorated jacket as a captain was more than what people would expect; too glamorous for my taste. A mangled bullet in a wooden and glass encased frame hung next to a picture of the *Mayweather*. It was the first bullet he ever fired, straight into the cranium of a known terrorist leader.

Patterson was always known for his sentimental treasures and, above all, his arrogance and overwhelming confidence.

"Commander Wilson, what the hell were you *thinking?*" Captain Patterson yelled. I half-heard what he said, being slightly intoxicated and all. "The operation starts in only an hour's time and you were *drinking?*" He rubbed his brow. "Don't even get me started on that bottle that fell in the hangar—you could've killed someone."

"I didn't," I explained, my voice still slurred. I could barely get the words out. I stumbled to the side once, but straightened up immediately.

Patterson grumbled to himself, and then said, "Return to your ship, but as of now, Michael is the new commander of your crew, and captain of the *Trident*."

I lunged forward, both my hands on his desk. "You did *what?* You don't have the authority!"

"I am *giving* myself the authority—by remaining intoxicated you are not only placing your fleet in jeopardy but my operation as well. This I cannot allow. Now, calm down or I will have you sent to the brig."

I stayed there for a second, staring at the jerk until something flashed across my mind. "I am a third-party to your command, and as such you have no standing over the leadership of my own fleet. The only way you can usurp my authority would be to—"

“—contact the President of the United States of America, which I did.” Reaching down, Patterson opened a drawer and slapped a piece of paper on the desk.

My legs grew weak. *This only happened an hour ago! No way was he able to make contact with—*I couldn’t finish my thought. I picked up the document and found the president’s signature clear across the line. At the bottom was the presidential stamp and at the top was the declaration of demotion for the duration of this operation. I read through the text, appalled by what I was reading:

By order of Jefferson Freeman, Commander and Chief of the United States of the America, Junior Commander Wilson Freeman of the United States Navy for Naval Explorations has been reassigned as communications expert for the duration of the operation under Captain Patterson’s command. Charges are pending for Junior Commander Wilson Freeman’s direct involvement in negligent indirect harm to his crew and fleet.

Signed,

Jefferson Freeman

My eyes closed as I read the part about the charges to be held against me.

“What are you waiting for?” someone said. I recognized the voice as Sargent Tucker. He wasn’t really beside me, was he? “Shoot him already.”

“I can’t,” I mumbled.

“Why not?”

Captain Patterson spoke, but with confusion plain in his voice, “You can’t do what?”

Sargent Tucker continued unimpeded, “The guy is a wackjob—he is going to kill your entire crew if you don’t stand up to him.”

“But if I kill him—” hands immediately pulled me to the ground, interrupting my train of thought.

“Kill who, Commander Wilson?” asked Captain Patterson, who leaned over the desk to look at me.

I didn’t respond—should have I killed the man before me? What would have happened to my crew? Is the thoughts in my head my own? Who am I?

“Who are you supposed to kill? Answer me!” After a second, Patterson gave up. “Forget this—lock him up and see to it that this conversation is archived for the court martial.”

I felt the urge to scream as the lightly armored guards carried me away like a ragdoll, my head bouncing once off the floor and filling it with immense pain. The only thoughts in my head were: *who am I?* An innocent question, but one I knew questioned my sanity. Or was it the alcohol? My last thought, as the door shut between me and my newly assumed enemy, was how satisfying it would feel to strangle the life out of him.

My humiliating adventure to the brig left me with a bruised forehead and a few minor scratches on my arms and legs. The men were not exactly gentle either. Every corner we came across resulted in a blinding light before my eyes as the back of my head hit that corner. After a few choice curses and another debilitating ride through an excessively bumpy hallway, I was thrown into a small room.

The lights went out. Suddenly, I was more alone than ever. Subdued and empty inside, I resigned to a long and likely uneventful sleep.

“Hey! I said get *up!*” yelled someone from the door.

I awoke with an agitated growl, angry at the man for destroying my peaceful sleep. Well, my side hurt so it wasn't very peaceful. My head felt like it was on ice.

"What the hell do you want?" I asked, raising the crook of my arm to block the incoming light. Captain Patterson stood at the doorway, his arms crossed and his heavy brow creased as he stared down at me with a look of angry desperation. *Seems he is having problems and he needs my help.*

"Come," he urged, reaching down with an extended hand to help me up, "you're needed on the bridge."

"Did you boys destroy another drill?" I pushed his hand away and helped myself up.

"No, you drunk fool—we don't use drills."

I laughed half-heartedly. "Oh, yeah. That's right! We use bright and shiny lights!"

"What is taking so long?" said a woman's voice from around a corner. I had no idea women were aboard on this operation, so who was it?

She stepped around the corner and looked at me under dark red hair, which flowed down past her shoulders in reflective streaks to the light behind her. She looked me over with disgust. Then, with a harrumph, she said, "Get him ready."

"Ready for what, darlin'?" I asked.

She simply turned, revealing the black leather armor that fit snug around her frame, and the black cape that fell to the ground behind her. Slung across her back was a sword. A sword? *When did we resort to medieval weapons?* Still, I liked that about her. But I don't even know her name. . . .

"Hey!" I exclaimed, pushing past Patterson. "I never got your name, darlin'!"

She stopped halfway down the hall, turned, and said icily, "My name is not necessary to one of your position. Just shut

up and stop calling me darlin’.” With that, she exited to the corridor leading to the bridge.

I smiled slightly. *Until I get your name, you will just have to get used to it.*

With Patterson close behind and the same two guards from before, we closed the distance to the bridge. Once there, I was immediately overwhelmed with the scenery—I never visited the *Mayweather’s* bridge before. Personnel lined the edges of the spherical bridge. Multiple platforms were connected by elevators that allowed for easier access to other areas of the bridge by level: weapons, extra-terrestrial and fleet communications, navigations, logistics, personnel, and inventory. The place was like a beehive with a supervisor on each level who all reported to Captain Patterson.

As if on cue, the supervisor of our current level—level 3, fleet communications—ran up to Patterson with a clear tablet in his hands. A few lights flickered on the tablet as it exchanged hands, but I was not interested in that little gadget. My eyes were reserved for the mysterious woman, whom I couldn’t seem to locate.

“What is this?” asked Capt. Patterson angrily. Looking at the supervisor, he pointed to the display and said, “Don’t we have a recruiter to tosses these sort of people out?”

The supervisor flinched, looked down for a second, but immediately replied, “I understand, sir, but these people seem to have some particular skills that would be of use to you.”

“They’re minorities!” spat Patterson. I immediately looked over at him, wondering what he would have against minorities. Aren’t we working for a country of the free?

Bringing the tablet back to look at other information, he said, “Send them to the army. I don’t have time for this.” Once Patterson was finished, he thrust the tablet back to the

supervisor and said, “Don’t let me catch you trying to recruit anyone I don’t approve again. Stick. To. Procedure!”

Patterson started to walk ahead of me, and I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. The two guards behind me immediately raised their weapons. He looked back at me as I stared into his eyes, all seriousness finally returning to me. I didn’t say anything—I knew there was nothing I *could* say—only warn him.

“If you boys are done playing around, you can follow me,” said the woman from the elevator doors.

I didn’t let go of Patterson’s shoulder; I squeezed, letting my intent and my frustration known. My best friend, Tucker, was of African origin, but he is still an American in my book. I don’t even know if he is alive.

Finally, Patterson shrugged my hand off and approached the elevator. The guards lowered their weapons, but rammed against my shoulder as they passed to follow their Captain.

I joined them in the elevator, but kept silent. I was not in the mood for sarcasm, not at this moment. Not even the mysterious woman held my attention as the elevator ascended to level one, the observation deck of the bridge.

“Come,” the woman said, walking onto the platform to the observation window at the end. The supervisor of the floor gave Patterson his tablet for review while we walked to the window. Beyond that was a sea of black, dotted with the stars of the Milky Way. As I came closer, I noticed the ships of my fleet around a cluster of particularly large rocks. Omacite from the looks of it—the metal used to build ships.

The woman turned as I met her. “Do you see something wrong?” She motioned to the ships abroad.

I looked at my ships to try and determine the problem. The harvester cannons seemed to be running at full strength, but the beam itself seemed less potent—the electrical

stream in the beam was weak. The balance of artificial gravity and magnetism to pull in the material was wrong.

“Well, there are a few things wrong,” I said. Smiling, I turned to the woman. “But I have no authority over my crew right now. In fact, I am a prisoner aboard this ship and am I awaiting a trial that may result in my dishonorable discharge. Why should I help either of you?” I finished by looking at Capt. Patterson, who scowled at me.

I looked back at the woman as she replied. “Well, why don’t we set the record straight with the President? Just a misunderstanding, correct?”

“Not good enough,” I said. “If you want me to help in the delivery of this unknown material—”

“How did y—” interrupted Patterson.

“—I will require a few prerequisites to be met,” I finished without looking at the Captain.

“Name them?” she said. Obviously this woman held substantial political power. Not even Captain Patterson looked twice at her. He only glared at me.

“First, I want a letter from the President extolling me for any wrong-doings and my charges erased. Then, I want undisputed control over the particulars of this operation,” I let that last one hang, knowing full and well Patterson would object. Instead, he just turned around for a second.

“Patterson!” exclaimed the woman. “I did not excuse you.”

After Patterson rejoined our little diplomatic meeting, I continued, “Third, I want the minorities that were requesting recruitment to join my ranks. That includes any others that were redirected to the army.”

“That’s a lot of recruits,” the woman said, uncertain as to why I would want so many. “You would require another promotion—to Field Commander and Navy Captain. Would that be your fourth and final request?”

“No.”

“You will get four and be happy with it,” she said, stern.

“You can’t have the whole world!”

I laughed. “*That* would be nice, but no. All I want is authenticated documentation regarding my requirements on my desk aboard the *Trident*.”

“Done.”

