

Destination Azahar

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Chapter 20 - The Marines Have Landed

Colonel Andrew Bryant, Commander of 504th Battalion, had elected to travel with the first wave of his troops being transferred from Demeter. As soon as transportation between *Asimov* and the surface was available, Colonel Bryant sent for Sergeant Budzinski to accompany him to the planet. He then asked the AI to locate Lieutenant Clark without alerting him to his own presence and was given directions to the dojo where Clark was training with Lieutenant Wallace and Corporal Miller.

When Budzinski reported to the Colonel, Bryant returned the salute and simply said, "You're with me, Sergeant."

Everyone came to attention when Bryant entered the makeshift dojo. Bryant was confused momentarily by the presence of three shirtless marines. Both men were far shorter than the two meter standard for Confederacy Marines, and the large woman was striking. "As you were," Bryant directed when he tore his eyes from Miller and started breathing again. He was not affronted that none of the bare-headed marines had saluted him. Marines don't traditionally salute unless covered, but there was a protracted silence after Bryant's order to stand at ease.

Budzinski detected the colonel's confusion and realized neither man was wearing a nametag. "Colonel, if I may, this is Lieutenant Mark Wallace who is currently assigned to *Sir Galahad*, Lieutenant Marvin Clark and Corporal Cynthia Miller of First Battalion." Budzinski addressed Wallace and Clark, "Gentlemen, this is Colonel Andrew Bryant, commander of First Battalion." Budzinski grimaced when he realized he had incorrectly addressed Clark as lieutenant instead of ensign.

"Please excuse the interruption," Bryant said to Wallace before turning his attention to Clark. "I understand that you have been on Azahar long enough to develop contacts with the people in charge of creating the accommodations here, Lieutenant."

Clark nodded as he addressed Bryant. "How may I be of service, Colonel?"

Bryant briskly told Clark, "There are 95 Delta Company pods orbiting this rock. You are to coordinate with the local authorities and organize their delivery to the planet. The three of you are *not* to alert *anyone* that I am on Azahar. Am I clear?"

Clark's nod was barely perceptible, but his voice was strong, "Very clear, sir. Allow me to clean up and I'll get in touch with Ensign McKinsey or Ensign Nguyen to arrange where and when the pods can be delivered. Do you have a preference, sir?"

"I'll leave their disposition to you and the colony planners. That is all," Bryant nodded as he dismissed Clark. He turned toward the door and told Budzinski, "You're still with me, Sergeant."

Clark knew he would be taking a big chance, but he turned to Corporal Miller, "Clean up and join me in my quarters, Corporal."

"Yes, sir," Miller said professionally and without so much as a smirk, which surprised Clark, as she headed for the doorway still bare from the waist up, which didn't surprise him at all. Clark and Wallace exchanged a look of relieved tension and followed Miller out of the dojo.

Clark kicked off his shoes and dropped his shorts and shirt as he crossed the foyer of his pod heading toward the master suite. When Julie Ann stuck her head out of the game room he summoned her with a wave of his hand. "Lay out a casual uniform for me while I grab a fast shower. I've got to go to work this afternoon."

Julie Ann nodded her understanding and picked up his discarded clothing before following him into the master suite.

"AI, please connect me with Ensign McKinsey," Clark requested.

"McKinsey here. What can I do for you, Mr. Clark?" A pleasant voice was generated in Clark's head by his implant.

Clark asked, "Do you or Ensign Nguyen have a minute to speak with me about the unloading of *Asimov*?"

"Tuan and I were just discussing that," McKinsey replied, "Would you care to join us in the colony CIC? Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, it's through the transporter room. Can I have fifteen minutes to make myself presentable and collect Corporal Miller?" Clark responded.

"Yes, of course. We'll be expecting you in fifteen minutes." McKinsey agreed before breaking the connection.

Miller approached Clark's quarters as Julie Ann was helping him into his service khaki shirt. He told the AI to admit her and asked Julie Ann to meet her in the foyer and ask for thirty seconds.

Clark had wet hair under his cap when he stepped into the foyer and returned Miller's salute before asking her, "How did you get ready so fast?"

She smiled, "Lot's of practice with a DI yelling in my face. What's the plan, sir?"

"We have an appointment in the CIC to orchestrate the unloading and disposition of 95 pods, Corporal. You're along to keep me out of trouble," Clark said as he indicated with his arm that she was to precede him out the door. He gave Julie Ann a quick kiss, "Thanks for your help."

"What's a DI?" she asked before turning loose of his neck.

"A drill instructor," Miller answered for him while laughing, "One of the loudest, meanest creatures in the known universe."

Clark and Miller knew that things were hectic because neither Nguyen nor McKinsey greeted them before directing everyone's attention to a holographic display. Nguyen showed Clark and Miller the plan to have clusters of pods connected to the colony center by long tunnels allowing families to be grouped by common interests. He acknowledged, "I understand marine families don't have much in common with the families of botanists, but concubines and kids should be allowed some mix-and-match socializing."

Clark held his breath in shock when Miller bluntly commented, "The billeting of navy and marine families next door to each other not only demonstrates insensitivity and poor taste, but also suggests either gross ignorance or downright stupidity. Actually, the smart planner would have isolated areas reserved for marines because we rarely get along with anybody. Our training emphasized taking and occupying real estate. This concept is so thoroughly ingrained that it can't be easily suspended even when we're off duty."

Clark scowled at Miller for being so blunt and possibly insulting Nguyen or McKinsey.

Nguyen laughed, "I know just what you mean. My mother was a marine. Her space was sacred, and woe be the poor fool who invaded it." He zoomed out the holographic display to show the placement of the navy residential area that was a good kilometer through solid rock from the marine neighborhood. "That's why I suggested that we put the navy housing over here."

Miller snorted her amusement and approval. "Smart man."

Nguyen added, "There was some discussion about setting up a residential area near the marine compound, but we decided that some disturbances could be tolerated during commutes and overlapping leisure activities in the hope of weakening the 'us versus them' barrier by making it easier for the concubines of the various services to socialize. We actually intend to install transporter nodes at the intersection of these long tunnels that connect directly to the marine compound from here and the navy compound from here."

He indicated the main junctions that connected the marine and navy residential areas respectively to the colony center.

McKinsey kibitzed, "We haven't designated a navy headquarters compound, yet. It may make sense to have it in orbit until we get a lot of heavyweights milling about. We'll need one at some point, but the crew of *Sir Galahad* is the only Navy presence at the moment, and her crew considers themselves to be transients. *Sir Galahad* will be leaving us after the modifications are completed and she passes her space trials."

Nguyen returned everyone's attention to the Barcino map. "We have new habitat pods being delivered to these three courtyards just up the tunnel from the transporter terminal. We can accommodate those families who elect to not be locked into their pods for three or four days while the pods are positioned here on this lowest level."

Clark looked up from the map. "How many are ready?"

Nguyen appeared a bit sheepish, "None at the moment, but our crews have volunteered to work a few hours after dinner this evening. They've set a goal to place ten pods around each of these three courtyards tonight. We've brought in some heavy excavation equipment to get the pods into position quicker than having them burrow down on their own."

"There's a transporter nexus in the tiny shuttles," Miller mumbled; then straightened up and asked, "Couldn't you place a transporter in the foyer of the habitat pods to give the occupants egress and ingress?"

McKinsey and Nguyen looked at each other. "We need to fire Judith," McKinsey mumbled which got the two of them giggling and prompted strange looks from the others.

"Sorry, private joke," Nguyen offered in lieu of a long explanation. "Yes, I think that would be possible for a limited number of habitat pods. I don't know how many nodes our transporter network can support, but I'll look into it. It could be enough to relieve a considerable amount of pressure from our schedule."

Clark asked for a view of the lower tier of the marine neighborhood. "Is there any reason for making these tunnels dead ends?"

"It eliminated through traffic," Nguyen remarked. "Is there a problem?"

Miller nodded agreement. She saw the same flaw, "You only have one avenue of egress. If it's blocked, then everyone on this side of the blockage is screwed."

"Damn, I missed that," Nguyen replied, "I was patterning it after neighborhood streets. I know these are underground, but the reinforced tunnels are incredibly safe."

"Yeah, up until someone sets off about five pounds of plastique," Miller muttered.

"These symbols represent elevator shafts to the surface at these locations, right?" Clark indicated the dots near the junction of each terminating intersection. There were 75 pod locations along dead-end tunnels to the left and right. "If you cut a tunnel between the courtyards at the end and the last courtyard of the dead-end, then you'll have a zigzag path all the way around giving you alternate exits. These escape tunnels don't need to be over a meter wide and two-and-a-quarter high."

"We can probably squeeze those in. The nanites can cut them in about a month," Nguyen commented. "Keep in mind that the pods are capable of digging themselves to the surface in two to five days, and their nanites can probably clear most tunnel obstructions in a few hours."

"I didn't know that," Clark admitted.

"I'd forgotten that," Miller remarked with a little embarrassment in her smile before changing the subject.

"I'm seeing roughly three squads in two courtyards and three platoons in two residential branches. Nine platoons per level. There's only enough space here for five companies."

"Only?" Nguyen asked.

"There are six companies in our battalion," Miller advised.

"Then I guess we need to get started on another neighborhood," Nguyen grimaced as he shook his head.

"No, there have to be enough locations here," Clark remarked. "There are far fewer than 1,350 marines in our battalion."

"You also don't want to mix officers with enlisted, and it's best to have NCOs somewhere in between." Miller remarked.

"Right," Nguyen slapped his forehead.

"We'll be bringing pods down from *Asimov* tomorrow. I think we should start with enlisted and work our way up," Nguyen suggested. "That will also give me a day to figure out how to create an appropriate social stratum."

"I'll have a list of pods by priority for you by tomorrow morning," Clark predicted. "How do I get a manifest of the pods and their current occupants?"

"I'll take care of that by dinner time tonight," McKinsey promised. "I'll be meeting with Captain Cooper sometime this afternoon."

"Actually, I have a note here from an Ensign Murphy with that information," Nguyen volunteered. Looking up at Clark he said, "I'll forward it to you right away, Marvin."

"AI, is Captain Kehoe in his office at the moment?" Bryant inquired from the Barcino transporter station.

The AI replied, "Affirmative. Would you like for me to connect you to him?"

"Negative!" Bryant responded quickly. "I intend to surprise him. I only require directions to his office."

The AI instructed, "If you'll step through the active transporter it will take you to Delta Company headquarters. Commander Kehoe's office is in the headquarters building that is within sight of the transporter pad. The structure is clearly labeled."

Bryant appeared to be confused and asked, "Commander?" He then answered his own question. "Oh, right! The new consolidated rank structure has replaced captain with commander. How is that supposed to be less confusing?" He remarked rhetorically and sarcastically.

"By not confusing the position of captain with the Marine's O-3 rank or the Navy's O-6 rank," the unperturbed AI answered evenly. "Lieutenant is now an O-2 in both branches eliminating that ambiguity."

Budzinski followed Bryant through the transporter. Battalion commanders usually have a cloud of aides and clerks surrounding them. Budzinski found it very curious that Bryant was out and about almost by himself. He began to wonder why the Colonel had invited him along, but long experience told him that officers at this level lived in their own little worlds.

All of the structures covered by the thick dome were an organized mix of prefabricated field accommodations: tents, inflatable Quonset huts, and the newer self-erecting innovations. The "Delta Company HQ" sign was clearly visible as promised on one of the latter style of structures and the pair headed straight for it. The last door in the hallway was labeled "Delta Company Commander: Cdr. Patrick Kehoe". The tall brunette in the reception area jumped to her feet when Bryant walked through. It looked like she was going to intercept the pair until Bryant held out his left hand in a clear warning to stay out of his way.

Kehoe jumped to his feet when Bryant burst into his office unannounced. "Colonel Bryant, what a pleasant surprise. No one told me you were coming, sir, or I would have met you at the spaceport. Please make yourself comfortable." Kehoe indicated two padded chairs. He walked around his desk and yelled, "Rodriguez!" Kehoe was clearly

getting a head of steam for not being informed of Bryant's arrival when he added, "Get in here!"

"Belay that!" Bryant countermanded without taking a seat. In a slightly quieter voice he told Kehoe, "Heads would've rolled if you *had* been made aware I was coming, Captain. No, I don't want to sit down or freshen up. I want an immediate tour of the facility with you as my guide. Your status report was incredible, and I want to see the unvarnished state of this facility."

Commander Kehoe visibly relaxed and a small smile of satisfaction appeared around his eyes, both because Bryant had used the old rank designation in his frustration and because of his certainty that the Colonel would find out for himself that the report was conservative, not an exaggeration.

Kehoe did his best to mask his smug feelings, "I wouldn't have believed that progress report either, Colonel. I still have trouble believing this was possible, and I've been here for six weeks watching it happen! I'd even considered sending you a toned down and more credible report, but that would've been misrepresenting the true state of your command, and I knew that I could never sign such a misleading report. I have every confidence that my report was accurate at the time it was transmitted. However, there has been significant progress since then.

"Ensign McKinsey and her team found a way to ship a pair of industrial replicators in standard dimension, but overweight pods. They accomplished what you'll see by starting the colony with only two such replicators less than four months ago. *Sir Galahad* arrived six weeks ago with the major pieces of a factory-class replicator. It's been in operation for about a month and has already duplicated itself. They had it running in half the time the Big Brains at Dothan said it would take. The factory has contributed nothing to what you'll see here. The factory units have been used exclusively for developing the orbiting facilities."

"Please," Kehoe said as he stepped toward the door of his office, "allow me to give you the full tour."

Three hours later they had walked the length of every tunnel that Bryant had indicated at random. Kehoe had even instructed Rodriguez to have respirators delivered to one of the airlocks in order for Bryant to inspect several sections that were not yet isolated from Azahar's atmosphere. They were standing in a tunnel looking out across a massive pit that could easily house the equipment needed by a heavy brigade.

"My God!" Bryant exclaimed, "The scale of this place is unbelievable." He looked back up the tunnel they had just descended. "Sergeant Budzinski, how did you convince a shuttle pilot to bring his craft through tunnels like this, in the dark, on an unknown world, with unknown defenses? It was absolutely insane for you to even suggest it!"

"I saw no other option, sir," Budzinski responded. "Most of us were at the surface entrance, and there were marines down in the tunnels who wouldn't have a hope in Hell of escape if the Sa'arm appeared. We brought them a means to escape, but it cost us a perfectly serviceable shuttle, and we still didn't retrieve everyone when the Dickheads jumped us from an even lower level, sir."

Budzinski looked Bryant in the eye. "Sergeant Carson and I still have guilt-ridden nightmares about leaving marines behind, sir. It's not the way we were raised."

Bryant nodded, "That after-action report is even more incredible than the status report I received from Commander Kehoe here. The combat camera footage indicated you would have needed baskets and sponges to retrieve their remains, Sergeant. You stowed a five hundred pound bomb in the shuttle and used it to destroy both the shuttle and its transporter nexus as the position was being overrun by Sa'arm. Is this truly an accurate model of the facility on Sa'Triste, Sergeant?"

Budzinski admitted, "I've had chills and lucid images flashing in my head since we reached the first airlock, sir. This pit is only different because it's empty. The one on Sa'Triste was filled with a shock-mounted multi-story building, but the rest? Yes, sir. It's close enough."

Bryant commented, "You should be locked away for your own good, Budzinski. I should have you committed for being totally insane, or pin another medal on your already crowded blouse."

Budzinski shook his head, "Let's not do that, Colonel. I abandoned marines to return with the intel that this hole is based on. The real hero is Lieutenant Timmons. She knew the risks and paid for this facility with her life, sir. She and Sewell and Walker and..." Budzinski lost his voice.

"We don't have a name for the marine compound on this planet, Colonel," Kehoe observed.

"Camp Timmons?" Bryant suggested.

Kehoe nodded, "Outstanding suggestion, sir. With your permission I'll make that recommendation in my next report."

"Thank you, sirs" Budzinski said quietly.

It was late when the trio emerged from the tunnel entrance near Commander Kehoe's office.

Kehoe asked Bryant, "Will you be returning to Demeter, or did you bring your lovely family with you, Colonel?"

"My family is on *Asimov*, but not on the drop schedule. Where would you recommend that I locate my residence?" Bryant inquired.

Kehoe smiled, "It's too late to do much today. Let's finagle an invitation to dinner for our families with Ensign McKinsey tomorrow night. I'm sure she can point out the perfect spot for you, sir."