

Alpha Sanction

Josh Gottlieb

Chapter 1

Hope Colony, June 22, 2957

3 Earth-hours before attack

“Mom, can I go outside?”

“No, Emily, you have chores.”

Emily Wong, a fifteen-year-old slip of a girl, scowled. “I’ve cleaned the windows, swept the yard, and realigned the stupid comms—something that *Dad* should have done last week.”

Her mother, Michelle, frowned. “Your father has been very busy, and you haven’t.”

“Right, watching a screen for hours where hardly anything changes.” Emily rolled her eyes. “I can see why Dad is always *so* tired when he comes home.” She pushed past her mother. “Whatever. I’m going to see if Raquel is done working. We wanted to catch the vids from Earth.”

Before Michelle could protest, Emily was out the door and headed towards the edge of the colony. Despite the bitterness towards her mother, Emily couldn’t help but feel more at ease as she breathed in the crisp evening air. Hope was a new colony, only two years old, but it was already being advertised as a paradise. With a single supercontinent that covered almost half of a planet nearly twice the size of Earth, the colony’s five thousand human settlers—the first wave of colonists from Earth—had plenty of room for whatever they wanted. And that was just for their personal lives.

Even though less than twenty percent of the planned expansion had been completed, what the agricultural centers had produced was enough to help feed two other colonies. Hope had a unique enzyme in its soil that allowed for the growing of crops at a rate and quality that amazed Sol Union scientists. Between that, the planet’s proximity to other frontier worlds in the western side of the Orion Spur, and the planned orbital dockyard, Hope was already shaping up to be a prime trade center for this part of humanity’s growing territories.

The downside to all of this, however, was that every single colonist who could lift a hammer was working nearly every minute of the 28-hour day. Even teenagers who had been dragged out

into the far reaches of the interstellar frontier were forced to learn complex computer skills, engineering, and whatever was needed to sustain a growing colony world.

Just thinking of that further soured Emily's mood. She hadn't even wanted to leave Earth, much less learn how to properly maintain communications systems. The only reason she had given in to her parents' efforts was learning that Raquel, her best friend, and her family were also going to Hope... and Raquel was just as opposed to it as she was. Misery loved company, after all.

"Emily, hurry up!" Raquel shouted as she saw Emily.

The two girls could not have been more different. Emily was short and skinny, to an almost unhealthy degree. Raquel Santiago was taller and more athletic than Emily, in part because Raquel's work involved building storehouses for the colony's growing harvests, while Emily dealt with computers. While Emily was more likely to ignore or snap at someone, Raquel would smile and treat even total strangers like family. Despite their differences, they were as inseparable as two overworked colonists that worked in two different fields of expertise could be.

"Sorry I'm late," Emily said. "Mom was giving me a hard time again."

"Yeah, my dad was doing the same thing." Raquel rolled her eyes. "Why does he even lecture me about construction? He's an *accountant*. He doesn't know the first thing about building!" She huffed, then shook her head and smiled. "All right, enough complaining. That vid's not gonna watch itself!"

Emily smiled back and pushed the bitter thoughts to the back of her mind. She could complain about her life later.

...

While his daughter enjoyed the night with her friend, Henry Wong was far from relaxed. He was hunched in front of his console, eyes glued to the screen. The only sounds came from beeps as his fingers touched holographic keys, occasionally interrupted by louder beeps from the screen, and his own tense breathing.

He was so focused on his work that he didn't notice that he wasn't alone until a hand landed on his shoulder. Henry yelped and jumped out of his chair, only to see Thinker smiling at him.

"Henry, relax," the Artificial said calmly. "It's just me."

Henry took a deep breath. "Sorry, sir."

Thinker was the only Artificial assigned to the Hope colony, and though he was only a senior administrator and not the colonial governor, he was liked and respected by most of the colonists enough that he held quite a bit of influence. His enhanced mind allowed him to forge the limited manpower the colony had into an effective workforce by maximizing every single person's potential. The younger colonists resented him for making them work, but when their parents reminded them that life would have been much harder without him, they kept their grumbling to a minimum.

"Don't worry about it, Henry." Thinker was nearly seven feet tall, and since Henry was already on the short side, he towered over the Natural human. "Do you mind telling me what you're doing here so late? It's 0100, and your shift ended hours ago."

Henry blinked, then glanced at the nearest clock to confirm that, yes, he had been working all night. "Sorry about that, sir, I've just been trying to figure out something."

Thinker dragged a chair over to Henry's station. "Do you mind if I help?"

Henry wasn't going to refuse a man whose brain worked ten times faster than his own, and outranked him. "Sure. See, you know how our long-range communications have been patchy at the best of times?"

Thinker nodded. "Of course. The pioneer group that found this system concluded that there was something in the nebula that was interfering with signals."

"Respectfully, sir, I disagree." Henry pointed to his screen. "No ship or colony has ever had a problem getting a signal into, out of, or through a nebula. However, we're having a near-total communications block, and we can only make contact when our equipment is facing away from that nebula."

Thinker frowned, but Henry was sure that he wasn't mad at him. If anything, the Artificial was mad at himself for not noticing this sooner, but he and the rest of the colony had been completely focused on creating a stable place to live, not on anything that was happening off-world. The limited satellites that could scan the system never detected anything unusual, and that had soothed a lot of nerves in the months before the colonization began. With the conflicts plaguing the SU's history all occurring in the galactic west, and no sign of anything alive—let alone hostile—to the east, no one was willing to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Let me see your findings.” Thinker transferred Henry's data to an adjacent console, and then brought up the readings that had been taken since the sensors had been installed. “Oh... this could be very bad.”

That was not what Henry was hoping to hear. “What?”

“There's a pattern.” Thinker pointed at a series of lines across the screen. “Every thirteen planetary rotations—that's when we have clear lines of communication with Earth. *Exactly* thirteen rotations, down to the nanosecond. Nature is rarely that precise, Henry.”

“Does that mean that these blackouts aren't caused by something natural?”

“Exactly.” Thinker typed furiously, not even looking at Henry. “Computer—send emergency transmission to the nearest Sol Union military force, Priority One.”

The console beeped, and warning klaxons blared across the colony. “*Ready to transmit,*” the computer's basic user interface program said.

“Communications interference caused by unnatural means. Likelihood of alien contact is seventy-two percent. Military reinforcement is requested. Send.”

“*Confirmed. Sending.*”

Henry breathed a sigh of relief. The nearest Sol Union fleet was less than four hours away. The colony would be safe. His family would be safe.

“*Error. Unable to complete transmission. Unknown interference detected. Unable to compensate.*”

Relief turned to fear. Without calling for help, the SU would only send a military response if Hope stopped sending transmissions of any kind, something that would take days, at least.

“How bad is this?” Henry asked, too scared to do more than whisper.

Though he was an Artificial, and his mind worked on a level that most Naturals couldn’t easily grasp, Thinker was just as human as Henry. The uncertainty on his face was very real.

“I have no idea,” he said.

...

Just because Hope’s distress call never reached the Sol Union didn’t mean that it went unheard. In the darkness of the nebula, a sleek predator turned gracefully in the void and powered towards the planet. In less than an hour, it began to orbit the colony.

Five minutes after that, the world began to burn.

...

Emily woke to a barrage of thunder and fire. She had decided to stay over at Raquel’s house that night to cool her temper from earlier. Later in her life, she would wish that she had stayed at her own home, if only to see her mother one last time.

At that moment, however, all Emily could grasp was her own fear and confusion. What was happening? Was there a fire? An earthquake? Both? Parts of the ceiling began to rain down, and she instinctively knew that she needed to get outside. But Raquel was gone, and Emily wasn’t so lost to fear that she would abandon her best friend.

“Raquel, where are you?” she shouted as she dodged flaming debris. “We need to go!”

Something caught her ankle, causing her to trip and fall onto burning metal and plaster. She screamed at the pain, and screamed louder when she saw what was holding onto her.

With only half her face intact, Raquel was barely recognizable. Her skin was blackened and charred, and both of her legs were gone. Only her head and the arm she’d used to grab Emily’s ankle were free. She gave Emily one last look of pain and fear before dying.

Choking back a sob, Emily pulled her foot free of Raquel's hand and stumbled through the burning door. Outside, she saw more fire, and heard the screams of the dying and fearful. Homes, factories, and everything else that had been a part of the colony was little more than a burning crater. Some people could be seen in the distance, but most of them were lying on ground, either completely still or in various states of dismemberment.

The pain, horror, and shock was too much for Emily; she retched repeatedly, until there was nothing left.

Before she was ready to get up on her own, a massive impact lifted Emily into the air, and back onto her feet. Only reflex kept her from falling back down.

The source of the impact was still visible—a massive green pillar of energy had crashed into what used to be the main fabrication building, destroying what was left of it, along with anyone that might have still been alive inside it.

It was all gone, Emily realized. Her home, her family, her friends... if anyone was still alive, they would be running away.

And that was what she did. Emily wasn't sure where she was going, but anywhere had to be better than in the middle of this slaughter. Stumbling at first, she ran for the edge of the colony and into the dark night.

...

June 25, 2957

It was by pure chance that help arrived earlier than expected. A Sol Union patrol happened to be close enough to Hope that they were able to detect the residual energies of weapons-fire. Knowing that the colonists had nothing beyond a few firearms with them—nothing that would have been detected from a distance—the commanding officer of the battlegroup ordered the vessels to change course.

As soon as the ships got close enough to the planet to scan the colony, emergency forces were deployed to search for survivors, and two vessels were sent beyond the influence of the nebula to report to High Command. Aside from sending that message and securing the system, all the

patrol fleet cared about was searching for survivors, praying that most of the colonists had made it to safety.

...

It took Emily several minutes for her to register the sound, and then figure out what it meant. The low thrum of anti-grav engines might have been softer than the roar of the colony's bulk transports, but all Sol Union technology was based around the same principle.

Without thinking, Emily stumbled in the direction of the sound, back to where the colony had been. She had been hiding in the wheat fields since the attack, with nothing to eat or drink, and without any way to treat her injuries. If she had been aware enough to care about such things, she would have thought she barely looked alive anymore.

The soldiers who spotted her, practically dragging herself forward, got the full picture. Terrible burns covered Emily's arms and legs, several pieces of metal were still lodged in her back, and nearly every injury showed signs of infection.

"Medic!" one soldier shouted. "We've got a survivor!"

"Help..." Emily's voice was a pained rasp, all of her energy focused on just reaching salvation.

Another soldier grabbed her before she collapsed. "Don't worry, kid, we've got you. You're going to be okay."

As the irony of those words sank in, Emily finally passed out.

...

Artemis, June 26, 2957

"The ground forces have finished their sweep, Captain. Eleven survivors were recovered, along with one hundred and four bodies. There was no sign of the others; they must have been vaporized."

Jordan Moor, captain of the *Artemis* and commanding officer of the battlegroup, scowled. “Eleven people out of five thousand. There is no silver lining here.”

Commander Allison Gates, Moor’s first officer, nodded grimly. “We can still avenge the victims, sir.”

Moor almost smiled. “That’s something we’re more than capable of.”

Sol Union warships were not built with finesse in mind. They were massive hulks, practically flying cities, and the *Artemis* was no different. At five kilometers long, the Fury-class battlecruiser was vaguely rectangular, with a sloping armored hull on the prow, spine, and sides. Two stubby wings, one on each side, kept the massive twin engines firmly connected to the hull. From a distance, it looked like the ship was covered in large studs, but those were weapon batteries; everything from long-range missiles and lasers, medium-range plasma projectors, to short-range point-defense systems.

In short, the *Artemis* was a force to be reckoned with, and when combined with her battlegroup of two other battlecruisers and two Rampart-class carriers, there was enough firepower to level a small continent. Some of the officers hoped that no more force would be necessary, that whatever had happened to Hope would be resolved quickly. Others, those that were students of history or veterans of the last war, wondered if they might need even more.

It wouldn’t be the first time the Sol Union had gone to war with an alien aggressor.

“Sir, we’re getting a transmission from the surface,” a bridge officer said. “Some of the colony’s sensor logs were recoverable. They’re sending it to us now.”

Moor nodded. “Filter out anything that isn’t essential to figuring out what happened here. We need to be absolutely sure that this was an act committed by a hostile entity.”

While that result was almost certain, there was a slim chance that this tragedy was all just a misunderstanding. If the SU was going to war, it needed to be sure that it was right to do so.

“Captain, there isn’t a lot of data to analyze, a few seconds, at most,” another officer said. “It won’t be great quality, but I think I can pull up a few images.”

“All right, put it on the main viewscreen.” The tactical display in the front of the bridge flickered as holographic projectors activated. The bridge went quiet as the officers saw what murdered so many innocent people.

The image was grainy and the details were impossible to make out, but there was no mistaking the ridged pillar-shaped ship that hung in the sky. The dots of green light along the sides indicated that it was about to fire its weapons at the planet below.

Moor stood up from his chair and glared at the image. As far as he was concerned, there was no misunderstanding, and no turning back. This was the enemy, it would be found, and it would be destroyed.

“Relay a message to Earth,” he ordered. “Hostile contact has been confirmed. Have all frontier systems be put on alert, and request reinforcements. As soon as this system is secure, we’re going hunting.”

“Sir, the attack was days ago,” Gates pointed out. “That ship could be anywhere.”

“Maybe,” Moor admitted, “but I’m willing to bet that if it’s still in the neighborhood, and these aliens want to pick a fight, they’ll hide in the nebula and wait for a chance to hit us again. I say our best chance is to find them before then.”

Gates, always eager for action, smiled. “Should I put that observation in the message to Command?”

Moor gave her a no-nonsense look. “Joke later, Commander. Right now, we have five thousand people to mourn.”

...

Several hours after being rescued, Emily woke up in the *Artemis*’ sickbay with a scream. Her dreams had been filled with images of fire and death and other horrors that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

A steady hand appeared on her shoulder, keeping her still. “Easy, kid,” a calm voice said. “You’re safe.”

Emily took several deep breaths and slowly took in her surroundings. She had never been on a military vessel before, nor did she realize she was on one at the moment, but the infirmary was like most hospitals, minus painted walls and calming pictures. Instead, there was dull-grey metal everywhere she looked; even the blankets on her bed were grey.

The man—tall, with dark skin and a kind smile—spoke again. “Calmed down now?”

“Where—” Emily was surprised at how raspy her voice was. Then again, she’d just had the worst three days of her life.

“You’re onboard the *Artemis*,” the doctor said as he handed her a glass of water. “We’ve rescued everyone we could from the colony, yourself included.”

Emily gladly drank the water before speaking again. “Are my parents here?”

The man took a datapad from the foot of her bed and tapped at it for a moment. “Wong, Emily...” his eyes were filled with sorrow, but he kept talking. “I’m sorry, but there were no other Wongs brought up from the colony. If they aren’t on the ship now, then they’re dead.”

Emily didn’t cry, but not because she held the tears back. She was just too shocked to react. Until that moment, she had never allowed herself to consider that she would never see her parents again. She had just assumed that they would always be there for her. Hearing the doctor say that they were dead was too much for her to process.

He guessed as much from her expression. “I know that this is difficult for you. Another ship is going to be taking you and the other survivors to a medical station, and then you’ll go back to Earth. Your file says you have family there.”

Emily nodded dully. That was all she could manage.

“I know it’s not much,” he went on, “but we’re probably going after the people who did this to you. If not us, then someone is going make sure there’s justice for what happened.”

This time, there was a little bit of fire in Emily’s eyes as she nodded.

“Good.”

© Josh Gottlieb 2018

Read the rest at <http://www.JoshGottliebBooks.com>