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MUTINY



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**STARSHIP:
MUTINY**

BOOK ONE



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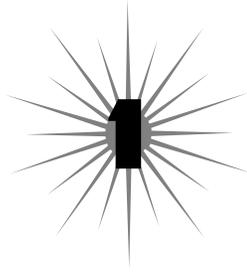
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To Carol, as always,
and to Lou and Xin Anders



The ship hung in space, all but motionless, a dull gray in color. There was no rust on it, of course, but it looked like there should have been.

“Not a very impressive sight, sir,” said the shuttle pilot as the tiny vessel approached the ship.

“I’ve seen worse,” said the officer.

“Really?” said the pilot, curious. “When?”

“Give me an hour to think about it.”

“I wonder if it’s seen a lot of action?”

“Out here?” said the officer with a grimace. “I think its primary function is to *avoid* action.”

“So you’re going to sit out the war out here?” said the pilot with a smile.

“Looks like.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, sir.”

“I’ve done my bit. I can use the rest.”

The shuttle approached the ship’s hatch, and when it was close enough a section extended and bonded to it. Then the hatch irised and the officer boarded the ship. He offered the uniformed woman who greeted him a lazy salute. She snapped off a smart salute in return.

“Welcome aboard the *Theodore Roosevelt*, sir!” she said as he surveyed his surroundings unenthusiastically. Finally he realized that she was staring at him.

“Is something wrong, Ensign?” asked the man.

“You’re supposed to request permission to come aboard, sir,” was the answer.

“But I already *am* aboard.”

“I know, sir. But—”

“My shuttle’s five hundred miles from here and getting farther away every second. What am I expected to do if you refuse me permission?”

“I would never refuse you permission, sir,” she said, flustered.

“Then it wasn’t necessary for me to request it, was it?” he said.

“I’m just following regulations, sir. I’m sorry if I have offended you in some way.”

“We’ll kiss and make up later, Ensign,” said the man. “Now suppose you take me to your leader.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The captain of this vessel, Ensign. My orders are to report to him. Or her. Or it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, saluting again. “Follow me, sir.”

She turned and began walking down a corridor that, like the exterior of the ship, had seen better days and better decades, then stopped at an airlift and waited for him. He joined her, and they ascended three levels on an invisible cushion of air. Then she stepped off, he followed her again, and she soon stopped before a door.

“In there, sir.”

“Thank you, Ensign.”

“Before I leave, sir,” she said, clearly nervous but determined, “may I shake your hand?”

He shrugged and extended his hand. She took it and shook it vigorously.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “*That*’ll be something to tell my children when I finally have them. Go right in.”

He waited for the door to read his retina, facial features, weight, and skeletal structure and match them against his records in the ship’s computer, then stepped forward as it dilated. He found himself in a

small, unimpressive office. Seated behind a desk was an exceptionally tall man of Oriental descent, almost seven feet in height, wearing the insignia of captain.

The new officer took a step forward. "Wilson Cole reporting for duty."

The captain looked at him impassively without speaking.

"Wilson Cole reporting for duty," repeated Cole.

Again there was no response, and Cole began to grow noticeably irritated. "I apologize, sir," he said. "They should have told me that my new captain was a deaf-mute."

"Shut up, Mr. Cole."

It was Cole's turn to stare in silence.

"I am Captain Makeo Fujiama," said the tall man. "I am still waiting for you to salute and present yourself properly."

Cole saluted. "Commander Wilson Cole reporting for duty, sir."

"That's better," said Fujiama. "I've read your record, Mr. Cole. It is, to say the least, unusual."

"I found myself in unusual circumstances, sir."

"I'd be more inclined to say that you put yourself in unusual circumstances, Mr. Cole," replied Fujiama. "However, there is no arguing with three Medals of Courage and two Citations for Exceptional Valor. That is truly remarkable, quite possibly unmatched in the annals of the Service."

"Thank you, sir."

"On the other hand, you have also been given command of your own ship twice, and have been demoted twice. That is shameful, Mr. Cole."

"That is bureaucracy, Captain Fujiama," said Cole.

"In point of fact, that was insubordination. You disobeyed your orders in time of war."

"We've been at war with the Teroni Federation for eleven years," said Cole. "As I see it, my job is to win the damned war and go home, so when I was given stupid orders, I ignored them."

“And put your ship and every man under your command at risk,” said Fujiama.

Cole looked directly into his new captain’s eyes. “War is hell, sir,” he said at last.

“Made more so by your contribution, I suspect.”

“My tactics were successful on both occasions,” said Cole. “They only took my command and my ship away. If I’d failed, I’d be rotting in a brig somewhere and we both know it.”

“You’re in a brig right now, Mr. Cole,” said Fujiama. “We all are.” “Sir?”

“The *Theodore Roosevelt* may not look like a brig, but for all practical purposes that’s precisely what it is,” answered Fujiama. “This ship is more than a century old. By rights it should have been decommissioned fifty years ago, but we keep getting into wars and we need every ship that’s still functional and spaceworthy. Most of the crew should have been decommissioned one way or another as well, but the Republic isn’t about to reward bad actors by returning them to their civilian lives. The *Theodore Roosevelt* is operating out here in the least populated section of the Rim. We rarely touch down on any planet, we’re unlikely to see any action, and in short we are the ideal holding pen for all those crew members who, like yourself, seem incapable of taking orders and becoming smoothly functioning cogs in the vast military machine. Discipline is in short supply, and most of the crew holds the Navy in no higher esteem than the Teroni Federation.” The captain paused. “I believe that describes the situation, Mr. Cole.”

Cole considered what he had been told for a moment. “What was your particular sin, sir?” he asked at last.

“I killed seven naval officers.”

“Ours or theirs?”

“Ours.”

“By accident, I presume?”

“No,” answered Fujiama in a tone that said the subject was closed.

There was an uneasy silence, which Cole finally broke. “I am happy to operate on the assumption that they deserved killing, sir. I want to make it clear that I’m not here to cause any trouble.”

“I hope not, Mr. Cole,” said Fujiama. “I think both sides can testify that it’s one of the things you do with exceptional skill and elan. I’ll be perfectly frank: whether I like it or not, and whether *you* like it or not, your exploits have made you a hero to most of the crew. You could make my job a lot easier if you took it upon yourself to lead by example.”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” said Cole. “Will there be anything else?”

“Your duties will be posted on every computer in the ship. Any private message or orders from myself or Commander Podok will show up only on your personal machines.”

“Commander Podok?”

“Our First Officer.”

“It doesn’t sound like a human name,” said Cole.

“She’s a Polonoi,” replied Fujiama, studying him carefully. “Is that a problem?”

“It makes no difference to me, sir,” said Cole. “I was just curious.”

“Good. If there was any chance of our coming into contact with a Teroni warship, I’d have you serve with me or with Podok for a few days until you got your feet wet. But we’re in the back of beyond, and you’ve commanded bigger ships than this one. You’ll take over the blue shift.”

“The blue shift, sir?”

“That’s the way we label them here,” said Fujiama. “The red shift is from 0 hour to 800 hours, ship’s time. The white shift is from 800 hours to 1600 hours, and the blue shift is from 1600 hours to 2400 hours. Commander Podok is currently in charge of the white shift, and

you'll be replacing Third Office Forrice, who has been temporarily in charge of the blue shift."

"Forrice?" repeated Cole. "I knew a Molarian named Forrice a few years back. We used to call him Four Eyes. It sounded like his name, and besides, he *did* have four eyes."

"Our Forrice is a Molarian."

"There can't be two Molarians with that name serving out on the Rim," said Cole. "It'll be nice to be working alongside an old friend." Then: "Who did *he* kill?"

"In point of fact, he's here because he refused to kill someone," said Fujijama. Cole seemed about to ask a question, and Fujijama held up his hand. "I do not discuss the details of my crew members' falls from grace."

"Ever?"

"Not until such time as Sector Command feels one of them might endanger the safety of the ship."

"I wonder how many ship endangerers Sector Command thinks you've got on the *Roosevelt*," said Cole, curious.

Fujijama sighed deeply. "Now that you're here, one."

"I suppose I should be flattered."

"Don't be," said Fujijama seriously. "I'll be honest, Mr. Cole—I am second to none in my admiration for your courage and your accomplishments. But I will not hesitate to deal with you in the harshest terms if you disobey an order or have a deleterious effect on the crew's already lax discipline."

"I already told you, Captain Fujijama—I know which side is the enemy."

"Good," said Fujijama shortly. "Follow proper Service procedures and obey regulations and we won't have any problems. You're dismissed."

Cole left the office, and found his ensign still standing in the corridor, obviously waiting for him.

"I'm glad to see you survived, sir," she said with a smile.

"Was there some doubt?" he asked.

"Mount Fuji has killed officers before."

"Not for reporting for duty, I hope," answered Cole, returning her smile. "Is that what you call him—Mount Fuji?"

"Not to his face, no, sir."

"Well, he's as big as a mountain," said Cole. "And what do I call you?"

"Ensign Rachel Marcos, sir."

"How's about I pull rank and just call you Rachel?"

"Whatever you wish, sir."

"Right now what I wish is to see my quarters," said Cole. "I assume someone has already moved my luggage there?"

"Your cabin is being thoroughly cleaned right now by the service mechs, sir," said Rachel. "Your luggage is aboard ship and will be moved there once the room has been sterilized."

"Sterilized?" repeated Cole, frowning. "Just what the hell did my predecessor die of?"

"Nothing, sir. He was transferred."

"Then why—?"

"He was a Morovite."

"So?"

"The Morovites are insectivores, sir. He kept a number of snacks in his room. As near as we can tell, they got loose almost four months ago. They didn't bother him, of course, but some of them are inimical to Men. We're just making sure that there weren't any larvae or eggs left behind."

"I promise that anything I eat in bed was dead a long time before I ever got my hands on it," said Cole.

"The galley never closes," she replied seriously. "There's no reason for any crew member of any race to bring food to his room."

"Sometimes it's just fun."

“Fun, sir?” she asked, frowning her brow.

“Rachel, you’ve been in the Service too long.”

“My thoughts precisely, sir.”

“Ah, so you do have a sense of humor after all.” He paused, hands on hips, and looked around. “Okay, I’m not on duty yet, and I have no quarters to go to. You want to give me the guided tour?”

“Most of the ship won’t concern you, sir—they’re the crew’s quarters, the crew’s mess hall, and the like.”

“It all concerns me,” replied Cole. “I’m going to be in command of this vessel one-third of every day. I ought to know what it looks like.”

Rachel frowned again. “I thought you were the Second Officer, sir.”

“I am.”

“Then you *won’t* be in charge of the *Teddy R*.”

“Is that what the crew calls her—the *Teddy R*?”

“That’s one of the nicer things, yes, sir.”

“As for being in command, it would be ridiculous to have all the ranking officers on duty at the same time and sleeping at the same time. Unless we’re under attack, I’ll be commanding during my duty shift.”

“All right, I see what you mean, sir. It just sounded like . . .” She let the words hang in the air.

“Like I was usurping command?” said Cole. “No. I can’t recite the regulation word for word, but if an attack seems imminent, my first duty is to alert the Captain of that fact.” He smiled. “He looks like he can be pretty formidable if he’s awakened in the middle of his night. I think if the situation arises, I’ll send you to do it for me.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and Cole decided that his original assessment—that humor was not her long and strong suit—was correct.

“Well, now that that’s settled, shall we proceed with the tour?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Just a minute,” said Cole, staring at the creature that was ambling

down the corridor toward him. “What the hell kind of critter is that?” he continued, raising his voice.

“I love you, too, you ugly malcontent,” rumbled the creature. It stood perhaps five feet tall, locomoted on its three legs by spinning rather than walking straight ahead, and had three boneless arms to match. Its boxlike, angular head boasted four eyes, two trained straight ahead, one each at right angles on the side of the head. Its nostrils were two vertical slits, its mouth round and protruding, its ears hidden beneath the blue down that covered its body top to bottom. It wore a metallic red garment, on which were bonded the insignia of its rank and an impressive number of medals.

“How’ve you been, Four Eyes?” asked Cole.

“Keeping out of trouble.” The equivalent of a smile crossed the creature’s face. “Trust me, it doesn’t take much effort out here.”

“You know Commander Forrice, sir?” asked Rachel.

“Yes, Ensign,” said Cole. “I’d give him a hug, but I hate to get close to anything that ugly.”

“Just for that, I’m never asking you to help me hunt for Molarian females in season,” said Forrice.

“Thank God for small favors.” Cole laughed, and Forrice emitted a pair of high-pitched hoots. “You know what I like about these Molarian bastards, Ensign? They’re the only beings in the galaxy besides Men who laugh, the only other ones with a sense of humor. It makes a hell of a big difference when you’re stuck on a ship with them.” Then, to Forrice: “It’s good to see you again. Are you on duty right now?”

“No. I was just going to the mess hall. Why don’t you come along and I’ll fill you in?”

“Sounds good to me.” He turned to Rachel. “I won’t require a guide at this time after all. If you can tell me where my quarters are, you can be on your way.”

“He’s got the Morovite’s cabin?” asked Forrice.

“Yes, sir.”

Forrice hooted again. “Now , *that’s* a proper introduction to the *Teddy R*.” He turned to Cole. “I’ll be happy to take you there after we leave the mess hall. I hope you don’t mind sleeping in your space suit for the first couple of months.”

“Spare me your humor and let’s get something to drink.”

“Drink?” repeated Forrice. “You’re not hungry after your trip here?”

“One look at you would take away anyone’s appetite,” said Cole. He turned to Rachel and saluted. “That’ll be all for now , Ensign.”

She returned his salute and began walking down the corridor in the direction they’d been going.

“So how have you been—really?” asked Cole as the Molarian led him to an airlift.

“Very well. They let me keep my rank.” He looked at Cole’s insignia. “I see they took yours away.”

“Twice.” They stepped out of the airlift and found themselves facing the officers’ mess. There were two human officers and a Molarian, all sitting at separate tables. Cole and Forrice found a table in the corner, seated themselves, and spoke their orders into the table’s computer.

“You still drink coffee,” noted Forrice.

“And you still drink the blood of Englishmen.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Forget it,” said Cole. “How’s the food here?”

“For me, fine. For you, who knows?”

“Okay, let’s get down to business. Has the *Teddy R* seen any action?”

“Maybe seventy or eighty years ago,” replied Forrice. “You’ve seen it. If it had knees and it was attacked, it’d get down on them and beg for mercy.”

“Seriously, *can* it defend itself if it’s attacked?”

“Let’s hope we never have to find out.”

“What about the crew?”

“They’re like us.”

“Like us?” asked Cole.

“Most of them have . . . *histories*.” Forrice lowered his voice. “They’re so bored or bitter that a third of them are on drugs at any given moment—and since it was authority that got them busted and sent to the *Teddy R*, they’re resentful of just about every form of authority.”

“That sounds like a lot of drugs. Where are they getting them?”

“I suppose a lot were smuggled onboard over the last two years,” answered Forrice. “Also, on most ships people want to get out of the infirmary. On the *Teddy R*, they make a habit of breaking into it.”

“So we’re patrolling an area that nobody wants with a crew nobody wants in a ship nobody *should* want,” said Cole. “There seems to be a certain mathematical purity to that.”

“Optimist,” said Forrice.

“Damn, I’ve missed you, Four Eyes!” said Cole. “Molarians may be the ugliest things God made, but you’re the only race that thinks like we do.”

“He created us after He’d gotten all His mistakes out of His system on Men.”

“What other races have we got onboard? The captain mentioned a Polonoi.”

“Yes, we’ve got a handful of Polonoi, plus a few Mollutei, some Bedalians, and we’ve even got a Tolobite.”

“A Tolobite?” repeated Cole. “What the hell is it? I never heard of it.”

“We didn’t know they existed until fifty years ago. Wait’ll you see it. It lives in symbiosis with a nonsentient little creature.”

“I’ve seen symbiotes before,” said Cole, unimpressed.

“Not like this one,” Forrice assured him. “And we’ve got a Bdxeni, though of course we almost never see him.”

“Every damned Republic ship’s got a Bdxeni these days. They never sleep, so they make ideal pilots. I assume that’s what our Bdxeni’s doing?”

“Yes,” answered Forrice. “They’ve got him wired into the navigational computer. I mean that literally—there are cables going from his head to the computer, or maybe it’s the other way around. I don’t know if he reads its mind or it reads his, but the ship goes wherever he wants it to go, so I guess it all works out.”

“Tell me about the Captain,” said Cole. “What’s he like?”

“Mount Fuji?” said Forrice. “Very competent, very proper. And very unhappy.”

“Unhappy?”

“Terminally depressed is a more accurate way of putting it.”

“Why?” asked Cole. “He’s still got a ship to command.”

“He’s lost three sons and a daughter in the war. And his youngest just enlisted last month.”

“He told me he killed a bunch of officers. Can you tell me anything about it?”

“Just rumors. As far as I’m concerned, most officers probably deserve killing. Present company excepted, of course. Why are you smiling?”

“I know you guys think like humans,” said Cole. “But I’m still impressed at how fast you pick up human speech patterns.”

“What do you expect? Terran is the official language of the Republic. If we’re going to serve with you, we have to learn the language.”

“Everyone learns it, or at least uses a T-pack to translate. But only the Molarians seem to have appropriated it.”

“Just clever, I guess,” said Forrice.

The top of the table slid to a side, revealing their drinks. Cole picked his up and held it forward.

“Here’s to a long, dull, peaceful tour of duty.”

But of course, he was just an officer, not a prognosticator.