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**STARSHIP:
REBEL**

BOOK FOUR



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To Carol, as always

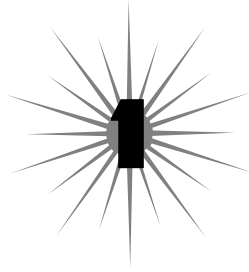
And to Eric Flint:

Friend

Collaborator

Co-editor

Boy genius



Wilson Cole sat alone at his table in the small, cramped mess hall of the *Theodore Roosevelt*, sipping a cup of coffee, when he received the transmission from the bridge.

“We’re all in position, sir,” said Christine Mboya, the slender black woman whose image suddenly appeared before him.

“Has Mr. Briggs analyzed their capabilities yet?” asked Cole.

“Level 2 pulse cannons, Level 3 lasers.”

“Okay, nothing to worry about. Let me speak to the Valkyrie.”

An instant later the face of his Third Officer, an exceptionally tall redheaded woman, appeared above Cole’s table.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Pass the word, Val. I want all of our ships except this one to stay out of firing range.”

“Why?” she demanded. “Are we here to engage the enemy or aren’t we?”

“They can’t do the *Teddy R* any damage, but they can pierce most of the smaller ships’ defenses.”

“Not if we destroy them first.”

“Just do what I tell you to do,” said Cole. “With a little luck we won’t have to destroy anyone.”

“Some war!” she snorted, and broke the transmission.

“Christine?”

“Sir?”

“Is Four Eyes down in the Gunnery section?”

“Commander Forrice is on his way there,” she answered. “One moment, sir.” Pause. “He’s arrived.”

“Let me speak to him.”

The image of a burly member of the tripod Molarian race appeared, surrounded by computerized controls for the ship’s armaments.

“Everything’s ready,” said Forrice. “Just say the word.”

“How big a crew have you got down there?”

“Four, counting myself.”

“That’ll be enough if we need it,” said Cole. “No one fires except on my express order.”

“Even if we’re under fire ourselves?”

“Even so. They don’t have anything that can damage us.”

“You’re the Captain,” said Forrice.

“Thanks for remembering,” said Cole dryly, ending the transmission.

He finished his coffee, considered going to the bridge, decided there was nothing he could do there that he couldn’t do where he was, and contacted Christine Mboya again.

“Sir?” she said.

“Have we pinpointed Machtel’s headquarters yet?”

“No, sir. They’re maintaining radio and video silence.”

“Can’t say that I blame them,” said Cole. “If it was me, I wouldn’t want to let a superior force know where I was holed up either.” He shrugged. “Okay, negotiating in private would have been easier, but it’s time to get this show on the road. Put me on audio and video, broadest possible bandwidth.”

“Done,” she announced. “Start whenever you’re ready.”

He chose one of the cameras that monitored the mess hall and stared into it. “This is Wilson Cole, Captain of the *Theodore Roosevelt*. This message is for Machtel, or, if he is no longer in charge, whoever

is running his organization. My fleet has been commissioned by the government of the Pirelli Cluster to rid it of the warlords who have taken it over. I'm sure you are aware that we have already deposed the Cluster's two other warlords—the human Chester Braithwaite and the Canphorite Grabius. You are all that remains.”

He paused for almost half a minute, long enough for them to start getting nervous wondering if he was going to speak again or if he'd said his piece and was about to start firing on them.

“You have nine ships on the ground and three more docked in orbit. I'm sure you have analyzed our strength, but just in case you haven't, let me inform you that you are facing a fleet of forty-three ships, many of them with greater firepower than any of your own.”

He broke the connection and poured himself another cup of coffee.

“That's *it?*” demanded Val, whose image popped into view again. “That's all you're going to say?”

“Of course not,” replied Cole. “But let them worry about it for a few minutes.”

“Right now they're probably getting us in the sights of every weapon they own.”

“Right now they're counting our ships and analyzing our defenses,” answered Cole calmly. “In another minute they'll realize I wasn't lying, and then we'll continue the conversation.”

“It's been a pretty one-sided conversation so far,” noted Val.

“I haven't asked them to say anything so far.”

Suddenly Malcolm Briggs's voice came over the ship's intercom, though not his image. “Incoming! Pulse and laser fire!”

“Solely at us?” asked Cole.

“No, sir. They're also targeting Mr. Sokolov and Mr. Perez.”

“I trust they're out of range?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay. Tell Christine to wait thirty seconds and then put me on again.”

“I’ve pinpointed the source of the pulse fire,” announced Forrice from his post in the Gunnery section. “You want me to take it out?”

“I want you to do nothing without an express order from me,” said Cole.

“That’s what I was requesting—an express order.”

“No.”

“You’re on in five seconds, sir,” said Christine.

Cole cleared his throat, counted to five, and began speaking.

“This is Wilson Cole again. I trust you’ve convinced yourself that you’re not about to inflict any damage on us. The corollary is that we can annihilate you in less than a minute.”

A brief pause.

“However, we have no desire to cause you any damage or loss of life. We are not conquerors, we are not warlords, and we are not criminals. We are a mercenary force, hired by the authorities of the Pirelli Cluster to put an end to your aggressive and illegal domination of the local star systems. And I should note that in this instance we are an *overwhelming* mercenary force.

“We have now reached the point where decisions must be made,” he continued. “We are confiscating the three docked ships. Any of you on the planet can surrender and pledge your allegiance to my fleet. If you do so, you will not be harmed—but you will not be left in control of your ship. Two of my men will be installed as Captain and First Officer until such time as you have proven your trustworthiness, and any disloyalty will be punishable by death. Those of you who choose this option should take off immediately and put your ships in orbit around the fifth planet in the system. If you do not wish to meet us in combat or join us as an ally, fly your equivalent of the white flag and

leave the cluster immediately, via the Landrigan Wormhole, and you will not be fired upon . . . but you will never be allowed to return. Your third and final alternative is to remain where you are and meet us in combat. You have ten Standard minutes to make your decisions, after which combat will commence.”

He broke the transmission, considered having yet another cup of coffee, decided not to, and took an airlift up to the bridge, where Christine Mboya, Malcolm Briggs, Val, and the alien Domak were manning their stations.

“Any response yet?” he asked as he arrived.

“Five ships have signaled that they want to join us,” answered Christine, “and are heading to the fifth planet.”

“Tell Jacovic to monitor them, and take out any ship that heads that way and *doesn't* go into orbit.”

“Two white flags, sir,” announced Briggs.

“Tell Sokolov to take a couple of ships, follow them to the wormhole, and make sure they enter it,” said Cole. “What’s left?”

“Two ships, sir,” said Domak, a warrior-caste Polonoi, her muscular body covered with natural armor. “I’ve identified one as belonging to Machtel.”

“Got him in my sights,” said Forrice’s voice.

“Forget it,” said Cole. “He’s not going to stand his ground.”

“He hasn’t moved yet,” said Forrice.

“He’s just proving how tough he is. He’s got a couple of minutes left.”

“The other ship is heading to the fifth planet, sir,” said Briggs. “That leaves just Machtel.”

“He’s probably not the type to take orders,” said Cole. “I’ll give plenty of ten-to-one that he heads for the wormhole rather than the fifth planet.”

“He’s not heading anywhere,” said Forrice.

“He will,” said Cole. “This isn’t *his* planet. Every other ship has already left. He won’t prove anything by dying. We’re just doing to him what he did to whoever was here before him, and we’re doing it a lot more humanely.”

“A humane war!” snorted the Molarian.

“Whose life do you want me to trade for Machtel’s?” asked Cole. “Yours? Val’s? Mine?”

“You don’t have to trade anyone’s life,” said Forrice. “*We* can kill him. *He* can’t harm us.”

“Whether we kill him or let him escape, we accomplish our mission,” replied Cole. “And by doing it this way, word will spread to future opponents that they don’t have to fight to the last man, that we’re not in the punishment or retribution business, that we’re just as happy to achieve a bloodless victory.”

“Sir?” said Briggs.

“Yes?”

“Machtel just took off. He’s heading for the wormhole.”

“Good. Tell Jacovic to take eighteen ships out to the fifth planet, put our new members in a tight formation, englobe them, and escort them back to base. That ought to discourage any foolhardy heroes among our new recruits.”

Val looked up from her control panel. “You really want to give this asshole a free pass?”

“Machtel? I promised him one.”

“He’s just going to be more trouble in the future,” she said. “The other ships have already entered the wormhole. We could take him out and no one would be any the wiser.”

“And when he didn’t show up at the other end, you think the others won’t know what happened?”

“So what if they do?” she persisted.

“Then before long far more powerful forces than his would know they could never trust our word again.”

She shrugged. “All right—but if you change your mind, we’ve got thirty seconds before he reaches the wormhole.”

“How the hell did I manage to assemble such a bloodthirsty crew?” Cole said wryly. “I feel a need to speak to someone who’s glad that we didn’t blow nine ships to hell and gone.” He walked over to a bulkhead and tapped his fingers against it. “Come on out, David.”

The bulkhead slid open, and an odd-looking creature of vaguely human proportions, but dressed like a Victorian dandy, stepped out onto the bridge. His eyes were set at the sides of his elongated head, his large triangular ears were capable of independent movement, his mouth was absolutely circular and had no lips at all, and his neck was long and incredibly flexible. His torso was broad and half again as long as a man’s, and his short, stubby legs had an extra joint in them. His skin may have possessed a greenish tint, but his bearing and manner were properly upper-class British at all times.

“Is it over?” he asked.

“It was a nonevent,” said Cole.

“The bigger our fleet becomes, the more nonevents we can expect to have,” said the alien approvingly.

“We just added eight more ships,” Cole informed him. “Five from the planet, three that were docked in orbit.”

“So we’re up to fifty-one?”

Cole nodded. “If they all work.”

“You’re going to make it harder and harder for me to solicit contracts that will cover all our expenses.”

“The burdens of success,” replied Cole. “I suppose we could attack a Republic convoy. That ought to put a huge dent in our expenses by the time we escaped.”

“It’s unkind of you to make fun of me, Steerforth,” said the alien.

“I’m open to suggestions,” replied Cole. “Who would you like me to make fun of?”

“Why are you being like this?” asked the alien.

“I apologize, David,” said Cole. “It’s just that we should *all* be celebrating a victory where we didn’t have to fire a shot—but I get the distinct impression that most of my senior officers would rather engage in armed conflict.”

“Well, you *are* a military ship and crew,” noted the alien. “War is what most of you have trained for all your adult lives.”

“No sane man wants to go to war,” said Cole. “These aren’t expendable chess pieces under my command. They’re living beings, and it’s my job to keep them alive.”

“I agree,” said the dapper alien. “You have to be quite insane to face the possibility of losing a battle.”

“Which is why you sit them out hiding inside a bulkhead,” noted Cole.

“Resting, not hiding,” shot back the alien. “I’m the *Teddy R*’s business agent, not one of its lieutenants—and as a rational and foresightful business agent let me predict that there will be no more pitched battles in our future. Our fleet is growing larger and more powerful almost by the week.”

“Yeah,” agreed Cole sardonically. “Eight or ten million more ships and we can meet the Republic on even terms.”

“Make fun of me if you wish,” said the alien, “but I’m telling you that you will not see another armed conflict or my name isn’t David Copperfield.”

“I hate to point it out,” said Cole, “but your name *isn’t* David Copperfield.”

“How can you say such a thing, Steerforth?” demanded David.

“Possibly because my name isn’t Steerforth.”

“Details, details,” said Copperfield. “People take the names they want on the Inner Frontier. I took David.”

“I didn’t take Steerforth,” said Cole.

“It is my gift to you, courtesy of the immortal Charles.”

“You and Mr. Dickens can have it back,” said Cole. “I just hope you’re more accurate about your military predictions than your name.”

Cole had the uneasy feeling that some nameless god of the spaceways grinned sardonically and silently mouthed the words: *Well, you can hope.*