

# ONE

Major Zack Marks sat by himself at the makeshift folding table in the tiny and seldom used supply building on the main base. Still dressed in his combat fatigues and smelling of three weeks of persistent territorial fighting in the field, he was actually enjoying his hot plate of food and the quiet solitude, even though he wasn't told why he had been ordered to report to this building instead of being able to eat his meal with his squad in the mess hall.

The quiet was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of General Marilyn Anderson. Zack stood to attention when he saw the stern and stoic base commander approach him.

"At ease, Major," she said. Zack relaxed, but stayed standing, not entirely comfortable. The General was a strikingly beautiful woman with short-cropped dark hair. However, she hadn't risen through the ranks of the military because of her gender or some twisted form of affirmative action. She earned her rank by being the best of the best. "Please, sit, Zack. How do you like your ration steak?"

"Best I've had for a while, ma'am."

The General stared at the thin grisly slab of mystery meat on Zack's metal tray. "Hmm," she said with a slight smile. "You've seen some lengthy time in the field recently, haven't you?"

“Yes, ma’am,” he offered in a serious tone. “For the coalition and my country.”

“I said at ease, Marine. If that steak is the best you’ve had for a while, we need to find you a different post.”

“I’m open to the General’s suggestions.”

“Good. And while I appreciate your formal tone, I want to talk straight with you. Okay?” General Anderson grabbed a folding chair and sat next to the Major at his table.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as he sat back down.

“I’ve known you since you were born, Zack. Your mother and father were close friends. They’d be very proud of you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re a good Marine. Impeccable record of service. Combat experience. A credit to the Corps.”

He started to say thank you again, but was interrupted by the General.

“I want you to join my personal staff,” she offered.

Zack responded with a curious look.

“As crazy as this world is,” she sighed, “it’s getting crazier with each new day. It’s 2045. We’ve modernized everything, but we still haven’t figured out how to get along on this planet.”

The General leaned toward Zack and whispered, “I don’t trust all of the people around me. The joint chiefs keep sending me new people - people not from the USA. Frankly, it’s getting hard to tell the allies from the enemy. I want people around me I can trust completely. People

with knowledge of the battles we're fighting, but also patriots loyal to the cause. The cause is still what's important."

"Begging the General's pardon, but I don't hear much about the cause these days. All I'm hearing is that we're monitoring global tensions, and we need to work together."

"Work together," she said with a hint of sarcasm. "You'd think so, but America's the only country who has a history of standing for liberty and freedom. The other countries are globalists at best. And their fighting force leaders are more interested in appearance than any worthwhile cause. We've been drifting in that direction, too, and it's past time we woke up."

Zack could hear the fervor in her voice as she continued. "I'm not interested in appearances, political correctness, or appeasement of other countries. But that point of view has become rare among the American civilian leadership. The rank and file military leadership is standing strong for the most part, but our hands are tied and our voices are not being heard. We're at a stalemate, and we're risking the lives of our fighting forces in the process."

Zack could sense that General Anderson had a firm grasp on what was causing the confusion in the ranks of the military, and he was on board with her thinking. For too many weeks now, he had sensed the frustration of the fighting men and women around him who were sacrificing for a cause that wasn't clearly

defined or even articulated but rather fought for the sake of symbolism.

“I desperately need *American* patriots around me, Zack. Watching my back. Being eyes and ears as to what’s going on. It’s important, and I think you’re just the man for the job.”

“I am totally loyal to the American military and the ideals for which our country stands. You can count on me, General. What’s our next step?”

The door to the supply shed opened behind them and a smarmy foreign officer entered uninvited. “Ah, General Anderson, you are here. I’ve been looking for you.”

The General raised her eyebrows, but didn’t turn to face the intruder. “Colonel Astapov, I’d recognize your voice anywhere. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing at all,” he said as a grim determined look came over his face. He pulled what looked like a newly issued ionized air plasma pistol from his side holster and approached General Anderson quickly.

Zack and the General both heard the familiar energizing whine of the Colonel’s weapon as he pointed it toward the General’s back.

Zack’s own experimental plasma pistol, charging on a nearby wall port, was too far away for him to reach. Instead, he sprung into action by leaping to his feet, rushing the colonel, and at the same time reaching for his stunner in an open pocket of his fatigues.

He punched the Colonel’s outstretched arm but was unable to stop him from firing his weapon which let

off with an uncharacteristic snap and flash instead of the usual air rush and bang. The colonel looked down at his weapon and tried to fire again, but it failed.

Zack stuck his stunner under the outstretched arm of the unsuspecting assassin and sent a non-lethal jolt that ricocheted through his upper body, causing him to drop his weapon and shake violently. Zack pushed him further away from General Anderson and turned to retrieve his own weapon from the charging port. The light on the port registered “green” so Zack knew he had full power. However, as he grabbed his weapon and turned to administer a lethal jolt to Colonel Astapov, he saw the colonel stumbling out the door, holding his side, his own weapon still lying on the floor.

General Anderson remained seated on her folding chair, hunched over the table, face down.

Zack reached for his communicator and punched in three numbers. “Corporal, code red in the small shed just east of the mess hall. I need emergency medical personnel and at least three armed Marines. This is not a drill.”

Zack waited to hear a positive response and punched out from his call to tend to the General. He feared the worst.

“General, can you hear me?”

“I’m not dead yet, Zack. He must have misfired.” The General sat up, aching and bleeding from a wound on her right side. “Probably a foreign copy. If that had been an American made original, I’d be dead for sure.”

“Help is on the way, General.”

“See why I want you on my detail?” she grimaced. “That guy’s supposed to be on *our* side. You just can’t tell who the enemy is these days.” General Anderson scowled and twisted her torso as five armed Marines and a medical crew stormed into the shed.

“Major Marks, Marines are here as ordered.”

“I want four stationed outside and one in here guarding the General. She was wounded by an allied officer – a Colonel Astapov. No one else is allowed in this shed. Anyone approaching the shed must show ID. Colonel Astapov should be detained on sight. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.” The corporal repeated the orders to his crew who swung into position.

The lead paramedic who had been attending to the General turned to Major Marks. “She’s lucky. The gun must have misfired.”

“I already said that!” barked the General. “Take me to the clinic and patch me up. I want Colonel Astapov apprehended and hung up by his worthless decorative non-combat medals!” She turned to Major Marks. “You did good, Zack. Real good. Grab that faulty weapon the colonel used. You and your team come with me. This is far from over.”