

E X C E R P T F R O M
P H A N T O M U L T R A

C H A P T E R 1 . 0

Phantom Pain

Time to drop. Taking a deep breath, I pulled down the shoulder harness with my right hand and secured it. With my left, I opened a pouch on my body armor and retrieved my mouthguard. A launch tech stood in the hatchway before me, his military green-and-gray overalls covered with oil stains and a few burn marks. Silently, he waited for the 19 other troopers in the pod to secure their harnesses. Given that our seats were arranged in a circle facing outwards, I couldn't turn enough to see my soldiers, so I called out to them.

"Y'all locked in?"

The reply was almost in unison. "Yes, Lieutenant!"

Upon hearing this, the tech stepped into the pod and quickly checked every harness, starting with the soldier on my left. He worked his way around the circle, his magboots humming, before finally coming back to me, examining my harness last. Yanking hard on the adjustment straps, he gave me a thumbs-up.

"Go get 'em, Lieutenant Cade!" the tech said. "Show those Feds what the 51st can do!"

I nodded, and he turned, then stepped back through the hatchway and onto the flight deck.

"Sealing now!" the tech shouted before placing both hands on the handle of the 90-kilogram steel hatch and slamming it shut.

There was a faint drilling sound as he secured it, bolting that thick metal wall in place. With the hatch now closed, the noise of the flight deck was muffled inside the pod, though I still made out three distinct knocks from the flight tech's hammer on the outside of the pod's hull. He and his team had finished their inspection and approved us for launch. I took another deep breath and tried to calm myself. *C'mon, Tommy, we got this.*

The drop pod's windowless interior was illuminated by red tactical lights and smelled of burning metal. That odor meant the pod had been dropped before, but I didn't know how many times—although it had been enough that none of the displays in the ceiling worked anymore. Cracked and flickering, those screens were entirely useless, and without them, we'd only know we'd made landfall when the pod plowed into the surface. My earpiece crackled to life, the operator's voice on the line.

"Lieutenant Cade, this is Ptolemy actual, comms check."

"Loud and clear, Ptolemy actual," I replied.

The pod lurched forward and began vibrating. We were being loaded—a giant bullet for a giant gun. Soon, the massive steel projectile that was our drop pod would penetrate the natural armor of the world below, punching straight through the atmos and into hard soil and stone. But this round wasn't meant to strike our enemy directly; it simply carried the real weapons inside it—*us*. The operator continued.

"Cade, you've been cleared for drop on MW-537. You'll land on a beach about eight clicks south of the main enemy installation. Imagery says that at least fourteen Surface-to-Orbital emplacements are embedded in that mountain. We're taking heavy fire up here, so we need those SO guns down ASAP."

Static obscured the transmission for a few seconds, and when the operator returned, I heard others shouting in the background. At the same time, our pod's vibration had turned into a series of loud metallic thuds. *The bullet's in the clip now.*

The operator spoke rapidly. "Just received an update from Imagery: 'No armor or naval presence detected at surface. Estimated enemy troop strength based on thermal scans is approximately 6,000, and no other enemy installations have been found on-world.'"

I thought back to the OPINTEL briefing we'd received 30 minutes prior. The intelligence officer, skinny and pale, had delivered the brief with machine-like efficiency. The I.A.S. Ptolemy's original mission had been to investigate a high-powered radio burst emitted from the MW star system. It was a single burst, non-repeating, and the analysts at the Imagery & Detection Division had determined that it contained no intelligible information. As far as anyone knew, the MW system was supposed to be unoccupied, with no human colonies or commercial operations... but it did have resources.

There were four inner terrestrial planets and two outer jovians, all untouched by human hands. Metal was plentiful here, and both the Imperial Authority and the rebels, who called themselves the Freedom Federation, were hungry for it. At the time, I'd wondered if the radio burst story was bullshit, just an excuse High Command cooked up to justify planting its dick in the system and claiming everything within.

Even if that wasn't the reason, the fact remained that the MW system's position could make an excellent staging ground for the enemy. If the Feds took it, it would potentially provide them with another route to push deeper into the Perseus Arm of the Milky Way—and, therefore, deeper into the territory of the Imperial Authority.

So, the I.A.S. Ptolemy and the 51st Quick Reaction Force had been assigned to investigate, with the entire 9th Engineering Fleet to follow soon after. However, the OPINTEL briefing made it clear that the MW system wasn't empty at all. Turned out the eggheads at Imagery had gotten it wrong yet again, and when the Ptolemy tunneled into the system, it was under fire *immediately*. The Freedom Federation had a small fleet of frigates in orbit around MW-537, a fleet that Imagery said shouldn't have been there. Being an advanced destroyer, the Ptolemy dispatched those Fed ships quickly, but that only revealed the greater threat.

The frigates had distracted us long enough for the enemy's ground installation to bring their Surface-to-Orbital guns to bear. Given enough time and ammunition, eight SO emplacements were more than enough to down a destroyer, and the Feds had at least 14. Clearly, the rebels wanted to keep everyone away from MW-537, which meant the Imperial Authority would do anything to take it from them. The pod jostled some more as the operator continued.

“Cade, you'll be the first pod down; the rest will follow about 12 seconds apart. We'll provide as much cover as possible but expect a significant anti-air response. Upon insertion, your first task is securing a beachhead for Mobile Command and Artillery. Lieutenant Hayes will be the second down and secure a forward position two clicks north of yours. The Hive will be dropped immediately after Mobile Command, and until MOBCOM is ready to take over, both you and Lieutenant Hayes will be the acting COs for your respective battalions. You will be relieved by Major Roberts once MOBCOM is situated.”

Still couldn't believe they were leaving me, a 20-year-old biracial kid, in charge of an entire battalion—even if it was only until Roberts was ready. The pod slammed hard to the right, and there was the faintest sensation that we were rotating. *The bullet's in the chamber now.*

“Lieutenant Cade, for this mission, your battalion will be designated as Hot-Rod Alpha, Lieutenant Hayes's battalion as Hot-Rod Bravo, and Mobile Command will be designated as Hot-Rod actual, confirm?”

“Hot-Rod Alpha confirms, Ptolemy actual.”

“You're launching in 30 seconds, then 40 seconds until atmos, and approximately two minutes to surface contact. We're getting hammered up here, Hot-Rod Alpha, so get those Surface-to-Orbitals offline.” Alarm klaxons sounded in the background of the transmission, and I could overhear someone shouting orders to redirect the drone net to provide cover for the pods.

“Mouthguards!” I shouted at my troopers.

There were scattered groans as we popped them in. The mouthguards tasted like absolute ass. They were supposed to be flavored to help take your mind off the violent drop, but these had clearly expired. *Classic Army. Fucking low-bid shit.*

The giant mag-rail cannon rumbled as it shifted, adjusting its aim until it finally had the planet below firmly in its sights. Crackling and popping noises erupted along the pod's hull as the mag-rail powered up to take the shot. The operator spoke one final time.

“Hot-Rod Alpha deploying.”

The mag-rail cannon engaged with a deafening boom, followed briefly by the sound of scraping metal as our pod shot through the barrel. The acceleration was brutal, lifting us out of our seats and into our harnesses. I shut my eyes and counted. *40 seconds to atmos, then 120 to surface.*

Within the last ten seconds, the pod's retrorockets would fire, engaging a full-burn stop, and we would go from crashing to hovering with only a few meters left to fall before touchdown. Then the retrorockets would cut off, having exhausted their fuel, and gravity would take care of the rest. The drop pod would fall about six meters and slam itself into the surface. It was this maneuver that necessitated the ass-flavored mouthguards.

The pod rocked as it changed trajectory, the silence of space replaced with the roar of atmosphere. I kept my eyes closed as the smell of burning metal increased dramatically. *110 seconds, then the retrorockets.* This wasn't my first drop; during Officer Basic Training, we did 100 simulated, then ten actual drops. The instructors wanted us to be used to riding what they lovingly referred to as the “express elevator.” That way, when we landed, we'd hop out of those pods like a bunch of calm and collected killing machines.

50 seconds left. Deep thuds were coming from outside the pod's metal walls, and I knew it had to be the enemy's anti-air. Trying to focus on my breathing, I squeezed my restraints tighter. This wasn't even my first combat drop; I'd already done over a dozen. Our unit, the 51st QRF Brigade, had been in the shit constantly since my first day of active service—nearly two years ago—but seeing that level of action was typical for a QRF.

The 51st Quick Reaction Force was designed for maximum agility and lethality, with our destroyer, the I.A.S. Ptolemy, serving as our home base. Custom-built to fit the requirements of a QRF, the Ptolemy was modified to include three mag-rail cannons for rapid planetary insertion, advanced quantum tunnel drives with greater range, and a full complement of powerful guns and sensors. *20 seconds.*

QRFs were designed for two purposes: fast reconnaissance and fast strikes. However, unlike most other battle forces, a Quick Reaction Force commonly operated alone. That meant it was just us and the Ptolemy out here. So, if we didn't down those Surface-to-Orbital guns before they tore our ship apart, we'd end up marooned on MW-537.

The retrorockets fired, and our asses slammed back into our seats. Fed anti-air suddenly struck the drop pod's top, sparks bursting from the ceiling, the blow sending our pod tumbling end over end. Warning lights flashed, and sirens blared as the emergency thrusters struggled to level us out, but we were too close to the ground, and the onboard guidance system knew it. It beamed its warning directly to our enhanced eyes, auged-in words flashing across everyone's field of vision in bold red letters.

COLLISION IMMINENT. BRACE. BRACE. BRACE.

Read more in the full book!