

Faith & Empire

The Holy Terran Empire

Book One

By

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FAITH & EMPIRE

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Thank You.

For

Georgette

PRAYER AND FASTING

“Diende, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”

I crossed myself at the words of absolution. “Amen,” I said and lifted my head to peer through the latticed screen of the confessional. “Thank you, Father.”

“God be with you, Marine,” the priest responded.

I exited the confessional, leaving its door open for the next penitent in line. I then found myself an open spot on the aisle end of a nearby pew and knelt to offer up my penance. When the prayers were said, I rose from the kneeler and sat back to prepare myself for the Mass and for the coming battle.

The chapel of Saint Pius V was aboard the Imperial Star Ship *Lepanto*, a Paladin-class battleship parked outside the Muvurunian star

system. Her mission: uproot the pirate horde that made the system their stronghold. In a few short hours, if the pirates didn't heed our demand to surrender unconditionally, the *Lepanto* would lead her battle group in a punitive invasion of the system.

If so, it would be my first time in battle.

And of course, I was nervous. In fact, I confessed to being outright afraid.

"The flesh is always weak," Father Ochiro reminded me gently. "No matter how hardened it is by training or how steeled by discipline the spirit, the flesh is always the weak link in our fallen, mortal state. So, do not berate yourself for being afraid. What you feel is only natural. It's certainly not a sin. Remember, the knowledge of His coming Passion so wracked our Lord's flesh with fear that He sweat blood."

"Yes, Father."

"Offer up your fear to our Lord," the priest added. "Join it to His suffering on the cross. Pray for an increase of faith in our Lord's mercy and rely on the training the Empire has invested in you. If you can do that, you will do well in God's eyes."

"I will do my best, Father."

"I know you will, son. Imperial Marines can do no less."

A half hour later, the Mass began and I prayed as the priest recommended. As it most often did, the liturgy swept me up, drawing me out of myself, climaxing in the reception of the Blessed Sacrament. My unease left me as the Holy Host dissolved against my palate. At last, I was able to settle comfortably into a deep sense of peace during the denouement of closing prayers. When the priest sent us off at the end of the Mass, I filed out quietly and contentedly with the rest of my freshly shriven brothers of Fifth Battalion.

Six abreast, we made our way through the *Lepanto* to one of the ship's hangar decks for a pre-mission briefing. We were in our dress uniforms, red-trimmed gray brigandines with matching zouave pants stuffed into black, long boots shined to a mirror finish. Gold-buttoned red gaiters dressed the boots. Our waists were girded with red silk sashes whose ends dangled half way down our thighs from the ceremonial knots tied at our left hips. Our heads were topped with berets, gray with red piping and stalk.

Beside me, Izzy Hooke, my oldest friend in the corps patted his belly as it made muffled gurgling noises. "Hang in there, beastie," he said. "It won't be too much longer."

"Are you hungry already?" I asked him.

“Always,” was his response. “I’ve told you, fasting don’t agree with me.”

I chuckled as did a few others around us. Izzy was part Kunthian, a big man, over two meters tall, with a prodigious appetite which chafed against the Imperial Marines’ practice of fasting before battle. Myself, I could go a couple of days without feeling a genuine pang of hunger, but doing without breakfast and lunch was enough to rile up Izzy’s stomach.

“I’m going to have me a couple of ribeyes as soon as I get back from this butt-kicking field trip,” Izzy said. “And three or four potatoes. Wash it all down with a quart of that Malaga Red Ale we loaded up on Aragona.”

A few rows ahead of us, our Company Chaplain, Nicholai Prata turned his head to address Izzy, “As soon as you get back? That wouldn’t be the sin of presumption we’re hearing from you, would it, Marine?”

“No Father,” Izzy answered. “It’s the virtue of faith you’re eavesdropping on.”

The chaplain smiled and turned back around.

“How is it that a Christian, born and bred, finds fasting so difficult?” Our platoon’s First Sergeant, Ross Hayes asked from the row behind us.

“Were you brought up in some exotic rite that doesn’t do Lent?”

“It’s nothing like that, sarge,” Izzy said.

“My priest and I, we had us an accord, that’s all; so, I never had to fast, during Lent or on Ember Days.”

“Oh?” Chaplain Prata turned back to face Izzy.

“Yeah, he allowed me to substitute wearing a hair shirt for fasting,” Izzy explained. “And Father Moses also insisted that I sleep on the floor during Lent. Even on Sundays. There was extra time at prayer, of course, and extra alms work which meant I had to volunteer my free time to church maintenance and grounds keeping and whatever else Father Moses needed done around the parish.”

“Sounds like your priest made out pretty good for himself with that accord,” First Sergeant Hayes said.

“Father Moses did use me like a rented mule during fast days,” Izzy said with a laugh and a shrug. “But I didn’t mind. Not so long as I got my four squares a day.”

“Four?”

“I’m part Kunthian, you know.”

“Only an eighth,” Hayes objected.

“What can I tell you sarge,” Izzy said with a shrug. “That eighth is all appetite.”

We all laughed, Izzy included.

Similar conversations were happening up and down our column. The moments of levity were welcomed distractions from the serious matters ahead of us.

We'd been in deep space, well beyond the Imperial border, hunting pirates for the last seven months. These particular rogues we sought were as highly organized as they were ruthless. They had outposts on a score of worlds and they ran roughshod over twice that many more planets.

They operated in a large, roughly wedge-shaped swath of open territory, the broad end of which was lodged between the borders of the Federation of Free Planets, the Union of Democratic Worlds and our Empire.

The entire sector was once ruled by the Dominion of Man, history's first galactic empire. More than a thousand years ago the Dominion lost a long and costly war with the Holy League Worlds. After their defeat, the Dominion's interplanetary civilization imploded. The superpower crumbled into over a hundred independent planets.

Surviving officers, many of them made up of the genetically-enhanced Orion super soldiers, as well as pedagogues and messianic ideologues of every stripe rushed in with armies, militias and

gangs at their back to fill the power vacuum left by the demise of the once all-powerful Dominion.

Three centuries of infighting ensued. Interplanetary war, global civil wars, revolutions and genocidal campaigns collapsed world after world of the former Dominion of Man. Most were reduced to nearly neolithic barbarism by the end of the three hundred and score years of the most savage warfare in human history.

The Holy League was too weakened by its crusade against the Dominion to mitigate the murderous madness that swept across the region. The League's attention was instead turned inward; its energies and resources spent recovering, rebuilding, consolidating forces, shuffling powers and hierarchies and sadly, some vicious infighting, until ultimately forging itself into the Holy Terran Empire I served as an Imperial Marine.

Many of the Dominion's ravaged planets had clawed their way back to some semblance of civilization since those savage centuries. Eleven of the old Dominion worlds were converted and absorbed into the Holy Terran Empire. Twenty-two others banded together into the Union of Democratic Worlds. Twenty-six joined to create the Federation of Free Planets. And the Dominion's

surviving legion of Orion Super Soldiers carved their namesake Hegemony out of thirty-four worlds.

Another forty-three planets remained independent, scattered across that farthest stretch of free space on the edge of the civilized galaxy. None of these unaligned worlds had a space-faring navy. This had allowed piracy to exist uncontested in the area ever since the fall of the Dominion of Man.

For centuries, individual and loose bands of these rogues contented themselves with picking clean the bones of the dead Dominion. Four decades ago they banded under one flag, declared themselves, The Free Alliance and claimed sovereignty over all the remaining unaligned worlds.

The neighboring galactic powers refused to acknowledge their legitimacy. The Union, the Federation and the Empire all refused to pay the tariffs and taxes the Free Alliance demanded of all who wished to continue trading with their new vassal worlds.

A recent change in Alliance leadership decided to take what their neighbors would not give. The pirates began confiscating the cargoes, ships and crews which ventured into Alliance space. Cargoes were sold off, captured ships were absorbed into the Alliance navy and their crews were ransomed off, all in lieu of past payments.

When the neighboring powers ceased doing business in Alliance space, the pirates directed their parasitical plundering beyond their borders. In a short time, the Alliance became a thorn in the sides of the Empire, Union and the Federation.

Several skirmishes between pirate forces and some of the various worlds near their borders were fought over the years, none effecting the pirates' behavior. To the contrary, the fighting recently brought the Union to the negotiation table.

Everyone expected the Union would soon recognize the Alliance as a legitimate political entity. The Federation hadn't thus far capitulated but neither had their populations been riled up enough by pirate abuses to summon up the political will to root them out.

Emboldened by these weak responses, the pirates continued making forays into their enemies' territories, including Imperial space, attacking trade caravans and pilgrim caravels.

Unfortunately for the would-be Free Alliance, the Empire was not as forbearing as either the Union or the Federation. Our emperor was not hampered by democratic considerations as were the leaders of the latter powers. After being forced to ransom the crews of three tankers and two caravels

in a single year, Emperor Andreas VI declared the situation to be intolerable.

The Imperial Navy, *The Emperor's Own*, as we are called, took it from there.

Three Paladin battle groups were formed to eradicate the pirate menace once and for all. The battle groups were complemented by contributions of ships and men from the Imperial Principdom most harassed by the pirates. Two of the battle groups, led by the Paladins *Shimabara* and *La Valette*, set about purging the sector of the pirate outposts and toppling the regimes of their Governor Generals. All the while, the *Lepanto* battle group traced the lines of panicked communications and the trajectories of the enemy's fleeing ships to the pirates' secret stronghold in the Muvuru system, a heretofore unknown seven planet system near the far end of the Perseus Arm.

Immediately upon arriving at Muvuru, *Lepanto's* Commodore, Josias Alba, hailed the horde and demanded their unconditional surrender. The response came back, "*Lepanto*, you are trespassing in Free Alliance space. You will withdraw immediately. Failure to comply will be taken as an act of imperial aggression, and as an act of war."

“We do not recognize the territorial claims of pirates,” Commodore Alba told them. “You have three days to surrender unconditionally to the Mercy of God and the authority of His Most Benevolent Emperor, Andreas VI.”

Silence was the loud response to the commodore’s second and subsequent calls to surrender.

Several probes were sent into the system over the past three days. The pirates destroyed them all. Before their destruction, the probes showed us glimpses of a ragtag fleet of over four hundred ships arrayed against the *Lepanto* and her escorts. Additionally, our short-lived probes noted three heavily fortified bases spread throughout the system.

Dislodging the enemy would not be easy.

I glanced furtively about me at my fellow marines and wondered if I was alone in wishing the pirate horde would see reason and submit quietly.

We filed into the hanger deck where thousands of chairs were set up in concentric half-rings around a raised dais. The first few rows, but for two in the center marked reserved, were filled with Angel Fighter pilots in their bright blue flight suits. Our regiment's other four battalions occupied the seats behind them. We filed into the outermost seats.

A couple of minutes after we were seated, Colonel Llewellyn L'Amour entered from a separate entrance on the ship's starboard. He wore a white brigandine, red sash and black zouave trousers tucked into black, knee-high boots. His gaiters were white with red buttons. He had large, thickly-veined hands and a bald, egg-shaped head beneath his white and red beret. The colonel had a black beard, cut in the short, spade-shape favored by his order of knights. His dark green eyes regarded us coolly from above a large hooked nose as he made his way to a raised dais at center stage.

At the colonel's heels followed two men in red brigandines, gold sashes and black, straight-legged pants tucked into red, long boots. Gold capes hung from their shoulders to the back of their calves. Swords hung from their sides in gold-fluted and gemmed sheaths. Their sword belts were wide,

black and buckled by golden, double-headed griffins. Their heads were uncovered.

One of them was a young man, no older, I guessed, than my own twenty-two years. He was fair of skin, blue-eyed with a full head of blond hair that reached to his shoulders. He was handsome in the extreme, possessed of the softly-chiseled good looks that could've made him a holoflix star, with or without acting ability.

The second man trailing our colonel was considerably older, sixty or seventy years old. He was just as fair but also taller, leaner and wore what was left of his gray hair close-cropped, seeming like a thin layer of ash across a bony skull.

Our company's Captain, Dayo Obey, black and lean of face and limb, snapped to rigid attention and bellowed, "Lords on deck!"

The regiment rose to attention together with the more than three hundred pilots. We clicked our heels and our right hands snapped to our shoulders in the Imperial salute, thumb, fore and index fingers raised and spread in representation of the Trinity, ring and pinky fingers curled together against the palm symbolizing the human and divine natures of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

More than five thousand voices cried out as one, "Faith and Empire!"

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