

## *Cannon Fodder*

Jordy Gaines ran his right thumb along the smooth handle of his rifle. He lurched forward as the truck rambled over the uneven surface that passed for a road. The private took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Won’t be long now, Lieutenant,” he said to his superior officer. “Gonna show those Prill what we’re made of.” He tapped his weapon to emphasize his point.

Lt. Dina Webber nodded without changing her demeanor. She stared straight ahead, keeping her anxiety hidden from her platoon in well-rehearsed fashion. Their orders roared in her ears but her mind kept drifting back to her husband and her two sons. Thankfully, they were safely tucked away on Earth, millions of miles from the brutality of this bloody expansion.

“You keep yappin and I’ll show you what you are made of,” snapped Private Mick Hatcher. He swatted the back of Jordy’s head. Jordy clenched a fist and glared at his tormentor but thought better of retaliating. Mick shook his head and elbowed a soldier beside him.

The members of the 79<sup>th</sup> Ground Division were crammed into the creaky truck with 29 similar vehicles behind them. The convoy travelled exclusively by night and hid in the thick brush of trees during the day. The four-day excursion across the alien world was nearly finished and tempers were running high. Dina felt the stress as well, but she did her best to hide it from her troops.

A communicator on Dina’s belt beeped. She removed it and read the message. It was an update from Central Command. The Prillonites added 50 more troops to the encampment, bringing the total number to 300 warriors. That was still 60 fewer than the soldiers in the convoy.

Dina typed an acknowledgement before reattaching the device to her belt. She glanced at her watch. If they were still on schedule, they would arrive within the next half-hour.

“What did they say, Lieutenant?” asked Private Bert Cooper. He sat across from Jordy and spoke in a low voice. His pale hands were balled into tight fists. It was sweltering inside the vehicle and he was sweating more than the others.

“Just wishing us luck, Private,” replied Dina. She didn’t look at Bert as she spoke. Instead, she stared at a crack on the floor in the dimly-lit truck and reviewed the orders in her mind. The plan was simple. Set up a perimeter around the Prill camp and wait for the bombers to arrive. Then advance with the ships providing air cover. Dina hoped they would lose less than a third of their forces, which Central Command would consider an acceptable loss.

Mick tightened the laces of his right boot. “We’ll need all the luck we can get if we’re going to colonize this rock,” he said. “From the looks of it, I don’t know why anyone would want to live here.” He shook his head. “It’s too hot and there’s barely any water.”

“The Prill like it,” said Bert. “Enough to fight for it.”

“They don’t know any better,” replied Mick. He tapped his right foot. “And they don’t have the technology to leave this crater.”

“But they have enough firepower to keep us from conquering them,” said Jordy. Several soldiers glared at him. “So far, anyway.” He pressed his lips together, hoping he didn’t sound like a coward or a traitor. Mick stared at him with his bitter, blue eyes.

“We’ll rid this planet of those big-eared vermin soon enough,” said Mick. “Then we’ll go home.” He smiled and leaned back against the curved wall of the truck. “We’ll be heroes. And rich.” Mick laughed. “I already have my eye on a house in Philadelphia.”

Bert sighed. “We haven’t been paid yet,” he said. He glanced at Dina before continuing. “Sometimes I wonder,” he added, keeping his voice low. “If we’re doing the right thing.” He slowly blinked his eyes. “Who are we to take this planet from them?”

Mick leaned forward and grabbed Bert by the collar. “How dare you question this!” he shouted. Other soldiers moved toward them as Mick and Bert struggled against each other. Dina shouted at them and everyone stopped. Mick pushed Bert away from him. “He should be shot for saying that,” yelled Mick.

“Private Cooper will be dealt with after the mission,” snapped Dina. “Until then, we need to work together if any of us want to make it home alive.” She looked at her watch again. “We’re almost there. No more talking until then,” she ordered. A few soldiers grumbled but they quickly obeyed.

The truck came to a complete stop a few minutes later. Dina sent a message to Central Command that they had arrived. Then she led her troops out of the truck as the other soldiers poured out of their vehicles. Overhead, she heard the engines of the Earth ships. She met up with the other officers and gave them their specific orders. The soldiers moved into position as the planet’s green sun began to rise over the horizon.

Dina fired her rifle into the air to signal the start of the attack. The Prill warriors emerged from their structures, shooting at the invaders. Dina’s troops fired back. The Prill set up a

defensive line fortified by deep trenches. Dina kept a mental count of the warriors as they appeared on the battlefield.

The lieutenant suddenly lowered her weapon. She watched in horror as several hundred Prill warriors poured out of their barracks. Most held standard air rifles, while others were armed with anti-aircraft machinery. Several airships took direct hits and crashed to the ground, as the Prill gradually picked off the human ground troops. She saw Mick take a direct shot in the head and as his body fell stiffly to the ground, she realized that none of them would return to Earth as heroes.

End

