

BEYOND THE GALAXY

ADVENTURE #2:
FREEDOM

by
Maureen Toonkel

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 17



Joshua Stoner leaned back against his chair and shut his eyes for a moment. He still couldn't believe how much his recent ordeal had depleted his energy levels. Nurse Rugan told him not to be alarmed. It was to be expected. *Poor Amanda. She certainly has had her hands full these past several days*, thought Josh. Without a doctor aboard she had to oversee the entire functioning of the Sick Bay. Perhaps it was a good thing. With so much to do, she didn't have time to think about Paul. That was Josh's problem. After filing all the reports on Brisula and reviewing the orders for Lexter, there wasn't much for Josh to do other than the normal day-to-day activities of running a spaceship. There was too much empty time for his mind to wander back to that last conversation with Paul Loring. He couldn't shake the picture of his best buddy laying on the bed with his wrist chained to the sidebar. Make that former best friend. Dr. Loring was a spy and a traitor. He had passed on confidential information to the enemy. He had endangered the

lives of his fellow shipmates. And worst of all he was a Tradian. *Why hadn't I picked up on that years ago when we were college roommates? If I had, I probably could have convinced Paul to denounce his allegiance to the Tradian Army and instead defect to the United Galaxy Command. Or could I have?*

"Sir, we are approaching Sub Space Station 16 A," Lieutenant Keith Hampton announced breaking into Captain Stoner's reverie.

Josh sat up straight and opened his eyes. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Please alert Lieutenant Commander Pearson of our arrival." He swiveled in his chair to face Lieutenant Diane Pearson stationed at the Communications Bay on his right. "Diane," he commanded, "please request Dave Andrews and Amanda Rugan to meet me in the Conveyor Port in two hours." The communications officer turned and flashed him a smile. Her bright red curls tumbled down upon her shoulders. *Dennis is sure a lucky guy*, reflected Josh. He got up and headed for the elevator.



Lieutenant Commander Dennis Pearson surveyed the Conveyor console. Everything looked clean and spiffy. He had checked and tested all the dials, levers, and mechanisms at least twice earlier that morning. He had also oiled and greased the hangar doors and shined up the stainless steel launchpad floor panels. Yes, Dennis prided himself on maintaining a well-kept transport station. He still was incensed at Paul Loring's insinuation that he had booby-trapped the James K. Obviously it was meant to be a joke, but Pearson took offense at even the

mere suggestion that he could ever do such a thing.

The elevator doors clanked open and Josh Stoner stepped out. The Captain's blonde hair was parted on the left as usual and his blue eyes had regained their sparkle. The scar from the cut on his forehead was barely visible. He knew that Josh hated to admit it, but those two weeks on Brisula had taken a toll on him.

"You're looking good, sir," said Pearson.

"Thank you, Denny. I am starting to feel much better." Josh took a seat at the console. "Any word yet from the Sub Station?"

Dennis sat down in the console chair alongside Josh. "I received a communiqué about ten minutes ago indicating that the pod should be ready to lift off in fifteen minutes. So it should be any minute now."

Just as the console phone buzzed, the elevator doors opened. Commander Andrews and Amanda Rugan had arrived together.

"The pod has lifted off," announced Pearson as he began working the dials and levers on the panel. Eventually, the hangar doors slid open and a small transporter space pod entered and landed. The silver and blue door emblazoned with the UGC logo rose and two officers clad in navy blue uniforms departed from the pod. A hatch door at the bottom of the pod opened and a tray slid out loaded with luggage. Seaman Chase and another security guard removed the luggage. The tray automatically slid back and the hatch closed. The craft backed out and the hangar doors slowly shut. The four Gladiator officers stepped from behind the Conveyor console then walked over to the launchpad.

"Welcome aboard the U.S.S. Gladiator," said Josh proudly. "I am Captain Joshua Stoner. This is Commander David Andrews, chief science officer." He pointed to Dave who nodded. "Over

here is Lieutenant Commander Dennis Pearson, our chief engineer who has just safely guided you to our ship." Dennis murmured a hello. "And lastly I am sure you will be happy to meet Lieutenant Amanda Rugan, head nurse." Amanda smiled shyly.

The two newcomers studied the group assembled in front of them before responding. Finally the woman spoke. She had long, wavy brown hair, which was tied in a ponytail clasped with a blue scrunchie band. Her skin was quite fair and she wore rimless silver eyeglasses. Her pale blue eyes and thick eyelashes could be seen through the glasses.

"I am your new chief medical officer, Lieutenant Commander Marlana Berg and this is General Medical Officer Lieutenant Tobias Carter. We are honored to be assigned to your ship."

"And we are honored to have you," answered Josh. "I would be pleased to give you a tour of the Gladiator."

"If you please," said Dr. Berg, "we would prefer to go directly to Sick Bay."

"As you wish," said Josh clearly taken aback by Dr. Berg's brashness. "Nurse Rugan and I will accompany you."



"Can you believe the nerve of her?" lamented Captain Stoner. He plopped down on the hard wooden office chair next to Dave Andrews. He had rapped his knuckles on the door but entered without waiting to be invited in.

"Of who?" questioned Andrews looking away from his computer monitor. He had been reviewing the history and basic statistics of Lexter, their next destination.

“Dr. Berg,” spit out Josh. “Amanda and I were showing Dr. Berg and Dr. Carter around Sick Bay, the Medical Lab, and the Morgue. She demanded to have everything rearranged. She wants the computer desk in Paul’s office moved to the other side of the room and she requested that I order a totally different chair. Then she asked that Amanda change the location of the stress and muscle evaluation equipment.”

Dave stared unbelievably at the Captain. He was quite surprised at what he was hearing. “Josh,” he said, “I don’t see anything wrong with Dr. Berg’s requests.”

“You don’t?” responded Josh. “Isn’t she being unreasonable?”

“Unreasonable? How?” answered Dave. “She should be able to arrange things so she can work comfortably.”

“But things were perfectly fine the way Paul had them.”

“Josh, you need to accept that Paul is never coming back. Don’t hold it against the new doctor just because she has been assigned to take his place. It is not her fault.”

Josh looked at Dave and just as quickly looked away as a wave of embarrassment flooded him. He was acting like a child. Dave was right. He should not be lashing out at Dr. Berg. But, he couldn’t help himself. The thought of her moving into Paul’s office and taking over Sick Bay was making him feel resentful. That was irrational thinking. He needed to pull himself together.

“Dave, please, forget—” The satellite phone on Josh’s belt pack sounded, cutting off his words.

“Captain Stoner,” Josh said into the phone.

“Sir,” came Diane Pearson’s voice, “Admiral Wilcox needs to speak to you immediately.”



Dennis Pearson drummed his fingers lightly on the wooden Conference Room table. It was the first time he'd been back in the room since the Captain's briefing nearly ten days ago. He couldn't say he missed the place. For a while he hated these four walls. That final vote still haunted him. It was hard to shake the thought that a couple of his crewmates actually thought he was a traitor.

The Captain entered the room and shut the door. He called the meeting to order. The sparkle in Josh Stoner's eyes that Dennis had noticed earlier that day was gone again, replaced by something else. Despondency? Yes, the Captain definitely looked dejected.

"Gentlemen," began the Captain addressing the three men he had summoned to the Conference Room: Lieutenant Commander Dennis Pearson, Commander David Andrews, and Lieutenant Keith Hampton. "I have called you to this meeting as I would like to request your assistance in responding to a number of questions from United Galaxy Command in reference to our recent mission to Brisula."

"What sort of questions?" piped in Dennis.

Josh was quiet for a moment. He stared straight ahead not looking directly at any of his officers. "To be honest," answered Josh, "they are more like charges that are being levied against the U.S.S. Gladiator. Actually, mostly against me since I am in command."

"Charges?" asked Andrews. "You mean for violations?"

"Exactly. Apparently, we, I, have disobeyed a number of UGC policies and regulations. Some can be easily explained while others may be...um...more difficult." Josh shuffled

through some papers that he had brought with him. He removed one sheet from the stack and held it up. "For instance, I need to file a separate report for the unrecoverable loss of each of six zip guns, five satellite phones, and four UGC uniforms. I need to submit reports for the temporary loss of a zip gun and a satellite phone along with diving equipment, which should be recovered when we are able to reach Seaman Scott. The reports need to include precise descriptions, serial numbers, explicit explanations of why the items were lost, what actions were taken to recover the lost items, and what precautions will be taken to prevent this from occurring again. Those are the easy ones."

"Josh, I can handle the diving ones. That was my call," offered Dave.

"Thank you, Dave. I appreciate that. The next ones are not so easy. We are being accused of not accurately informing UGC of the activities that were occurring during the Brisula incident. I take responsibility for this. When we discovered that Keith and Beverly's bodies were fakes, I gave the command to go back to Brisula without first getting approval from UGC. I also withheld from UGC the fact that the bodies were fakes. I will need to explain to UGC my reasons for doing this and hope they understand."

"You were not the only one who violated that policy," spoke up Dave. "I did not divulge the true facts of your disappearance to UGC either."

"I was the one who set the precedent for you to continue to deceive UGC so it is my responsibility. Hopefully they will see that with the threat of a spy aboard the ship it was dangerous to give out too much of the truth." Josh looked away from everyone and began playing with the pile of papers. Slowly he raised his head and shifted his glance over to the right. His

eyes locked briefly with Keith's and he turned away. "This one worries me. There are charges hinting that treason may have occurred."

"Me, sir?" asked Keith. He had been wondering why he was included in this meeting. He should have known that he wasn't going to get off so easy for giving out confidential information. He saw Josh nodding his head.

"Yes, but it's not only you. It's Wayne and Dave also. We were all under orders not to tell anyone about the Brisula Project. Under Dave's command he allowed Paul, Dennis, Diane, Jackson and Amanda to be informed. Wayne told Joban and Fabiana. Unfortunately, Keith told the enemy."

"You and I told the enemy also," said Dave.

"But we didn't know Paul was the enemy. Keith knew General Platt was a Tradian. On the plus side, Keith did not give out any valuable information. He possessed a lot more knowledge that the Tradians could have made great use of."

"Well, sir," said Dennis, "I think if we all put our heads together we can come up with the right wording to explain all of this away."

"You know Denny, I am glad to hear that you and Dave got along so well while I was gone because if I don't find those right words, Dave is going to be your new captain."



"Bleep. Bleep." A small blue light flashed on the communications panel. Diane pressed the receiver control.

"U.S.S. Gladiator," she said into the speaker of her wireless transceiver.

"Diane, it's me." The voice was crackly and sounded far away.

"Wayne, is that you? Where are you?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm in the Communications Station. I must speak to the Captain."

"Hold on, I will transfer you." Diane pressed the hold button, brought up her phone book, and touched Joshua Stoner's name.

"Captain Stoner, here."

"Sir, Lieutenant Shasta would like to speak to you. Shall I transfer the call?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, go ahead."

Captain Stoner waited several seconds but heard nothing. "Hello? Hello? Lieutenant Shasta? Wayne, are you there?" He shut the phone. "We must have lost him," he said to the others in the room. He dialed the Bridge.

"Lieutenant, I am on my way down to the Bridge. If Shasta calls back keep him on the phone till I get there."

The blue light flashed again on the communications panel. Diane answered quickly. It was Wayne Shasta. She told him to stay on the line. The elevator doors opened and Josh walked out.

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

"Captain, you—" Static filled the air, followed by silence. Then the line went dead.

"Do you know where he was calling from?" asked Josh.

"He said he was calling from the Communications Station. I believe the call was coming from Brisula," responded Diane.

"Did he tell you why he was calling?"

"No sir. He only said that he needed to talk to you." Again the blue light flashed. Diane answered and told Shasta to go ahead.

"Captain, I am concerned about the welfare of the slaves. They are not being treated humanely. Captain Torgenson has kept them all imprisoned while we are waiting for additional rescue teams and transports to arrive."

"Are the slaves being cared for?" asked Josh. "Are they being fed?"

"Yes, they are being fed, but many are being locked in their cages twenty-four hours a day while others are working long shifts in the shipping and receiving areas or performing janitorial tasks. They are working without food, water, or breaks."

"At least they are not digging in the gravel pits. It is only temporary, Lieutenant. Help should be there shortly."

"But, sir. I promised that I would free them."

"And you will. They have waited this long, a few more days will not hurt."

"Sir, there is something else. Things do not seem right here."

"What things?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling. Like when you and I—" The line went dead.

"I'm worried about him," Josh commented out loud to Diane.

"And well you should be," answered someone standing behind Josh. It was Dr. Berg.

"I didn't hear the elevator," said Josh turning around to face the doctor.

"I came down the stairs," she answered. "I am ready for a tour of the ship."

"I see. Well, I am quite busy at the moment. I will check my schedule and let you know when I can fit in time to give you a tour." He turned, walked past her, and pressed the elevator button. "Now if you will excuse me, I need to get back to the

Conference Room.”

“Captain, if you have a minute, there is something of great importance that I must talk to you about,” said Dr. Berg.

The elevator door slid open. Josh strode in. He held his hand across the door so it wouldn’t close and motioned with his other hand for the doctor to enter. “You can accompany me to the Conference Room.” The door shut.

Diane turned back to her console and shook her head. That was sure odd. She could not remember the Captain ever being so rude to a fellow officer. It was plain to see that he did not like the new doctor.



“I don’t get it. Admiral Wilcox was so pleased with our mission when the Captain gave his briefing. Why has he now turned this into an ugly mess?” Dennis leaned his head on his hands as he tried to make sense of the forms he was reading.

“It’s not Admiral Wilcox’s doing,” answered Andrews. “It’s UGC. They need to make sure every t is crossed and i is dotted.”

“Well, if you ask me, they should be giving Josh and Keith commendations instead of threatening disciplinary actions,” shot back Dennis with fury in his eyes.

“Unfortunately, no one is asking you,” Andrews responded. “I think Josh is going to come out of this OK. It is Hampton that I am afraid may face the brunt of the situation.” Dave looked over at the young officer. It was a shame to see such a promising career have to be cut short. But he was quite certain that Hampton’s head was on the chopping block. “UGC is going to need a scapegoat. They must show that they took action

against someone for all the violations. Regrettably, I believe that someone is going to be Keith Hampton.”

“So, Commander Andrews, you are saying that my days as an officer aboard the Gladiator are numbered. I am as good as gone,” said Keith just as the Conference Room door opened.

“I will not let that happen, Keith,” stated Captain Stoner as he entered the room with Dr. Berg behind him. “I would not be standing here today if it were not for you.”

“Sir, you would have managed to escape all on your own,” responded Hampton.

“No, I would have died from a poisonous snake bite.” Everyone laughed and Keith turned red.

“We don’t know if the snake was poisonous,” Keith said when the laughter died down.

Josh grinned. “What am I going to do with you?” Given the last few hours it was good to have something to chuckle about. “Seriously, I will do everything in my power to protect you including taking full responsibility for everything that occurred in regards to Brisula. Keith, you have nothing to worry about. Is that clear?”

“Sure, sir.”

“OK. Now that we have that settled, I would like to introduce you to our new Chief Medical Officer Marlana Berg.” Josh gave a slight bow and then pointed to Keith. “Doctor, this is Lieutenant Keith Hampton.”

“Lieutenant Hampton, I am very glad you are here,” said Dr. Berg. “I was just going to talk to Captain Stoner about you.”

“About me?” questioned Keith.

“Is Hampton sick?” inquired Josh.

“Actually,” responded Dr. Berg looking at Josh. “I need to talk about you also. And one other crew member, Ensign Beverly Glenna.”

“What is this about?” demanded Josh.

“We should continue this conversation in my office as it is a personal matter. Please have Ensign Glenna report to Sick Bay.” And with that Dr. Berg left the room.

Josh whispered to Dave on his way out, “I told you she has a lot of nerve.” He held the door open for Keith Hampton then let it slam shut.



The mood was somewhat somber as the three Gladiator officers sat silently in Paul Loring’s former office awaiting Ensign Glenna’s arrival. Keith was particularly feeling down in the dumps. Not only did he have no idea what Dr. Berg needed to talk to him about but according to Commander Andrews it was all but certain that he was headed for a discharge. Despite what the Captain’s good intentions might be, there was really nothing that could be done. He was guilty. But worse than all of this was Beverly. She had been distant to him the last couple of days. After returning to the Gladiator and ultimately being released from Sick Bay, he and Beverly had graciously been rewarded by Captain Stoner with three days off to relax. It had been just about the happiest three days of his life. He had gotten to learn more about Bev and to fall more deeply in love with her. It was different being able to interact freely without worrying about being poked with a cattle prod if they were caught touching or talking at the wrong time. They spent hours just holding hands and staring lazily into each other’s eyes. They took long walks along the Observation Deck, gazing at the millions of infinite stars surrounding the Gladiator. And

there was those endless conversations. Both had called their parents with the thrilling news of their non-deaths and Keith was so excited to introduce Beverly to Mom and Dad. But over the last two days Beverly seemed to be avoiding him. She had skipped out on having lunch and supper with him. He racked his brain wondering what he may have done to upset her, but he kept drawing a blank.

A knock on the office door startled Keith Hampton and he jumped.

"Nothing to be afraid of, Lieutenant," said Josh. "It's only Ensign Glenna."

Oh, great, thought Keith. *That's just what I need. Doing something so lame in front of the Captain.* He watched as Beverly took a seat alongside the Captain. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and pinned up on the back of her head. She kept her eyes averted away from Keith.

Marlana Berg closed her office door and sat down behind her desk.

"Let me begin by saying that I am under strict orders of United Galaxy Command to carry out their instructions to the maximum degree necessary. You are all required to submit to these mandatory orders, which include an extensive psychological assessment. In fact as of right now you are all on restricted duty pending the outcome of my evaluation," stated Dr. Berg.

"What exactly do you mean by 'restricted duty'?" asked Captain Stoner with irritation in his voice.

"In your case, Captain, until I clear you for full duty, you cannot make any crucial command decisions without consent of your first and second officers."

"You have got to be kidding?" exclaimed Josh. "That is absurd."

"In the case of Lieutenant Hampton and Ensign Glenna," continued the doctor, "they cannot perform their normal duties. They can temporarily be placed on other assignments such as laundry, janitorial or kitchen duties."

"With all due respect, there is nothing wrong with those assignments but we would be wasting the valuable knowledge and expertise of two highly skilled officers," responded Josh. "How long are we talking about?"

"That depends," stated Dr. Berg. "The tests can be completed in about four hours on the computer under my surveillance. The personal interview will take approximately two hours. I would need three to four hours for the analysis and to prepare the report, and another hour or more to go over the report. The report would then need to be filed with UGC before I could lift the restriction."

"So we are looking at a couple of days for each officer or about six days for you to complete this entire assignment," concluded Josh.

"That is under ideal circumstances, Captain," responded Dr. Berg.

"What do you mean?"

"You are assuming that the evaluations will all be positive. There is reason to believe that you have all suffered psychological damage from your experience in captivity and as a result will need extensive psychotherapy before being able to return to full duty."

Josh rose to his feet and walked over to the desk where the doctor was seated. He stared down at her. He was unable to speak at first. Then he had to catch himself as the anger tried to overtake him.

"Neither my officers nor myself need any counseling. We are doing fine. I thank you for your concern."

"Captain, you do not have a choice."

"What if I refuse to take your tests?"

"If you refuse, I will have no choice but to report it to UGC."

"Well then, I will just have to take my chances with UGC."

Josh turned around and faced Keith and Beverly. "The two of you are to follow Dr. Berg's orders. Lieutenant Hampton, tomorrow morning you are to report to the Laundry for temporary reassignment. Likewise, Ensign Glenna, you are to report to the Galley."



Dave Andrews and Dennis Pearson had left the Conference Room and were in the Messdeck enjoying a late night snack along with Diane Pearson and Bonnie Shea when Josh Stoner found them. Diane could see that the Captain looked upset. Something was bothering him.

"Care to join us, Captain?" invited Diane.

"Sure," said Josh. He pulled over a chair and placed it between Dennis and Dave. What Josh really wanted was to talk privately with his top two officers, but he didn't want to be rude and ask the two women to leave.

After a half hour of mindless chit-chat the conversation turned to gossip. Usually Josh tried to squelch shipboard rumors, but he paid attention this time since the gossip concerned the new doctor.

"And did you see all the luggage she brought with her?" asked Officer Shea. "Seaman Chase told me that he thinks there was something alive in one of her travel cases." Josh shook his head. *That's a new one.*

"What do we know about her?" asked Diane.

"I checked out her background," answered Dave Andrews, "and I must say it is quite impressive. She graduated top of her class from Albert Einstein Medical College. She completed three residencies at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. She is board certified as a general practitioner, psychiatrist, and general surgeon. Dr. Berg is highly respected among her peers. We are very lucky to have such a gifted doctor assigned to our ship."

"You left out the important things about her background," said Diane. "You know—" She smiled at Dave.

"Oh yes." Looking at Josh, he said, "Dr. Berg is 33 years old. She has never been married. She is not currently dating anyone. And she is quite beautiful."

"Why are you all looking at me?" asked Josh. The Captain stood up, bid everyone a good night, and left the Messdeck.



"Captain."

Josh turned around. Dave Andrews was jogging down the hallway behind him. He stopped and waited for his science officer to catch up to him.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?" Dave asked when he caught his breath.

"Since when did you start hanging out in the Messdeck?" inquired Josh with a puzzled expression across his face.

"I let myself be roped into it by Dennis," grinned Dave.

"Wow, you two really did become friends when I was

gone.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” laughed Dave. “By the way, when did you get so interested in the latest ship scuttlebutt?”

“Um...well...” Josh gave his head a slight shake. “I did want to speak with you and Dennis. At this point it can wait till tomorrow.” The two officers headed for the elevator.