

Family Matters

by Mark Tuttle

Chapter 1

"Your dad is a warmonger!" Melka Denton yelled, as his wild punch missed the other boy by centimeters.

Melka was a 12-year old boy in a 40-year-old's body. Short and stocky, his thick red hair grew in matted patches curled over the edges of a fat, round face. The other boy was lean and tall for his age. Lacking Melka's mass, John tried to step back further while he wiped blood from his lip.

"Stop it Melka! I'm sick of fighting with you!"

Several other boys circled them, cheering and laughing. It didn't matter who took the hit, they were delighted to see the blood. The quiet, upscale Washington D.C. neighborhood went about its business.

"Maybe your 'hero' daddy will come fight for you, you little coward," Melka sneered as he regained his balance. He braced for another attack. "You're a coward like your dad."

John stopped retreating and narrowed his eyes. "I told you he's not a coward! He was ordered to pull his ship back. It wasn't his fault!" John swung a fist at Melka and caught him across the nose, but it didn't land solidly. Melka took advantage of John's arm being so close and grabbed it, throwing John off balance. Melka dropped hard on top of John bringing both boys down.

"My dad's stuck in a hoverchair now because he got left behind!" Melka grunted, trying to twist John's arm. "Maybe I'll just cripple you to return the favor."

John realized he was about to lose this fight and yanked his arm in desperation. He pulled free of Melka and grabbed a handful of his red, slimy hair. Holding it tight, he balled the fist of his other hand and began smashing Melka hard in the face. He landed two or three solid blows before two other boys descended on him, yanking him off of Melka who was breathing hard and wet.

"Stop!" someone shouted from a yard two houses down. She was from a tall, handsome woman, wearing a green workout suit. In a short run, she covered the dozen meters to the boys quickly. "Break it up, before the civcams see this!"

The circle of boys quickly dispersed and muttered excitedly about the fight they had just witnessed. Melka was still pushing himself up off the sidewalk while John sat up from where the two boys had pulled him down.

"Melka Denton," the woman scolded. "This is the last straw. What's done is done. It's not John's fault. If your dad would like to take it up with his father, I can arrange that!"

Melka spat out blood and rubbed a painful spot on his head. A large patch of red hair was visibly absent. John reached out with a handful of hair and offered it back to him. Melka slapped his hand away, obviously startled by his sudden bald spot. Melka stood up and stormed down the street. He glanced back at John. "Sleep tight tonight, jerk," he muttered under his breath. He turned back and walked away, his hand on his head.

"What happened?" the woman asked John, her stern demeanor suddenly becoming compassionate.

"Same thing as always," John sighed. "Same as it's been since the attack." John watched Melka as he disappeared down the hill. "A lot of kids at school lost people in that battle with the Shi. They all hate me, Mom, because of what Dad did."

Corissa pulled John tight to her and began wiping the blood from his face. "It wasn't his fault. He was following his orders. He saved a lot of people that day."

"But how do we know that?" John asked, pushing away from his mother. "How do we know anything on the newsvids is true?"

"Jonathan Horatio Hicks! You listen to me," she admonished. "You've been listening to Melka and the others too much. Your father is a great man, and an outstanding officer. But he can't save everyone. No matter how hard he might try."

John looked up at the darkening sky. The orbital platforms were becoming visible, dotting the lower orbit. The *Atlantis* moored at one of them. "Mom," he asked. "Did Dad at least cry when he heard how many people died? Did it affect him at all?"

"No, honey," Corissa sighed as she closed her eyes. She pulled John back toward her as they began walking home. "That's our job."

John and Corissa Hicks entered their house and turned out the porch light. For several minutes, the street remained dark and quiet. From the opposite end of the street, dark shapes began moving among the houses. They silently slipped around the buildings until they were a few hundred meters away from the Hicks house. Two pairs of red eyes glowed and flared for a moment while one of the shapes pulled up a small device. It clicked once and a hoarse, angry voice answered. The shadow responded with a low, rumbling series of hard sounds. The device clicked again and was put away. The two figures looked at each other and a pointed claw rose in the direction of the house. The shapes slipped back into the shadows from where they came, while more shadows approached silently from the other end of the street.

Chapter 2

The bridge of the *Atlantis* hummed with activity as Admiral Horatio Hicks finished climbing the last step up to the command platform at a half run. His First Officer, Lieutenant Ramsey, rushed to meet him before he made it to the captain's station.

"What is it?" Hicks demanded. "Why the alert?"

"Sorry to wake you, Sir, but we thought you should see this," Ramsey reported, the tousle of his brown hair indicating he arrived on the bridge only shortly before Hicks. Ramsey was the most competent F.O. in the fleet, which is why he was aboard the *Atlantis*. Four minutes out from a dead sleep, he was already in uniform, on the bridge, and ready to brief his captain.

"Looks like Quay activity over D.C.," Ramsey indicated, pointing to the data on the tactical screen. "A couple of ships, the smaller hekatons, buzzed us and then took off for deep space. It sure woke the bridge crew up fast."

Hicks glared at Ramsey. "I'll assume that was a poor attempt at humor."

"Uh yes, Sir," Ramsey retreated. "We couldn't return fire because they approached us port side aft using the docking platforms of the station as cover. If we'd fired and missed, we could've taken out a pylon."

"My crew doesn't miss," Hicks stated coldly. "So they came in, did a fly by and left?" Hicks stared at the front screen on the far side of the bridge. "Why, Ramsey?"

Ramsey studied the telemetry from the Quay ships. "A test? They've done that before."

"The Quay have seen *Atlantis* in action. They know what she's capable of," Hicks replied. "This was a distraction."

"A distraction?" Ramsey questioned. "From wha..."

Hicks had jumped toward the captain's station to activate the ship wide comm. "All hands, full alert. Section heads to duty stations. Staff levels at battle ready." The bridge crew hurried to man additional stations as crewmembers poured onto the bridge. Ramsey crossed the distance to the ops position and began issuing instructions to the helm crew.

"Take us away from the platforms, half steam. Swing us 120 degrees from aft and nose us back from the planet. Squadron commanders, prepare..." and the comm officer suddenly cut him off.

"Lieutenant Ramsey, Admiral Hicks," she interjected. "Incoming transmission for... the Admiral, Sir." She stared down at her board and tapped it as if broken. "It's from the Quay."

The bridge went silent for a moment as Hicks stared forward. "Put it through."

"Audio only. Coming now," the comm officer stated.

There was a crackle of static and a jumble of clicking and scratching. The comm officer reached to adjust the gain when a voice echoed across the bridge of the *Atlantis*.

"Hicks. Slayer of Tulak of the Katal, slayer of Gnikahkn of Luhus, slayer of Gashttakh of Luhus, slayer of..."

"This is Admiral Horatio Hicks. Captain of the Earther battleship *Atlantis*. Who am I addressing and what is your business?" Hicks interrupted stoically.

After a pause, the Quay continued. "The Quay value life and brotherhood. When they are slain, their slayer is addressed with his crimes. You do not value life. Your list is long."

"State your business or we're finished here."

After another short pause, the Quay continued. "I am Arhnaknak of the Katal." The voice on the speakers paused before continuing again. "And I have taken your son."

Chapter 3

"Do I have to tell you I don't like this?" Ramsey huffed.

Hicks and Ramsey charged down a companionway of the *Atlantis* toward the shuttle bays. "No, you don't."

"It's obviously a trap. How would the Quay get your son? And get him off of Earth? Hell, you don't even know they have him!"

Hicks stopped and looked at Ramsey. He had shown no emotion since first entering the bridge. There was barely a trace of any now. "No, I don't know. But, they are up to something. First, there was the distraction. Now, they've deliberately targeted this ship and me. There is something bigger happening and we need to know what."

"What about your son, if they really do have him?"

Hicks turned to the shuttle bay door and began to key in his command code. "Command can't reach my family. Local authorities found the house in shambles. There was blood. The neighbors heard screams, but no one saw anything."

Hicks turned back to Ramsey. "My job is to protect Earth and my ship. That's what I'm doing. Understood?"

Ramsey held Hicks' gaze for as long as possible. "Yes, Sir."

"Is everything I asked for ready?"

"It's ready sir, good luck. You know where we'll be."

Hicks reached up and squeezed Ramsey's arm. "Watch the sky."

Hicks turned to the door as it opened. A speedy Class IV courier shuttle sat on the pad as technicians finished emptying its hold. Fuel cables retracted as the pilot stepped over one. He stood straight and saluted crisply to Hicks. "Commander Wren Hartley." Hicks returned the salute as a private would salute the Earther President. Hicks was all military. There were no shortcuts, no matter what level you were at.

"At ease. You've read the briefing?"

Hartley nodded. "Yes, Sir. Take you to the coordinates on Venus. Pickup one passenger and return. Simple."

Hicks shook his head. "It won't be that simple. I'll explain on the way," he added, turning the commander by the shoulder as they walked to the courier shuttle.

Minutes later, the courier left *Atlantis* and arced across Earth's horizon toward the west. Hicks stared down at a small holo emitter pulled from his pocket. He clicked the switch and small, glowing image of his family appeared. Corissa and John smiled. He didn't. He never smiled, even though Corissa begged him to for the vids. He stuffed the emitter back in his pocket and looked out of the side port window. "How long?"

"Twelve hours, Sir, and we're pulling 5G. Only a Mav hotrod goes faster," Hartley replied.

Chapter 4

The shuttle landed with some difficulty on the windy surface of Venus. The coordinates the Quay provided were in an atmosphere pocket, near one of the planet's heavy oxygen generators. You could walk around without a mask, but it was a small perimeter. Plus, it smelled like sulfur and exhaust all at the same time. Not a good place for a picnic, but a fine place for the private exchange of a hostage.

A Takha life ship perched far off on the horizon. Apparently, they didn't want the ship to be close to the shuttle in case it was booby-trapped. A contingent of ten Quay warriors stood a small way from where the shuttle landed. A large, cloth bag lay at their feet.

Horatio Hicks strode down the ramp when it finished lowering to the Venusian soil. The pilot stepped out of the ship to the top of the ramp. "Jeez," he muttered, as he saw the Quay standing in rank.

Hicks held up a finger to quiet the pilot as he continued down the ramp. When he reached the bottom, the Quay in front shouted, "You are not alone!"

"Military protocol requires me to be escorted by a trained pilot!" Hicks shouted over the wind. "He's unarmed, as am I."

The Quay studied him and stepped forward. "Open the vessel's door," he hissed.

Hicks looked back to the pilot but never took his eyes from the Quay, who had stepped closer to him. He nodded to Hartley.

Hartley leaned over to the door and pulled the handle. Most of the starboard side of the shuttle opened upward, revealing empty space inside. The Quay all leaned forward to look. When they were satisfied it was empty, the lead Quay spoke again. "I am Arhnaknak."

"Where is my son?" Hicks asked coolly, still not looking at the bag.

"Safe, for now. Only your cooperation will keep him so."

"You weren't specific about your demands. That's sloppy for a kidnapper, Arhnaknak," Hicks stated. "I assume you're looking for a trade. Me for him? Revenge for the Quay I've killed on my duty?"

Arhnaknak snarled and clicked. Either Hicks' comment or his attitude, or both, angered the other Quay. Arhnaknak raised a claw to quiet them, much the same way Hicks had just done to Hartley.

"No. We want you dead. But we need your ship."

"Like Hell," Hicks sneered.

"You speak in ignorance, Hicks," Arhnaknak rasped. "I am giving you the opportunity to eliminate our common enemy in one glorious action."

This surprised Hicks for a moment, but he showed no emotion. Senior staff aboard the *Atlantis*, veterans of many hours of poker games with their captain, would not have been surprised. "Explain," Hicks barked.

"The Shi," Arhnaknak began, measuring Hicks, "have a weakness. Their world sat much closer to their star than it does here in this pit of space. Their oceans are freezing. Ice clogs their lands, chokes their resources, crushes their flesh. What brings them life is threatening to make them brittle. To crack and die in the cold."

The Quay warriors, clicking and hissing to each other, clearly enjoyed the discussion. Arhnaknak glanced toward them and they grew silent again. He turned back to Hicks. "You will deliver the final blow that kills them all. And you will die in the process, along with your murderous ship."

Hicks remained silent. When it was clear he wasn't yet ready to speak, Arhnaknak continued. "I have the location of the massive thermal generator the Shi use to keep the core of Seyal molten. It is the

only thing holding back the ice. It is too well protected for us to attack. But we have studied your ship. You will set a collision course for this facility on Seyal. Your fighters will clear your path and although your ship will take massive damage, its nuclear core will be intact for the collision. The resulting explosion will destroy this facility and Seyal will freeze. The Hated will be destroyed and we will be at peace."

Hicks thought for a moment. He looked at the Quay as if making calculations in his head. "What does my son have to do with this?"

"If you refuse, he will die," Arhnaknak growled. He then turned and uttered something unintelligible to a Quay warrior behind him. The warrior picked up the bag and carried it forward. It hit the ground with a loud thump in front of Arhnaknak. Something inside awoke and coughed.

"Go to Hell," Hicks replied, locking eyes with Arhnaknak.

"I have killed many Earther families looking for you," Arhnaknak hissed. "Human parents are always willing to die for their young. You are no different. You will not let him die to the ripping and clawing of the Quay." Arhnaknak kicked the bag with his long front leg. A small voice inside began crying.

Hicks remained collected. "I am an admiral of the Earther fleet. Captain of the flagship *Atlantis*. I do not give in to the demands of thugs like you. Kill the boy, if you must. He will die like any soldier and be honored as we step over your decaying bones."

Arhnaknak's voice began to rise. "You bluff! He is of your flesh! I have seen the cries of men begging for the lives of their offspring! You share their weakness! Look at his face and tell him you are willing to let him die!"

Arhnaknak reached down and tore the bag open. A boy fell to the ground, sobbing and coughing. He looked up with frightened eyes and his matted, red hair stuck to his head by sweat and fear.

Hicks looked down at the crying boy. For a long moment, he stared, emotionless at the pitiful sight. The boy had scratches and tears in his clothes, but he showed no physical mistreatment. He looked up at Hicks with teary, pleading eyes.

"You will fly your ship to Seyal. You will kill the Hated. Or your son will die," Arhnaknak croaked in a hoarse whisper.

"Kill him, Arhnaknak. I'm under orders to protect my ship. He doesn't supercede my duty."

Arhnaknak was obviously stunned, as was the Quay gathered behind him. His eyes burned and a visible orange glow began to seep through the cracks in his carapace. "You are mad. You are the butcher as we were told."

Hicks reached into his pocket and recovered the emitter. He clicked the button and the holo of Corissa, Jonathan and he flared to life. "This is my son, Arhnaknak. You grabbed the wrong boy."

Arhnaknak bellowed and turned to the Quay warriors behind him. Hicks didn't understand the word, but he was certain it was Quay for "fools." Arhnaknak scooped the boy up in one claw. Melka let out a scream before the Quay threw him in frustration a meter to Hicks' right side. Hicks jumped to catch him when the boy suddenly stopped... in mid-air.

For a moment, no one moved. Hicks, Hartley and ten Quay just stared at the boy hanging limp, a meter or so above the dusty surface of Venus. Hicks was the first to break the stalemate. He held up his arms toward Melka and yelled. "Here! Shroud Unit 7, engage!"

Melka's body suddenly flew from where he hung motionless to the arms of Hicks, who brought them both down to the ground. From all around, small arms fire erupted from several points. Hartley ducked inside the shuttle for a moment before stepping out, brandishing a plasma rifle. He layed down suppressing fire over Hicks' position. The Quay armed themselves and tried to find something to hit.

"Get back to the ship!" Hartley yelled, dodging a blast hitting the panel next to his head.

"No time, Shroud 7, extraction!" Hicks shouted, again to empty space.

Hicks looked down at Melka, who was surprisingly quiet. *He is probably in shock*, Hicks thought. But he needed him awake. "Melka, where's John? What happened?"

"John and I had a fight. I... I went back that night to... well... I wanted to hurt him. Because of my dad. I snuck in but they had left. Then... then..."

Despite the sounds of the battle raging around them, Hicks was calm. A look of compassion formed on his face. "Your father is a great tactician, Melka. When he's healed, there's a place for him on the bridge of the *Atlantis*."

Melka stared up at Hicks as tears welled in his eyes. "I thought you were going to leave me, Mr. Hicks."

"I don't leave anyone behind, Melka. Never."

A body slammed to the ground next to them. It was one of Hicks' Shroud units. The Shrouds were soldiers who wore experimental armor, fitted with a technology that wrapped light around a subject. This rendered them undetectable to all visible light receptors, including the Mark I Eyeball. Unfortunately, a flailing Quay can get lucky, and it looked like one did.

Hicks looked up from Melka at the raging battle. Hartley still fired from the door of the shuttle. A couple of Shrouds lay on the ground, injured or dead. It was hard to determine how many. Hicks saw a gorget cannon fire with a blast that split a charging Quay warrior in half. The chest-mounted cannon was designed for close range work, and it was effective even against a Quay's natural armor.

Shroud 7, now visible, dropped to his knees besides Hicks and Melka. "Extraction ready, Sir." He scooped Melka up and held him to his chest. Plastic fiber straps snapped out from the sides of his armor and wrapped firmly around the boy's midsection. The soldier pulled off his "thumpers," heavy three-fingered gloves, and tossed them to the ground. He then pulled out an enviromask and slipped it over the boy's face with his free hand.

Military combat extraction was dangerous at best. The extraction team would drop into the combat zone and harness the injured. It usually only took a few seconds. The extractor would then jet pack boost the pair straight up to an extraction shuttle that would scoop them up a kilometer or so above the combat zone. Timing was everything.

"Shroud 7 to *Atlantis*, extraction in five, four, three..."

Two Quay forelegs interrupted the soldier's countdown as he and Melka were knocked over. Arhnaknak charged on top of them, a putrid steam seeping like hot gas from his chest and mouth.

"Liar! Butchering flesh bag!" He whirled back to Hicks. "I gave you the chance to kill all of the Shi. All of them! What would your duty tell you to do?" He leaned in low toward Hicks' face. The stench and the heat became intense. Hicks had seen an enraged Quay before, but not this close and certainly not upside down, as he saw him now. He struggled to pull himself away as his hand landed upon Shroud 7's gloves.

Arhnaknak raised a claw high into the air to impale Hicks when Melka screamed in terror. Shroud 7 struggled to get to his feet, and the boy's frightful thrashing made balance difficult. Arhnaknak turned to the sound of the scream just as the pair stood up. Arhnaknak reared up in defiance to Shroud 7 as he finished his countdown. "...two... one!"

Arhnaknak reached out to grab Melka as the jetpack whined to life. A split-second before ignition, the Quay would tear the boy's head off.

Until the lights suddenly went out for the Quay leader.

Captain Horatio Hicks landed a left hook on the lower side of Arhnaknak's abdomen and amid the sound of crushing carapace, sent the Quay spiraling head first into the dirt. Hicks pulled the second thumper on his right hand and turned to Shroud 7 and Melka. "Go. Now," he ordered with an angry calm.

Shroud 7 nodded and hit the igniter. The jet pack roared to life, merging with the sound of Melka's scream as the two disappeared in the haze of wet, oxygenated clouds. The extractor shuttle roared into view high ahead, slowed slightly, and sped off to rejoin *Atlantis*, its human cargo intact.

Back on the battlefield, Hicks looked around. The rest of the Shroud unit chased the last Quay warrior back to the life ship. Except one other that remained. Arhnaknak pulled himself up slowly, shaking his head. He looked up to see Hicks approach a second too late, as a right uppercut smashed into his lower jaw. Both of the Quay's horns broke off and he flipped over backwards. Hicks moved forward again as Arhnaknak lashed out with his back leg and brought the Earther officer down. As he fell, Hicks slammed his right hand down, catching the Quay leg between his gloved fist and the ground. The impact crushed the leg and cracked the rock underneath.

Arhnaknak gasped, low and raspy. His voice was weak but still defiant. He looked at Hicks, who stood over him, the two oversized white gloves stained with Quay blood. "What..." was all the Quay could mutter.

"They're called thumpers. Something we designed for close combat with your kind. Once you get past the artillery and the GC's it's hand-to-hand. Thumpers measure the distance between themselves and the enemy. When contact is a millisecond away, it creates a grav-field that amplifies the force of the blow by about a hundred times. Levels the playing field for us 'flesh bags.'"

Hicks leaned down to Arhnaknak. "They pack quite a punch." He darted his left hand out and grabbed Arhnaknak by the neck. "But I can choke you so fast that your head will crack right off your neck." He squeezed slightly, and the Quay began to growl and squirm.

"You attacked my family. You attacked me. But you were probably just following orders. Am I right?" He loosened his grip and stood up, backing away from the Quay. He shook the thumpers from his hands and let them fall to the ground. "I understand orders. Sometimes we're forced to do things that aren't right. All in the name of orders." Hicks looked back to the spot where he had just spoken to Melka.

Arhnaknak looked at him suspiciously. "We only care about killing the Shi. The Hated."

Hicks turned again to Arhnaknak. "You lied about killing families, didn't you? I don't know how you found my home, but I would have heard about a Quay killing spree on Earth."

"Yes. We studied you. We have children as well. It is a weakness that we possess and assumed you would as well. To protect the young is what an honorable species does."

Hicks leaned down to the fallen Quay. "You won't have my ship. You won't kill me." Hicks paused. "But I won't kill you either."

Arhnaknak cocked his head to the side. The Shroud team filed back toward the shuttle. They had reached the perimeter for safe travel and turned back.

Hicks leaned in to his Quay counterpart. "Stay away from Earth. Stay out of my way. The next time you see *Atlantis*, she will be firing upon you. And one more thing..." Hicks straightened up, still looking down on Arhnaknak. "Tell me where this Shi thermal facility is."

Chapter 5

Horatio Hicks entered the *Atlantis* sickbay on his way to the bridge. Tailen Benks, staff doctor, met him near the door. "How's our guest?" Hicks asked.

"He was in shock by the time we got him in here. What were you thinking, performing an extraction for a 12-year-old?" Dr. Benks scolded.

"There wasn't much of a choice, Doctor. Besides, it looks like he got a good story out of it."

Through the glass divider, Hicks saw Melka lying in the bed with his son Jonathan sitting on a table next to it. Melka made a swooping hand motion, followed by several punching motions. Without hearing it, he could tell that the story was being embellished somewhat. Hicks poked his head in the door.

"John, your mother is coming in on the shuttle at 1200 hours. It's a tight turnaround, so make sure you're ready."

"Sure, Dad," John replied. He made eye contact with his father and smiled. With the doctor behind him and no one but his son and Melka in view, Hicks returned a broad smile.

"Mr. Hicks," Melka asked nervously.

"Admiral," whispered John.

"Uh.. Admiral Hicks," Melka corrected himself.

"Yes Melka?" Hicks replied.

"I just wanted to thank you. For saving me... and... uh... letting John come visit me on your ship."

Hicks smiled again and bowed his head slightly. He turned back toward the door and left sickbay. Melka turned to John. "Hey."

"What?" John asked.

"Your dad's the greatest, you know that?"

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