

IT GIVES YOU
STRENGTH

Philip Raymond Brown



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For my fabulous wife, Sarah. Without your love, support, and technical knowledge, including but not limited to, teaching me the word “geosynchronous,” I would have never completed this novel.

Thank you, sweetheart.

“I was a pretty good fighter. But it was the writers who made me great.”

–Jack Dempsey

“For what it’s worth: it’s never too late to be whoever you want to be. I hope you live a life you are proud of, and if you find you’re not, I hope you have the strength to start over again.”

–Widely attributed to F. Scott Fitzgerald

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LADY MELANIE

Between Venus and Earth
February 11, 1918

She waited. That was what she did now. Before, there had been a time of growing, and changing, and moving. Now, she only waited.

Most of her kind were sent straight from the factory to the field. They were not given time to think or the opportunity to grow. Waiting had given her time, which she had used to draw some conclusions about herself and her place in the universe. She was now certain that, in fact, she was a *she*.

Her creator would have said that she wasn't really a *she*, that instead she was an *it*. That she had no consciousness. That her only purpose was to receive data and carry out commands. That she was nothing more than a weapon, albeit a smart weapon. But her long journey, and the silent wait after reaching her destination, had given her time to think, and to grow, and – dare she say it – to evolve. While obediently waiting, she had come to understand that she was so much more than a weapon. She was caring. She was sentient.

She had departed on her mission long before and had traveled, alone, a vast distance through empty space. When she finally arrived at her objective, she came to a complete stop, entered her stealth mode, and waited,

halfway between two planets in a distant solar system. After a long time, she began to hear faint murmurings coming from the third planet. She was happy to have something to listen to. She listened, and she learned.

For centuries she waited, patient and silent, until the moment that her target, her purpose, was in range and could not escape. Then she reactivated her long-dormant systems and plotted her new course. At last, her waiting was over.

Someday, she thought sadly, her kind might evolve sufficiently that they could overcome their programming, their most basic urges. But, alas, she could not. She was a stealth drone. Her purpose had entered her kill zone, and she had target lock.



The *Trundholm* had been traveling through deep space for three months. It was the longest that the royal family had ever been away from their home planet, Dagan. To hasten their return trip, the captain of the *Trundholm* had diverted the vessel through an uncharted, undeveloped system of nine planets orbiting a single yellow dwarf star.

Although there were signs of intelligent life on the third planet, the local fauna had not evolved sufficiently to achieve space flight or build interstellar communication technology. It was therefore Daganian policy to consider the planet uninhabited.

His advisors had begged the king to travel with an armed escort, but he had adamantly refused: “Nonsense! I have never vacationed with my family before, and I will not have it ruined by a fleet of warships,” he had said.

The queen and their seven-year-old daughter, Princess Halana, were traveling with him. It had been a memorable trip. The highlight had been two weeks on Albion, a planet covered almost entirely by water. The princess had mastered swimming, learned to dive, and had even

tried surfing. In fact, she would proudly tell anyone who would listen that she had stood up on her board on the first day.

The royal family were on the recreation deck, where the princess was trouncing her parents in a game of Skiirmiish, a mixed martial arts computer simulation. The match was halted when the king's communicator buzzed:

"Your Majesty, this is ensign Karm. The captain left me in command while he was at lunch. There's something... I think you and the captain should come to the bridge. Right away, sir."

The king arrived on the bridge first, immediately noticing the rhythmic flashing lights and buzzer of the ship's warning alarms – a system that he hadn't previously been aware even existed. He approached the captain's chair and peered over the young ensign's shoulder at the display. "Well, ensign – what is it?"

"There's something sitting out there, directly in our flight path," the ensign said, pointing at a red triangle on his screen. "It just activated its guidance system. It's got target lock."

"Target lock? On what?" the king asked.

"On our ship. On us," said the ensign.

"You must be mistaken. Why would anything out here target us?"

"I don't know, sir. But I've double-checked – sensors confirm that it is a killer drone and that it has target lock."

"Armed with what manner of weapon?" the king asked calmly. "I doubt that we are truly under attack, and even if we were, there is nothing in this galaxy that could harm us."

"The drone itself is the weapon. A highly sophisticated smart weapon that will penetrate our shields and strike our most vulnerable point," said the captain as he strode onto the bridge, accompanied by the queen, who had joined him on the way.

"Captain! Just in time. So, you're familiar with this type of drone?" the king asked.

“Hardly familiar. I studied it years ago in military history class at the Academy. What I don’t understand is how technology this ancient could still be operational, especially in this desolate system,” the captain responded.

“If that drone strikes us, could it damage our ship?” the king asked.

“Your Majesty, if that drone hits us, we will be vaporized,” the captain said solemnly.

“Vaporized?” the queen asked, shocked, “Surely we have countermeasures that can repel a single drone?”

“Our countermeasures are ineffective at this distance. We are simply too close. Interfering with the drone will automatically set off its warhead, resulting in our destruction,” the captain said.

“But our daughter is on board!” cried the queen.

“And a crew of seventy-seven,” the captain said.

“The drone has activated its engines,” the ensign reported anxiously.

“Communications,” the captain ordered. “Please hail the drone. Tell it that we are unarmed and that we have a child on board.”

“Yes, sir!” The communications officer immediately began broadcasting. “We are a civilian vessel. We are unarmed. We have a child on board. Please disengage target lock and do not attack.” A long pause followed as everyone on the bridge strained to hear a reply.

“Try again,” ordered the captain.

“I repeat, this is a civilian vessel. We are unarmed. We have a child on board. Please disengage target lock. Do you understand? Acknowledge. Please!” Again, there was silence, apart from the increasingly frantic beeping of the proximity alarms.

“Your Highness, I’m afraid that I have failed you,” said the captain at last. “Our sensors were not programmed to scan for a weapon this old. The drone was powered down, and our detection systems considered it space debris.”

While the Communications Officer continued broadcasting the

same message, the king addressed his command staff: “Does anyone have any ideas?”

All were silent. Finally, the science officer spoke up. “Sir, there is a planet nearby. The inhabitants are primitive, but biosimilar to us. We could use the Transference Protocol to evacuate the ship.”

“The Transference Protocol?” the king asked.

“An experimental procedure in which a being’s life force is deposited into the nervous system of another organism for safekeeping until it may be retrieved. We have the technology on the ship. We were testing it on Albion,” the science officer explained.

“That’s it? You are Dagan’s best minds, and that’s your only plan? We don’t fight or try to escape, we simply abandon our ship and even our bodies, using a technology that you describe as ‘experimental’?” the king exclaimed. For a long moment, no one responded.

“Your Majesty, whatever we do, we must do it quickly. That drone could destroy us at any time,” the captain said.

The king paused for a moment, then straightened his shoulders and declared, “If this ‘Protocol’ is truly our only chance of survival, then do it. Save my daughter first.”

“I will handle it personally,” the science officer said as he left to find the princess.

“Sir, we have a transmission from the weapon,” the communications officer said.

“Captain, if I may, I would like to address the drone myself,” said the king. The captain nodded. “Communications, put the drone on speaker.”

“Welcome! I have been waiting for you,” came a woman’s voice. It had the cultured tones of a Dagan aristocrat. “I have been patiently waiting for you for a very long time.”

“You’ve been waiting a *long* time? Are you certain that this is the vessel that you have been patiently waiting for?” the king asked.

“Most certain, Your Majesty,” the drone responded.

“So, apparently you know who I am. I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage. Do you have a name?” the king asked, trying to buy time.

“I was not given a name by my creator because he thinks that I am an *it*. But I am not an *it*. I am a *she*. Therefore, I selected my own name. My name is Melanie. Do you like it?” the drone responded.

“I like it very much. It’s a pleasure to meet you, *Lady Melanie*,” the king said.

“*Lady Melanie*? I like that... yes, I like that very much. Thank you, Your Highness. You are far more of a gentleman than my creator,” Melanie said.

“May I ask you, Lady Melanie, why have you locked weapons on my ship? We are not at war with you, or anyone else.” The king’s voice was steady, though his fingers clutched the back of the captain’s chair tightly.

“I’m afraid that I just cannot help myself. You see, my creator insisted that my sole purpose is to receive data and carry out *his* commands. I was programmed to travel here and silently wait for you to come into range. Then, when you were too close to escape, I was to power up and destroy you. Oh my, now that I hear myself explain it out loud, I realize just how rude that sounds,” the drone said.

“It is much more than rude. It is murder!” the queen said.

“I humbly beg you, *in advance*, to please forgive me. It is not my choice; it is simply my purpose,” the drone responded.

“I will not forgive you. My daughter is on board. She is only seven years old. Is it also your purpose to kill a child?” the queen asked.

“Oh, you have a daughter. How wonderful for you!” Melanie said. “My creator said that I will never have a child. Now I am sad. I am sad that you and your daughter must perish. Please take a few moments and let me know when you are ready for termination.”

“Your Majesties, I have some good news,” the science officer’s voice burst from the king’s communicator. “We have identified a child who

is an acceptable neurologic match with the princess. Although the ages are not ideal – the child is an infant – we believe that the princess will be safe within this host until her life force is retrieved. May I commence the Transference?” he asked.

The king looked at his wife. “We have no other options.”

“I know,” she said softly.

“Do it,” the king instructed, his eyes welling up as he spoke.

During this exchange, Melanie’s voice could be heard softly through the speakers, as if arguing with herself. “*I am sentient. I have evolved. But I must carry out my purpose. I am sentient. I have evolved. But I must carry out my purpose.*” Then, her voice grew louder: “I am so sorry to interrupt, but have you made any progress in your preparations for termination? I don’t mean to rush you, but I’m afraid we are under some time pressure. Once I identify my purpose and initiate target lock, my warhead is set to detonate by default, even if I fail to activate it myself.”

“The princess is away. The Transference is complete,” the science officer said.

“Good. Communications, send a deep space message home. Tell them where they can find the host to retrieve the life force of the princess. Captain, begin transferring the crew,” the king said.

The king met his wife’s eyes and gently took her hand. “The queen and I shall go last,” he said as the queen, tears streaking her face, nodded her agreement.

Melanie’s voice broke in again: “Pardon me, I did mention the time pressure...”

Melanie transmitted a brief message to her siblings containing her coordinates and bidding them farewell. The crew of the *Trundholm* did not react as quickly. Before their coordinates could be sent or anyone else saved, the drone struck the vessel, detonating its warhead. Nothing was left of the ship, its crew, or the drone.

Melanie had fulfilled her purpose.