



The Morcai Battalion: The Recruit

By Diana Palmer

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THE MORCAI BATTALION: THE RECRUIT

A prophecy foretold:

Three years after the unprovoked attack on a peaceful colony, the war between the Rojok dynasty and the Tri-Galaxy Fleet rages on. Born of that war is the Morcai Battalion, a fleet comprised of Centaurians and humans—the first collaboration of its kind and a step toward an intergalactic alliance. But the fragile union is tested as their courageous commander in chief, Dtimun, is faced with the temptation of the forbidden—and human—Dr. Madeline Ruszel.

A combat surgeon, Ruszel is aware of the danger of inciting a Centaurian's interest, even if he is the most intriguing of men. Besides putting their mission at risk, personal relations between their kinds are still outlawed. But a prophecy that touches on both their lives and the future of all alien nations hints that a greater unity may be theirs for the taking...if they, and their crew, survive in the battle for peace.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A high-octane and gritty space adventure"

--RT Book Reviews on The Morcai Battalion

"...fans of stark outer space military science fiction will appreciate this sobering at war thriller."-- The Best Reviews on The Morcai Battalion

"Palmer...is the queen of desperado quests for justice and true love." -Publishers Weekly

About the Author

Author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer is a multi-New York Times bestselling author and one of the top ten romance writers in America. She has a gift for telling even the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

No Bio

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Battered and sore, Dr. Madeline Ruszel stood at attention in front of the Holconcom commander, Dtimun. The tall alien perched on the edge of his liquiform desk with his arms crossed, glaring at her. His cat-eyes, which changed color to mirror his mood, were the dark brown of anger.

She knew she looked unpresentable. Her red Holconcom uniform was stained with synthale and her own blood. She was disheveled and bruised. Her long, wavy reddish-gold hair was in a tangle all the way to her waist, and also sweaty from her recent activities in the base officers' lounge. Contacted by the base military police unit, after her apprehension, Dtimun had ordered Ruszel brought to the *Morcai*, the flagship of the integrated Cehn-Tahr and human commando unit known as the Holconcom.

He hadn't said a word since she arrived, with bruises just coming out on the soft skin of her face, around one of her green eyes. She'd been standing at attention for several minutes, waiting for the explosion. Holconcom were forbidden to engage in brawls. That included not only the Cehn-Tahr complement, but the humans as well. The elite and feared military unit had, unknown to the human commanders of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet, genetically engineered superior strength, plus microcyborg enhancers that made brawling extremely dangerous. Besides that, Madeline was a combat surgeon. By constitutional galactic law, medical personnel were denied that sort of recreation.

Of course, they were also denied the use of side-arms. Madeline tried to conceal the one she was carrying tucked in her waistband, under her tunic, from the alien's penetrating gaze.

Finally, he spoke. "You are out of uniform, madam," he growled, indicating her uniform, unbuttoned at the throat.

She raised one hand and quickly fastened the button.

"And you are carrying a firearm," he continued. "Firearms are forbidden to medical personnel. You are a doctor."

Technically, she wasn't only a doctor of medicine, but an internist in Cularian medicine, an anthropological group which included the Cehn-Tahr—or Centaurians, as they were incorrectly known by humans—and their worst enemies, Rojoks. In her past, Madeline had captained an Amazon commando squad and had routinely carried a service weapon. But she wasn't going to push her luck by reminding him of that fact, given the state of his temper. His expression might be benign, but his elongated slit-pupiled cat-eyes were still brown. Grimacing, she tugged the Jebob disruptor from her belt, stepped forward and laid it gently on the desk beside him. She returned to attention.

"Would you care to explain the purple discoloration around your left eye?" he added.

"It's called a black eye," she informed him merrily. "That would be from Flannegan's fist. Sir."

He made a rough sound deep in his throat and folded his arms across his broad chest. "I assume that you do have some justification for throwing Flannegan through the expensive antique glass patio doors at the officers' club?"

She brightened, although she still hadn't quite met his eyes. "Yes, sir!"

"Which is...?" he prompted.

"Flannegan called you a cat-eyed benny-whammer. Sir," she added formally.

He just stared at her, as if he had doubts about her sanity.

"How can I justify the dignity of your position aboard the *Morcai*" he began solemnly, "as the only female, human or otherwise, ever to serve aboard her, when you spend hours in various bars across the base embarrassing both the Holconcom and me?"

She shook her head. "Sir, the honor of the unit was at stake," she said earnestly. "You must see that we... " She cleared her throat. "I mean, *I*, had to defend your honor."

"We." His eyes grew darker.

"Me. I. Myself." She gathered speed.

"And Stern," he guessed, "and Hahnson and Komak." The other two human officers, Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson, were Madeline's longtime comrades. Komak, a Cehn-Tahr, was Dtimun's second in command.

She met his eyes, aghast. "Sir, I never said that...!"

He drew in a breath. "It is useless to try to deceive me."

She straightened even more. "I'm really very sorry, sir," she said. "I waded in to punish Flannegan, and his buddies in the First Fleet attacked me. I was outnumbered, so the others intervened to save me from them."

"A pity," he muttered darkly, "that they are not here to save you from me."

"I was about to say that myself, sir," she returned brightly. Her green eyes were twinkling, despite all her

efforts to appear sincere.

The humor was contagious, apparently, because his cat-eyes flared into a green smile, if only briefly, before the angry brown returned.

"Brawling," he scoffed. "Not only does it reflect poorly on your profession, but you have no business displaying a firearm to the entire base."

"I had to relieve Flannegan of the firearm, sir—he'd taken it from a Jebob officer and he was using the grip to batter my head."

His eyes narrowed. "I will remind you once more that medical personnel are not allowed sidearms. Lawson insists on it, and so do I."

Her green eyes glittered at him defiantly. "With all due respect, sir, I'm not going into a combat situation unarmed, whether or not Admiral Lawson likes it."

Dtimun stood up, shaking his head. "Your previous combat history as a captain with the Amazon Division is at war with your professional credentials as a healer. It will lead to grief."

"I always hide the firearm, sir," she assured him.

He turned, scowling, and gave her a long look that took in the nice fit of her red Holconcom uniform. There were no pockets. Neither was there room for a weapon. "Should I ask where you hide the firearm?" he questioned unexpectedly.

She gave him a horrified look. "Sir!" she exclaimed with mock embarrassment.

"At least reassure me that all of your Cehn-Tahr crewmates removed their microcyborgs before you engaged in this senseless slaughter," he replied, trying to salvage something from the encounter. This was a deliberate deception, also. The microcyborgs were strengthenancers, used by the Cehn-Tahr clones of the Holconcom. But their contribution to Dtimun and Komak's physical superiority was minute. Dtimun and Komak were not clones. The humans had no idea of the real nature of the Cehn-Tahr.

"Komak collected them the minute Flannegan called you a cat-eyed...called you a name," she amended quickly, "and I threw a bar stool at him," she assured him with a muffled grin.

He let out a long sigh and waved a hand at her. "Get out of my office," he muttered. "And stay out of the base officers' club until I give you official permission to return there."

"Yes, sir!"

"And, you are grounded until further notice."

"Yes, sir!"

He glared at her as she started to leave. "Take that weapon and give it back to Flannegan. And if I catch you carrying a firearm into combat," he began with the threat in his tone and his posture, "I will stand you up in the brig and let Komak use you as a practice target for his novapen. Am I understood?"

"Oh, yes, sir, you are," she assured him, grabbing the weapon off his desk.

"Ruszel," he called as the door powered apart at her movement.

Her hair flew around her face as she turned back to him, her eyes questioning.

"Does Flannegan have a similar souvenir of the encounter?" he asked unexpectedly.

She grinned. "Indeed he does, sir. Two of them!"

Once again, there was the faintest flash of green in his elongated eyes. "Carry on."

"Yes, sir!"

She was chuckling as she went out of the room and down the deck toward her medical quarters.

Dtimun watched her go with mixed emotions. She was so unlike women of his species, who were not allowed in the military, much less in combat. It had been a point of contention between himself and Ruszel since she and her Terravegan Strategic Space Command comrades, Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson, had become part of the legendary Cehn-Tahr Holconcom unit now known as the Morcai Battalion. The humans frequently tested his patience to the limit. But they were fierce fighters, loyal and honorable, and they complemented the Cehn-Tahr soldiers in ways he hadn't imagined.

In the almost three years since the Holconcom had escaped from the Rojok death camp, Ahkmau, the war between the Rojok dynasty and the Tri-Galaxy Fleet had intensified. The Cehn-Tahr of the Holconcom, except for Dtimun himself and Komak, were all clones. So were Captain Holt Stern and Dr. Strick Hahnson—through no fault of their own, since their originals had been killed by the Rojoks. Dtimun had carefully concealed this knowledge about Stern and Hahnson from the brass of the Tri-Fleet military, due to the inexplicable human contempt for clones.

His men and the humans, formerly of Stern's ship, the SSC ship *Bellatrix*, had been a volatile mix in the first days of the unit. Holconcom were not used to touch without combat, and the Terravegan humans were a physical race. Therefore, brawling had been strictly forbidden for fear that a massacre might ensue, and not only because of the secret tech used by the Cehn-Tahr members of the Holconcom to boost their already formidable strength.

Not that it did any good to forbid brawling. Komak, Dtimun's executive officer, had gotten around the no-brawling rule by having the clones remove their microcyborgs, the tiny, highly classified strength modifiers that all members of the Holconcom had embedded in their scalps. His comrades enjoyed the physical sparring with other races. Now the humans aboard the *Morcai* and their Cehn-Tahr comrades frequently trashed bars; but usually not on Trimerius, the headquarters planet of the Tri-Galaxy Fleet. Admiral Jeffrye Lawson was not going to take Ruszel's participation in the sport lightly. He felt that a Terravegan lieutenant commander, as Madeline was ranked aboard the *Morcai*, should not brawl. Of course, he also felt that doctors should not help to create patients. But he had a soft spot for Ruszel, which was why she got away with so many infractions of regulations.

Besides Ruszel's brawling, Dtimun had two more equally disturbing problems. The first had to do with the living machines aboard his ship, the *Morcai*. There were four *kelekoms* aboard the *Morcai*. The living, sentient machines bonded with their operators and were capable of incredible intelligence-gathering abilities.

On Ahkmau, the ship had lost one of its operators and the unit had gone into hibernation after its companion had died.

None of the *kelekom*s had ever lost a companion since Dtimun's accession to head of the Holconcom. Because the joining was so intimate a relationship, it was also emotional. The unit had gone into advanced hibernation mode. Two attempts had been made, over the past two years, to find it a new companion. The first had seemed encouraging. The *kelekom* had made an effort to give the Cehn-Tahr officer time to become familiar with it. It had forced itself to go on missions with him, had functioned almost normally during the weeks that followed. The officer was delighted to be part of the elite unit. The *kelekom* accepted him in the months that followed and allowed him to join with it. Mission after mission had followed. And just when Dtimun was sure the match would be permanent, the young Cehn-Tahr officer had walked into an ambush and died instantly.

The *kelekom*, now robbed of two linked Cehn-Tahr companions by death, had gone into depression and had finally shut down all over again. Months had passed with no interest from it as Dtimun presented it with new candidates, none of whom seemed to be acceptable. Now, it seemed possible that it would die. That, Dtimun could not allow to happen. He had to find a replacement operator, but none of his men aboard ship had inspired any interest in the declining bionic machine. So the ship had had to operate with only three units. He thought that perhaps Lawson might have a human computer technician to spare, one whose very strangeness might appeal to the depressed living machine. It was a long shot, but it might work.

His second problem had to do with a complement of ambassadors who were holding an emergency meeting on Ondar, a neutral planet in the nearby Ce-relles system. They were discussing the unexpected death of Rojok tyrant Mangus Lo while he was in Tri-Galaxy Fleet custody, pending a retrial in his conviction on war crime charges, and the latest incursion by his nephew and successor, Chan Ho, who had seized another star system in the New Territory with the help of Chacon, his respected field marshal.

Apparently, Chacon had managed to explain his part in Mangus Lo's arrest on Ahkmau. He had permitted the Morcai Battalion to escape from the horrors of Ahkmau, but no one outside the unit had been privy to that knowledge. Presumably, even if the explanation was sketchy, the Rojoks' new emperor was afraid to test his own power as commander-in-chief by attempting to try the people's favorite soldier, Chacon. There was interspace chatter, however, that Chan Ho favored his late uncle's terror policies and had gone head-to-head with Chacon about their renewal. It was worrying.

The Tri-Galaxy Council was working on a diplomatic solution to the Rojoks' latest appropriation in the New Territory, claimed by member planets of the Tri-Galaxy Council. The Rojoks had already seized Terramer and its system, now they were spreading out to another nearby system, which contained abundant natural resources. The ambassadors were on Ondar to vote on sanctions against the so-called neutral member-worlds of the Rojok dynasty, as well as a modified budget to fund the war against the Rojoks. It was a controversial meeting. The Rojoks might attempt a kidnapping.

Dtimun had word from a spy in his circle of acquaintances who said that a contingent of Rojoks was planning to establish a covert base within skimmer distance of the council chambers. He'd taken that information to Lawson, who advised patience. Dtimun had none. Despite the Holconcom's alliance with the Tri-Fleet, it was autonomous. Dtimun could ignore Lawson's dictates and do what he pleased.

Since the chambers were on neutral ground, in a neutral system, the Tri-Galaxy Fleet had been ordered to stand down while the diplomats debated.

Just to annoy Dtimun, the Cehn-Tahr emperor, old Tnurat Alamantimichar, had sided with Lawson on the issue and insisted that the Holconcom stay away from Ondar. He interfered frequently. It was ongoing payback for his Holconcom commander's deliberate provocation of his chauvinistic policies by allowing a female—and a human female at that!—in the Holconcom. The old emperor had been outraged at the news. He and the Imperial Dectat had tried to have Ruszel arrested and executed. Dtimun and Lawson had spiked his guns with the Tri-Galaxy Council. Over the years the emperor had been making the *Morcai* 's commando raids more difficult. His word carried weight with the Council. Most of the member worlds were terrified of him. Dtimun was not. Nor was the old emperor going to keep him planetside if he had intel that the delegates on Ondar were in immediate danger. But for the time being, Dtimun sought more confirmed intel.

Meanwhile, he'd grounded Ruszel, forbidding her to leave her medical unit planetside as well as her office on his flagship until further notice. He would have put her in the brig, but grounding her, along with the threat of the brig, might be enough to keep her in line. For the time being, at least.

Users Review

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