MACLYNN

The End Times – Book 1

Prologue

Present Time

The Empress

She smiled as the three warriors circled her. The tip of her saber wove a pattern as she shifted the weapon from hand to hand. If questioned, she would have ignored knowledge of the affectation, knowing that it belonged to another. The circling continued. Each approach, each feint was covered as they tried to find a weakness, a way through her defenses. Then she lunged, first right, then left, then back again, studying their hips and feet, ignoring the tips of their weapons. The first went down, a killing blow on the exterior of his meshed armor, just above the heart. She whirled, a pirouette, her sword held close as one blow passed by, and another deflected off the edge of her weapon. She could see the blade slip by her face before deflecting. She spun, and they parted as their comrade fell to the floor. Now one stood on either side. They lunged at the same time, one for her groin, one for her spine. She leapt, allowing both weapons to pass beneath her. One fell, as she twisted in mid-air, her blade crossing his neck, another killing blow. The third lunged again, knowing his time was at an end. She twitched to the right. His blade slipped beneath her left armpit. Her blade crossed his neck. She landed erect and smiled, satisfied with her performance. Her three bodyguards stood, bowed in deference, then knelt before her. The practice session was at an end. The electroshocks delivered by her practice weapon were not fatal, but extremely painful.

"Excellent! Excellent! Even MacLynn would have been impressed, my friends! Now, I need a walk to relax. Two minutes and we leave!" she said, as a servant retrieved her practice sword and handed her a towel.

She wiped the sweat from her face, knowing her old mentor would have chided her for her lack of conditioning. Another servant waited, holding open a long, insulated leather coat. She threw the towel aside, slipped her arms inside the coat, and nodded as she walked away. The training was a ritual before her weekly walk through the Corridor of Time. It settled her mind before she confronted the reality of her dying empire.

Clad only in an armored body glove, boots, and a high-collared, full-length leather coat, Alexandra liked to walk the halls of her mountain fortress at night. She treasured the solitude. The only sound was the casual tread of her boots on the cold stone of the hallway.

The thousands of servants, workers and soldiers that traversed the labyrinthian structure during daylight hours were mostly abed. Her bodyguards still followed her, of course, but at least they kept their distance. She could pretend she was alone, and it was at times like this that her mind drifted back to the distant past.

"*My youth? When was I ever young?* *When I was 20? When I was 100 . . . 500?"* she mused, walking slowly, hands behind her back.

The question had come often to her mind as of late. Then she paused, glancing to her left, remembering a tapestry in this section of the mile-long corridor.

"Ahh . . . yes, this is it," she said, and smiled as she gazed on the massive heirloom.

Thirty feet long, ten feet high, it told a story, as did all the tapestries in the Corridor of Time. The quiet hum of stasis generators told of protective fields that shielded fragile cloth from the ravages of millennia. Hundreds of tapestries, most of them thousands of years old, told the story of the reign of the Immortals.

"I really was young then, truly young, and so very full of myself, so naïve," she chided, but laughed inside as memories of the time before the Great Betrayal came flooding into her mind.

"It was all so simple . . . so stable. Mother, Grandmam, as far back as time recorded, brides all, immortal Mothers of the Union. Each bore the seed in their breeding turn. Everyone's place in society was so regimented . . . so predictable. Then came my turn . . ." she said, shaking her head, smiling at the age-old image of her family.

"So young, I was barely 20 . . . a newborn. What did I know?" she asked, and sighed at the memory of her own innocence.

"Poor Mother . . . so many centuries ago, and I still remember every detail of your face. All frown, never a smile . . . except for me, and of course, for Father. Your stern visage hid a love of life so deep that it should never have been extinguished. But then . . . even Immortals can be killed. I’m now the last of us. We'll create no more. The line of immortality ends with me," she said, as she removed the glove from her right hand and reached out.

The stasis field sparked as her fingertip touched the protective barrier, but her DNA was recognized, and she was allowed to pass. She shuddered as her forefinger brushed across the silken image of her mother's face.

"It had been a mistake, all of us on one planet. Everyone but me, the blushing bride, but who could have known?" she sighed, and turning, replaced her glove, and looked away.

Guilt was the one weakness she allowed herself. Her wedding had given him the opportunity. It was a weight that she would bear forever.

*"Who would have thought that he would destroy an entire planet to kill us? Six billion people dead, just to kill a few hundred thousand. But he wanted it all. He wanted the Planetary Union gone. He despised the Normals, referred to them as pets. I remember him saying, 'Why listen to their words? They'll be dead tomorrow, and some new pet will arrive with a new list of complaints.' He wanted an Empire, his Empire. He wanted to be the last of the Immortals,"* she thought, her mind drifting inward.

"In a way, he won. The Union was destroyed. We never knew how fragile the alliances were. With us gone, human greed came forward. Politics, racial, and cultural differences began tearing apart every planet. I had to defeat him. Then I was forced to subdue them, to keep them from killing each other . . . to create an empire. Now I am Empress forever. Some worlds call me a monster . . . a butcher, but he gave me no choice. But . . . of what use am I now? Am I any better than he would have been?" she asked, and paused, glancing up toward the right center of the tapestry.

The tapestry, a portrait done in the old style, was all that remained of the royal family. It was a true tapestry of needle and thread. The thread was as fine as silk. The images as real as life. It had been completed after the announcement of her engagement. In the foreground, 11 brothers and sisters stood in regal poses surrounding their father and mother, rulers of the Union and all humanity. In the background stood the husbands, wives, and grandchildren. All were in their finest regalia.

"Why do you still stare at me? It wasn’t my fault," she said, staring upward at her own youthful face.

Beside her image stood another, the only remaining visage of her twin brother. He held a planet in one hand, as if examining a trifle.

"How could so much evil have been housed in so much beauty?" she asked, as she studied a young man as handsome as his father.

A frown passed across her face as she remembered the teasing she had endured at her twin brother’s hands. Twins were a rarity amongst Immortals. Their next sibling was over a century older. They were hardly identical. She, like her mother, had been born with a face less than blessed. It possessed character she had been told. A connection to the "Root Stock" had been a less than kind description used by her brother. But despite the teasing, she had been happy. She and her mother had been so close, both raven-haired, large, tall women, with plain faces. The other children had taken after her father, he of the golden hair and noble features.

"Why, brother? How could you kill your own? For what? To be alone like I am . . . to outlive everyone around you? To watch the Normals age and wither, one after the other, over and over. Their short lives end so quickly. A hundred years and they’re gone. Friendship and love can be so very painful when you’re always left behind. Why, brother?" she asked, and as ever, there was no answer.

There were no tears. The time for that had long passed. The memories and the pain had become fossilized, turned to dense stone, a pale imitation of a time that had receded into history . . . for all but her. But the guilt remained, a tiny spark that refused to extinguish. As she scanned the heirloom, another face caught her eye and she smiled.

"Malthus, poor Malthus, my husband to be. We were so unalike in temperament and looks. I suppose that is why we fought so much. What did you see in me? Did you really love me or was it just my father?" she asked herself as she turned away, intending to continue her stroll down the dim corridor.

"You with your blonde hair, handsome features and perpetual smile. You looked more like a member of the family than I did. Me, with my straight black hair, over six feet tall, and a face so plain it begged for a veil. What a pair! I choose to believe you really loved me," she laughed, remembering how happy her mother had been when the engagement was announced.

The prospect of an immortal spinster daughter had haunted her mother’s dreams. Twenty had been the betrothal age. She had to be married before she was 21. It was tradition. It had been her mother who had insisted on a grand wedding . . . the final wedding.

"Only Shepaard will do, she had said. Everyone just had to be there . . . and everyone was, Mother, everyone . . ." she said, as she shivered, and forced her heart to harden once more.

She thought back on Shepaard, the garden planet, twice the volume of Old Terra, but with a smaller iron core giving it nearly the same mass and gravity. The Gem of Erebus it had been called. Only 40 light years from Old Terra, it was the center of the Planetary Union, home of the most stunningly beautiful terrain in the galaxy. Mountains ten miles high, forests that ran unending for thousands of miles, oceans teeming with life. It was, in a word, pristine.

"We were to be married there. I was the last female sibling to be wed. Only he remained, my twin brother, still alone. He seemed to like that. I didn't understand at the time. The family had collected from the far reaches of the galaxy, all of them. All the distant cousins . . . so far removed. All came home to Shepaard, home planet of the Immortals, the rulers of humanity. But it’s all gone now . . . Shepaard . . . the Union . . . our family . . . and I am the last," she said, as the memory of that fateful day, the day that would be forever known as the Great Betrayal, passed before her mind’s eye.

"Connell always told me you were not to be trusted. But he was always so cautious. So typical for a mere mortal. At least, that's what I thought he was at the time. Just another warrior, just another bodyguard assigned by my father. That's all he meant to me then. Humans like him were like seasonal insects, their lives so short. But he suspected you, my brother, and I was a fool, as were we all. Our arrogance destroyed us. We thought we were invincible."

Only her bodyguard and a few servants had been in orbit with her above Shepaard. The bodyguard, a taciturn black-haired giant of a man, had taken charge. He transported her father from the surface. She had screamed in rage, demanding to be taken to him, but he had refused. She had been hidden away during the Unification Wars. He kept her alive and saw to her education in the arts of the warrior. Later, he found others to teach her the ways of the ruler. They became close.

"You taught me well, Connell MacLynn. Some said I looked more like your daughter than his," she smiled, as she remembered the endless days of physical and mental torment.

She hated him intensely in the beginning. His training was brutal and relentless. They traveled to desert planets, ice planets. Planets covered in jungles filled with lethal predators. Planets with cities that covered entire continents. Each stop would last for weeks or months. She became an expert at surviving in every known habitat that would tolerate the presence of humans, and some that would not. Weapons, both human and alien, became familiar, then natural as his training exercises intensified. Her bruises and scars accumulated as he laughed at her feeble attempts at harming him.

"In the end, it was I that taught you a lesson."

She laughed aloud as she feinted with her left hand, her fingers spread like claws, then leapt into the sir and swept rapidly forward with her right in a raking fashion.

"Axian tiger claws. One tip and I ripped you from cheek to chin. Sometimes, I wonder if it was simply another lesson meant for me rather than you," she said, and turned to gesture for her guards to remain in place.

At first, he had treated her like the child she was. In the end, she was as hard and tough as any Galactic Marine. The physical size and strength that had made her feel awkward as a youth, when combined with his training, had made her equal to almost any warrior in existence. Survival . . . the gun and the sword had come first. Other lessons had come later.

"Look at me now, unable to move from my fortress. My sword gathers dust as the great invasion begins," she mused, longing to flee the fortress that had become her prison.

"Only here can I gather the information I need. So many trillions depend on my actions. Only here can I see it all . . . in this cursed fortress perched on a mountain on Old Terra," she continued, as she turned away from the tapestry that dragged her back to the past, and a guilt that she could never quite leave behind.

She glanced over her shoulder. Three huge figures were spaced across the hall 30 yards behind her. Their hands were free, weapons discretely hung behind their backs or maglocked to their armored thighs. She nodded and continued her slow walk down the Corridor of Time.

She paused at the end of the passageway. Artificial lighting gave way to brilliant moonlight. The goblet filled with golden Ambrosian was waiting for her, as it always was, delicately perched on a slender pillar of purest gold. The goblet had been a wedding present, one of two, the other was long gone. Holding the goblet before her face, she turned the ornately sculpted stem between thumb and forefinger. The bowl of the goblet was cut from a single white diamond, mounted on a stem and base of purest adamithrium. A thousand facets sparkled in the moonlight streaming in through the Star Window far above. The wine was transformed into a rainbow of light.

Smiling, she sipped from the glistening vessel, savoring the delicate sweetness, the scent of flowers, the earthy taste of a planet long dead. She knew that the visions caused by the wine would soon follow.

"So little left, never to be tasted again. Only Shepaard could produce such a wine," she sighed, remembering the vast vineyards she had wandered in as a child.

That had been another time, a time of galactic peace, before she was forced to fight for her survival, to take up the sword of war. Sipping the cool wine, she walked into the circular edifice that was at the hub of the Ten Corridors. Thirty yards across, the black stone surface was steeped in moonlight. Glancing up, she felt as if the moon and stars were reaching out for her, welcoming her. In the center of the hub was an elevated platform, also circular, also black stone, some 20 yards across. Ten steps upward and she reached the Disc of the Ancients. The black marble surface was inlaid with an image of the galaxy of humanity. Swirling arms of diamonds and precious gems spiraled outward from the center covering the entire surface of the platform. The floor glistened and shimmered. The gems seemed suspended in nothing, as if the galaxy had been transported onto this surface.

By tradition, only immortals were allowed to tread on this platform. Only she had walked here for over a thousand years. In the center sat a small throne of purest ivory. Upon its surface was carved the history of the Immortals. Ancient glyphs, in a language long dead to most, told the story of her people, of their ascendency to the stars, of their finding the lesser races of humans, of their decision to ally with them in their infinite numbers, and in the end use their own near immortality to unify them . . . to protect them.

Sipping the cool wine, she stepped around the ornate throne, staring upward, the light of a thousand stars streaming into her mind. She sat, knowing that the throne would adjust to her perfectly.

She slid the stem of the goblet into a slot in the right arm rest, and whispered, "Now . . ."

Slowly, smoothly, the throne began to rise; its anti-gravity drive activated by her voice. The throne reclined, as per its programming, stopping at 20 degrees from the vertical. Tilting her head back, she relaxed, the Star Window looming ever closer. The hemispherical dome, 90 feet across, was the highest point on the planet. It stood at the apex of the tower, a full 300 feet from the surface of the hub. Her isolated fortress, carved into the highest mountaintop on Old Terra, provided the solitude she craved and the security she needed.

The throne slowed, coming to a halt as it crossed the plane of the impregnable dome. From here, all was displayed before her. Here, she felt at peace. A long sip of wine and the vision began. Humanity, in all its genetic complexity, was hers to view. Her mind lifted free, following the web of life from place to place, ever expanding. Thousands of human worlds were scattered across the galaxy, and she, their Empress, was responsible for their survival.

"Where are you tonight, Connell? What danger are you bearing now because of me?"

She would never know. Glimpses were all she had left, brief images of her people, incomplete and without context. Once, she could see everywhere, see nearly every detail. The visions had been her blessing. Now others had to be sent to find the details, the truth . . . and years went by. Her intuitions, once near infallible, were now blurred and confusing. Now, when so much was at stake, she was almost blind. Shepaard, once buried in the past, had returned to haunt her. It was a distraction she could not afford.

"So many deaths, all gathered for my wedding, such a waste. Viewing the tapestry was a mistake. I should have it removed and stored. This danger is now," she said, and pushed the past behind her, but knew inside the tapestry was going nowhere.

Another long sip, another, and another, and she left the galaxy, ever expanding her search.

"Where are they now? When will they come?" she asked, as she felt for the limit of her vision.

Far upon the northern rim of the galaxy she felt resistance. The barrier had grown. A dozen worlds were completely beyond her reach. The Kytun had finally come. The invasion had begun as she knew it would. Arcus, a beautiful agrarian planet with 3 billion humans, was the capital of that sector.

"Father, what am I to do? If I announce this openly there will be widespread panic across the galaxy. Many planets will tear themselves apart before they’re even touched. Order and unity will break down when I need it the most."

For many centuries there had been silence, only silence from her father. Once, his spirit had still been there. He had provided guidance. But as the shadow grew, his voice had dimmed, then disappeared. Now she was alone with her thoughts. Only her warrior remained . . . somewhere. He had told her centuries ago of a visitation from her father, of the Plan, of the hope it presented.

"Father, why don’t you contact me? I am your daughter. I am Empress. What don’t I know? What should I do? Connell, where are you?" she asked, her hand caressing diamond as a final sip passed her lips.

"It has been so long. Why no message? I feel your presence, your life . . . somewhere. I need to know. How close to completion? Will the Plan work? So much is gone, invisible. I am blind and leading us nowhere. They are on us now. Poor Arcus!" she said, as her mind drifted back to the start of it all . . .