

THE  
**FRONTIERS SAGA**  
EPISODE 10



# LIBERATION

Ryk Brown

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**THE  
FRONTIERS SAGA  
EPISODE 10**

# **LIBERATION**

**Ryk Brown**

*The Frontiers Saga Episode #10: Liberation*

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First Kindle Edition

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## CHAPTER ONE

For the first time in weeks, Nathan was actually excited about something. He had seen Luis, one of his closest friends, on the view screen. He had even heard his voice, brief as it had been. In moments, his friend would step onto the Aurora's main hangar deck, having been rescued from the stranded Celestia only a few minutes ago.

Nathan entered the forward end of the Aurora's main hangar bay and eagerly made his way aft. Just ahead of him, about halfway down the bay, Vladimir and a group of Corinairan technicians and security personnel were preparing to board another shuttle, one fitted with a Corinari breach box.

"I thought their flight deck had a functioning transfer airlock," Nathan said as he approached.

"The entire forward section is depressurized," Vladimir answered, "except for the bridge."

"Are you sure that thing is going to work?"

"We will be using the port side aft emergency hatch. The breach box is too small to fit around the regular personnel boarding hatches."

"Will you be able to get the data cores out through there?"

"It will be tight, I expect. We will see; we will know."

"Two more of my friends from the Academy are in the Celestia's aft section," Nathan told him, "Kyle and Tilly."

"Sounds like a comedy team," Vladimir said. "I will say hello for you."

"Tilly is a pretty good engineer," Nathan said. "I'm sure he'll have quite a bit to tell you about the Celestia's status."

"I will be sure to speak with him, but if you do not mind, some things I must see for myself," Vladimir warned.

"Of course," Nathan said. "Just give me an update as soon as you can. We're in enemy territory, you know."

"I know, Nathan. I know. That is why we are bringing our friends," Vladimir said, pointing at the Corinari troops boarding the shuttle.

"Jessica's idea?"

"Yes. She is afraid there are Jung saboteurs in the aft section of the Celestia waiting to come aboard and steal our beautiful ship from us." Vladimir leaned into Nathan. "I think she is paranoid."

"It's her job to be paranoid."

Vladimir turned to board the shuttle, holding one hand in the air. "She is overqualified, my friend."

Nathan watched as Vladimir jogged up the rear ramp of the shuttle. Its engines began to spin up as her aft boarding ramp swung into its closed position. He took several steps backward to get out of the way so the deck hands could guide the shuttle as it turned around and headed toward the airlock.

As Vladimir's shuttle rolled into the port airlock, the starboard airlock door began to rise, revealing another of the Aurora's shuttles on her way in. Nathan stayed back against the side while the shuttle rolled past him, its own aft cargo ramp slowly lowering as the shuttle rolled to a stop.

Jessica came walking down the ramp as it lowered, jumping off the end as it neared the deck. She was still wearing her Corinari EVA suit, her helmet in her hand. Behind her was Major Waddell and his four Corinari soldiers.

"You didn't have to come all the way down to meet us," Jessica said jokingly.

"Lieutenant Commander, Major, nice work," Nathan congratulated.

"Thank you, sir," Major Waddell said as he stepped off the ramp. "It was interesting."

"Shouldn't you be on the bridge, Skipper?" Jessica teased. "We are in hostile space, after all."

"XO has the conn, and we've got Talons Five and Six sitting on the horizon to keep an eye out for unexpected guests," Nathan explained.

"Did the Cheng take some muscle with him?" Jessica asked.

"As ordered," Nathan assured her. "Was it really necessary?"

"Better safe than sorry," Jessica said.

"In this scenario, I would tend to agree with the lieutenant commander's precautions," Major Waddell said.

"We should properly verify the identities of everyone on that ship before they come over," Jessica insisted.

Nathan looked at the top of the shuttle's cargo ramp. There were two smiling faces, one male and one female, both wearing standard EDF EVA suits, their helmets in their hands. "What about those two shady looking characters?" Nathan asked, pointing at Luis and Devyn.

Jessica looked back over her shoulder at them. "They said they knew you, so I figured I'd let you check them out." Jessica smiled as she turned to leave.

Nathan smiled at Luis and Devyn as they started down the ramp. He turned back to Jessica and Major Waddell. "Lieutenant Commander."

Jessica and the major both stopped, turning back toward Nathan.

"Once you get changed, Lieutenant Telles wants to meet you."

"Lieutenant who?" Jessica wondered.

"The leader of the Ghatazhak platoon," Nathan added. A puzzled look came over his face. "Did I forget to tell you about them?"

Jessica looked at Major Waddell.

"I thought the captain told you," Major Waddell defended.

Jessica looked back at Nathan. "Where the fuck did you guys go while I was on Earth?"

"Oops," Nathan said, a guilty expression on his face. "Major, would you?"

Major Waddell gently tugged at Jessica's shoulder. "Come, Lieutenant Commander. I will explain everything while we remove our gear."

Nathan turned back toward Luis and Devyn as they stepped onto the deck.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" Luis asked. He could barely contain the smile on his face as he saluted. Devyn made no effort to conceal her happiness at seeing their friend alive and well.

"Permission granted," Nathan answered. He did not bother to return the salute, instead stepping forward to embrace one of his closest friends. "Damn, it's good to see you," Nathan mumbled as he hugged his friend. "You look like shit," he added as he pulled away and looked at Luis, "but it's good to see you." Nathan turned to Devyn who looked like she was about to cry. He wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her hair.

"We thought you were dead," she said, fighting to hold back her tears.



"I almost was," Nathan said. He laughed as he pulled back from her. "Several times, in fact."

"What the hell is going on, Nathan?" Luis asked. "How the hell did you, of all people, end up in command..." Luis looked around briefly, his arms rising to his sides. "...of all this?"

"It's a long story," Nathan said.

"Where have you been for the last three months?" Devyn wondered.

"That's an even longer story," Nathan added, rolling his eyes. "I'll fill you in later. For now, we need to get you two to medical and get you cleaned up. Doc Chen wants to check you out before you debrief."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to show us the way," Luis said. "We didn't have a medical section on our ship—at least, not one that was pressurized."

"Follow me," Nathan said. He stepped between them and put his arms around both their shoulders. "It really is great to see you guys." As they started walking forward, Nathan reached up and tugged at Luis's scraggly beard. "What's all this?" he asked. "No razors on that barge?"

\* \* \*

Vladimir held himself steady, floating inside the breach box as he activated the controls on the side of the Celestia's hull. The outer airlock door hissed slightly as it cracked open, sending a fine dust floating away from the door seal. The door retracted slightly inward, then slid to one side to reveal an empty airlock chamber on the other side. Vladimir grabbed the overhead rail on the inside wall of the breach box and swung his feet into the airlock, letting the Celestia's artificial gravity pull him downward as his body followed.

Once his feet were firmly on the floor, he turned around to face the men in the breach box. "The security detail and I will enter first," he announced, "per the lieutenant commander's instructions."

"Beg your pardon, sir," the sergeant in charge of the Corinari security detail said. "I believe Lieutenant Commander Nash's instructions were that we were to enter first and secure the entrance."

"With your strange guns and uniforms, you will scare the hell out of them," Vladimir said. "No offense, Sergeant, but you and your men are not the friendliest looking bunch. I will enter first; you will follow." Vladimir looked at the sergeant. "Or you can wait here if you like."

The sergeant shrugged, rolled his eyes, grabbed the overhead rail, and swung into the airlock in similar fashion to Vladimir, landing on the deck of the airlock as he gracefully transitioned from the zero-gravity environment of the breach box into the Celestia's artificial gravity. "It feels a little light," the sergeant commented as he jumped up and down a bit to test the gravity.

"They are probably running at half G to save power," Vladimir explained. Vladimir waited until all four of the Corinari troops were in the airlock and the outer door was closed again. "Are we ready?"

The sergeant stepped forward, pulling Vladimir away from the inner door and toward the back of the airlock. He stepped in front of him and raised his weapon. The other three Corinari troops raised their weapons as well. The sergeant and the other man in front knelt down on one knee with their weapons up and ready. "Now we're ready."

Vladimir rolled his eyes. "Press the intercom button, Sergeant."

The sergeant did as instructed.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy of the Aurora," Vladimir called out. "We are ready to enter. Please do not make any sudden, aggressive moves when the door opens. I have security forces with me as a precaution. They will not use force unless challenged."

The sergeant turned off the intercom and resumed his ready position. The door began to slide open, revealing an empty room with an opening into a corridor on the far side of the room.

"Show yourselves!" the sergeant barked, his heavy Corinairan brogue tinting his words.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic peeked around the hatchway on the far side of the room, his hands waving freely. "We're not armed!" He looked to either side of the airlock. "Come out, guys," he said, gesturing.

The sergeant shifted his weapon to the right side of the room as one of the Celestia's crewman backed slowly away from the side of the airlock's inner door, his hands high. The Corinari soldier to the sergeant's right shifted his weapon to the left side of the room as another crewman also backed away with his hands in the air.

"Moving," the sergeant announced as he started through the inner airlock hatch. The Corinari trooper to his right raised his weapon upward momentarily, lowering it back down and taking aim at the second crewman once more as the trooper from behind the sergeant stepped forward to take his place.

"Moving," the second soldier said as he rose from his knee, stepped through the airlock hatch, and moved to the left.

"Turn around," the sergeant instructed sternly, "and get down on your knees."

"What the..." the first crewman started to say.

“Do it now!” the sergeant instructed.

“I would do as they ask,” Vladimir instructed from inside the airlock. “They take their jobs very seriously.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic demanded from the other side of the corridor hatch.

“You too, sir!” the sergeant insisted, his weapon now trained on the lieutenant commander.

“Please, Lieutenant Commander,” Vladimir begged. “They are only following the instructions of our security chief... in case there are Jung saboteurs aboard your vessel.”

“You’re kidding, right?” the lieutenant commander said.

“No, sir, I am not. There is a war going on, and the Aurora is the only armed ship left to defend the Earth. I’m afraid that makes such precautions necessary. So if you would please do as the man says for now, it would be greatly appreciated.”

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic turned around and got down on his knees. “Does your captain know about this?”

“Yes, he does,” Vladimir answered as the other two Corinari troops stepped through the airlock to help secure the room. The two soldiers continued forward through the other hatch and passed Lieutenant Commander Kovacic, checking the corridor as far down as the next intersection where they took up defensive positions.

“Is this really necessary?” the lieutenant commander asked.

“Immediate area is secure, sir,” the sergeant reported.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, gentlemen,” Vladimir said as he entered the room. “Please, get up.”

The other two crewmen slowly rose to their feet, turning to face Vladimir.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy," Vladimir said, reaching out to shake Kyle's hand. "I am the Aurora's chief engineer. I will need to speak to your Cheng. You are...?"

"Ensign Marcus Kyle," the second crewman answered as he shook Vladimir's hand.

"Kyle?" Vladimir said. "Nathan says hello."

"Then it's true?" the first crewman said from the other side of the room. "Nathan's alive?"

Vladimir turned to Tilly, moving over to shake his hand as well. "You must be Tilly."

"Ensign Jonathon Tillardi."

"Yes, it is true," Vladimir assured Tilly as he shook his hand. "Nathan instructed me to say hello to you as well. He said you are a good engineer. Are you the Cheng for this ship?"

"I guess," Tilly answered. "I'm as close as you're going to get, anyway."

"Who are these men?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked as he stepped into the room. "I recognize your accent, but not theirs. I don't recognize their weapons or their uniforms, either."

"Forgive me, Lieutenant Commander..."

"Kovacic. I'm in command of this ship."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Who are these people?"

"They are from the planet Corinair. They are our allies."

"Never heard of it. Is that where the Aurora has been all these months, digging up allies?"

"It is a very long and complex story, I'm afraid. One that I am sure Captain Scott will tell you very soon. For now, my orders are to transfer the data cores to the Aurora and to determine the condition of your ship."

“Well, Tilly can help you with the condition of the ship,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said, “but you may have a little trouble getting the spec-ops guarding the cores to give them up.”

“They may speak to our security chief directly if they wish,” Vladimir instructed. “She, too, is spec-ops, and I’m sure she has the proper authentication codes.” Vladimir stepped up to the lieutenant commander and shook his hand. “Now, would you please take us to the cores while the rest of my team comes aboard?”

\* \* \*

“You’re coming along nicely, Josh,” Doctor Chen said as she stepped up alongside Josh’s bed.

“Does that mean I can go back to work?”

“How have you been doing in the simulator?” she asked.

“It was a little strange at first, but only for the first day. I haven’t had any vertigo problems in there for more than a week now.”

“How much time have you been spending in there?”

Josh looked away for a moment. “Uh, I haven’t been keeping track. A lot, I suppose.”

Doctor Chen looked at her data pad. “Sixty-two hours this week, according to the logs.”

“Oh, you can see those, huh?”

“I’m the ship’s doctor. I see everything,” she told him with a smile. “You must be the only one using that thing.”

“I wish. I’d be in it twice as much if it weren’t for those relief teams they’re training.” Josh watched as the technician finished the infusion and removed the intravenous catheter from his arm. “The Falcon’s ready to fly, Doc. How about me?”

Doctor Chen studied her data pad for a moment, skimming through the young man's latest test results. "I don't see any medical reason to keep you from returning to your duties..."

"Yes!" Josh exclaimed under his breath.

"...On the condition that you start slowly and don't overdo it," she added.

"This is the Aurora, Doc. When do we ever do anything slowly?"

"Please, don't remind me."

Josh looked across the treatment room at the unfamiliar man sitting on the edge of the bed. He had been sitting there quietly, not talking with anyone and watching people come and go the entire hour Josh had been receiving his infusion. "Who is that guy?"

Doctor Chen turned slightly, looking over her shoulder. "His name is Tony. Lieutenant Commander Nash brought him and his friend back with her from Earth."

"Is he injured?"

"Cuts and scrapes mostly, but his friend is still in surgery. She was in pretty bad shape when they landed."

"A girl? What happened to them?"

"Something about an ambush when they were being picked up."

"He doesn't look good," Josh commented.

Doctor Chen looked at Josh, noticing the concern on his face. "Maybe you should speak with him," she suggested. "You still have to wait fifteen minutes for the nanites to disperse throughout your system before you are free to move around at will."

"I wouldn't know what to say to him," Josh said.

"Just introduce yourself; ask how he's doing. Talk about whatever he wants to talk about. Just distract him from

worrying about his friend. That alone would probably help.”

Josh looked at the doctor. “Didn’t know you were a counselor as well.”

“Part of the job,” she said. “I’ll check back with you in fifteen minutes.”

Josh waited for the technician to finish taping up his arm, then stood and walked across the room toward Tony. As he approached, Tony looked up at him, his eyes full of doubt and fear. Josh recognized that look. It was the same one that Kaylah had worn for the first few days after Josh had regained consciousness. “Hi, I’m Josh,” he said, extending his hand toward Tony.

“Tony,” the stranger answered, shaking his hand.

“You okay?” Josh asked, pointing at the bandage on Tony’s forearm.

“That’s nothing,” Tony answered. “Just a cut.” Tony looked at Josh’s arm. “What about you?”

“Me? I was all messed up: subdural something, broken bones, radiation burns. I was out for like a week or something.”

“Wow. You look like you’re doing pretty well, then. What were they giving you,” he asked, pointing at Josh’s bandaged IV site, “medicine or something?”

“Just another batch of nanites. I get a new batch every few days now.”

“Really? They gave some to my friend when we landed. What are they, exactly?”

“Nanites? I don’t really know for sure. They’re some kind of microscopic robots they inject in you. They use this scanner to program them to fix you up inside.”

“How many do they put inside you?”

Josh scratched his head. “Huh, I never really thought to ask. Millions, I think.”



"Do they hurt?" Tony wondered.

"If you have a lot of them all working in one spot, sort of. They feel like little needles poking you on the inside."

"That doesn't sound fun."

"You get used to it," Josh said, sitting down on the end of the bed. "It helps if you keep yourself busy doing something. Keeps your mind off them."

"They said something about the pain when they injected her with those things," Tony said. "They seemed worried about it."

"I think people from Earth feel the nanites more than others. For some reason, they don't bother the Corinairans. I suppose it's because they're the ones who made them."

"Corinairans?"

"People from Corinair?" Josh said. "Oh, yeah. You wouldn't know about them, would you?"

"What, is it a planet or something?" Tony wondered. "I heard there were old colonies of Earth nearby."

Josh laughed. "Corinair is not exactly nearby."

"Is that other doctor, the one with the funny accent... is she from Corinair?"

"Yeah. That would be Doctor Galloway. She's really good. Of course, all the Corinairan doctors are really good. From what I understand, they're more advanced than the doctors you have on Earth."

Tony looked at Josh. His eye squinted, and a confused look crossed his face. "So you're not from Earth, either?"

"Me, no. Never been there."

"But you're not from Corinair, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"No accent."

Josh nodded. "I was raised on Haven."

"Is that near Corinair?"

"A few months ago, I would have said no, but now that I've traveled all the way to Sol, Haven seems really close to Corinair."

"This is getting really confusing," Tony said. He looked around the room, hoping for someone that might offer some information about the condition of his friend.

"You're worried about your friend, aren't you?" Josh said.

"Of course I'm worried about her. No one has told me anything since I got here—except for you, that is."

"Listen, I know this probably sounds stupid, but I'm telling you, the doctors here do amazing stuff. They'll take care of her. And whatever they can't fix, the nanites can."

There was a long pause. Finally, Tony sighed. "I hope you're right."

Josh looked around, unsure of what to say next. He glanced at the time display on the wall. He still had five minutes to kill. "So, what's your friend's name?"

"Synda."

"She your girlfriend or something?"

"No, nothing like that. We used to spar together in the gym, back before the Jung invaded. Until a week ago, I hadn't seen her in months, not since the invasion."

Josh turned his head toward the hatchway. In the corridor outside, he could see Captain Scott talking with two strangers in EVA suits. Two medical technicians joined them and led the two strangers away, after which the captain stepped through the hatch and walked toward Josh.

"How are you doing, Mister Hayes?" the captain asked as he approached.

"Great, sir," Josh answered. "Never better."

"That's what I want to hear," Nathan answered. "Have you seen the doc?"

"She's somewhere around."

"I'll be back in a moment," Nathan said as he left to find Doctor Chen.

After Nathan left, Tony asked, "Who was that?"

"That's the Aurora's captain."

"Aren't captains usually older?" Tony wondered.

"I suppose. I haven't met many myself," Josh answered. "Captain Scott's pretty good, though."

"Scott? As in Nathan Scott, the president's son?"

"Yeah, but I thought he was a senator or something," Josh said.

"He was elected president of the North American Union just after the Aurora was reported lost. A lot of people say he won with the sympathy vote due to the loss of his son."

"I didn't even know there was such a thing."

"What?"

"Sympathy votes."

"You don't have them on your world?"

"We don't even have elections on my world."

Tony squinted, becoming curious. "Where exactly is your planet?"

"Haven's not a planet; it's a moon orbiting a gas giant. It's in a system just outside the Pentaurus cluster."

"I have never heard of the Pentaurus cluster. Where is it?"

"Using Earth's coordinate system, I couldn't rightly tell you. We had to convert everything over to the Takaran's galactic coordinate system in order to work with the new navigation systems they installed."

"Well, how far is it from Earth?" Tony wondered.

Josh laughed. "About a thousand light years."

"You traveled a thousand light years?" Tony asked in disbelief. "You must have amazing ships."

"We came in this ship," Josh said, "in the Aurora."

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Josh said, somewhat boastfully. “Her jump drive is amazing.”

“Jump drive?” Tony wondered, his eye widening.

“It allows us to instantly jump through light years of space... all in a single instant.”

Tony’s jaw was hanging open. “That’s unbelievable!”

“That’s what I thought at first,” Josh admitted.

“And it can jump a thousand light years?”

“Actually, no,” Josh corrected. “It took us seventy-five jumps to get here. What with recharge layovers and all, it took us a few weeks.”

“It’s still incredible.” Tony looked at Josh. “So what do you do around here?” Tony asked.

“I’m a pilot,” Josh bragged. “I used to fly this ship, but lately, most of my flying has been in the Falcon.”

“What’s that?”

“The Falcon? It’s an old deep space interceptor we fixed up. We use it mostly for recon missions.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“It can be,” Josh said, “but most of the time it’s just boring, short jumps.”

“The Falcon has a jump drive as well?”

“Yeah. It used to have linear FTL, but they yanked it to make room for the jump drive instead.”

“Does it have weapons?”

“Of course,” Josh bragged. “It has a missile bay and a nasty-ass plasma turret in the nose. Unfortunately, we don’t get to use them very often.”

“They don’t use it in combat?” Tony asked.

“Sometimes, but mostly we just jump in, cold-coast through a system, collect information, and hope no one spots us.”

"Is that how you got injured? Someone spotted you?"

"Something like that, yeah."

Nathan came back into the room, interrupting the conversation. "Are you ready to return to duty, Josh?" he asked as he approached.

"Hell yes... I mean, yes, sir," Josh exclaimed. "I've been practically living in the simulators..."

"Yeah, I know. I've seen your flight performance reports. They look pretty good."

"I'm not sure what the doc will say, though," Josh admitted.

"I've already spoken with Doctor Chen. Although she would prefer that you had another week or two, she gave you the green light."

A huge smile came across Josh's face. "Just say when, Captain."

"Report to flight prep. Loki's already there waiting for you."

"What's the mission, sir?"

"Lookout duty," Nathan said. "Not very exciting, I know, but we need eyes on Earth to let us know if the Jung send any ships out our way. Loki's got the mission parameters and flight plan."

"Sounds exciting enough for me, sir," Josh said. "Anything to get back in the cockpit again."

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

"Thank you, sir," Josh said as he rose. He looked at Tony. "Don't worry; your friend will be all right. You'll see."

Tony nodded his thanks at Josh as he departed. He looked at Nathan.

"No word yet on your friend?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir."

“Lieutenant Commander Nash will be up shortly to check on you. Meanwhile, I’ll see if I can’t get an update for you.” Nathan patted Tony on the shoulder as he turned to depart.

“Thank you, sir,” Tony said, watching the captain as he departed.

\* \* \*

Vladimir, his team of four technicians, and two Corinari security troops entered the compartment in the Celestia’s aft section where the data cores from the Ark had been stored for the last few months. Ensign Tillardi and Lieutenant Commander Kovacic followed closely behind. As they entered, two EDF marines stood, snapping to attention as the lieutenant commander entered the room.

Vladimir looked them over briefly. They were wearing combat pants and T-shirts, both of which were fairly worn out after months of constant use. They still wore their sidearms, and their automatic weapons were slung over their shoulders, but they had long ago abandoned their body armor and headgear. “As you were,” Vladimir ordered as he approached the carefully secured carts containing the data cores. “Are these the data cores?” he inquired, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, sir,” one of the marines answered smartly.

“Is it true, sir?” the other marine asked, breaking military protocol by speaking. “Are you guys from the Aurora?”

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic smiled. “It’s true. The Aurora is hovering less than one hundred meters off our port side. We’ve been ordered to move the data cores over to her as soon as possible.”

Vladimir moved closer to the carts carrying the cores. He looked at the third man standing by the carts. The man was

younger, on the slim side, and without the same mannerisms as the other men. He seemed somewhat nervous. "I am Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy," he told the young man. "I am the Aurora's chief engineer. And you are...?"

"Yanni Hiller."

"You are not EDF."

"No, sir. I work for the Ark Foundation."

"Why are you here?" Vladimir wondered.

"When we received orders to evacuate the cores, my supervisor ordered me to stay with them no matter what."

"All the way to Metis?"

"I'm not sure he knew where they were going when he told me to stay with them."

Vladimir looked at the marines. "Is this true?"

"Yes, sir," the first marine answered. "The only time he leaves them is to use the head. We were in the shuttle that picked them up from the Ark facility. They were under attack by the Jung when we arrived."

"And you've all been here guarding these cores since then?"

"Yes, sir," the first marine said. "Those were our orders as well."

Vladimir couldn't help but laugh. "I am impressed," he told them. "You may continue to remain with the cores if you wish. You'll be happy to know that the Aurora does have better accommodations."

"I'll be happy if they have clean uniforms," the second marine said.

"I'm sure they can find something for each of you," Vladimir promised. "These men will help you move the cores to our shuttle for transfer to the Aurora," Vladimir explained as he signaled his technicians to start moving the cores.

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Commander,” Yanni said. “The cores are very sensitive. They are one thousand years old, after all. They must be handled very carefully.”

“I assume that is why your supervisor sent you with them,” Vladimir said, “to see to their proper handling and storage.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you also know how to retrieve data from these cores?”

“Retrieve data?”

“Yes. We will need to copy everything on these cores into another storage system, something more current... more robust.”

Yanni was speechless. “Sir, that would take years, possibly decades, especially if the data must be uncompressed as it is copied. The amount of capacity needed would be enormous. That is why we have only been transferring what we need. Earth simply doesn’t have the computer capacity to copy everything from them.”

“I believe our allies have the capacity required,” Vladimir assured him.

Yanni looked confused. “Our allies?”

Vladimir looked at the marines. “Gentlemen?” The marines moved toward the carts to disconnect the cargo nets covering them and holding them securely to the deck.

“What allies?” Yanni asked again as they prepared to move the cores.

\* \* \*

Jessica and Major Waddell walked into the cargo bay that was being used as the Ghatazhak’s headquarters aboard the Aurora. The large bay had been emptied of all its contents



other than the shipping container that had once held the Ghatazhak and their gear.

“What the hell?” Jessica mumbled as they entered. All about her were young men of nearly identical size and proportion. The only way to distinguish one man from another was by their facial features, hair color, and eye color. They were spread out around the room. Some were partaking in organized calisthenics. Others were studying computer terminals. There were even several of them sitting in rows of chairs watching what appeared to be Takaran entertainment videos.

As she stood there looking, four men entered from behind her, greeting her politely and with perfect military decorum as they passed.

“Where the hell did they get all this stuff?” she wondered.

“The captain has supplied them with whatever he could spare in order to keep them separated from the crew for the time being.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jessica said, “considering how many Corinairans these guys slaughtered.” She looked at the major. “I’m surprised you’re so calm about it. They put some serious hurt on your company back on Takara.”

“These men did not do so,” Major Waddell corrected. “The men you speak of did not survive.”

“Good point. So you’re okay with this?”

“Honestly, I would prefer they were not here. However, I must admit that thus far they have proven to be most effective.”

“So you think it was a good idea for the captain to wake them?”

“I think it was his only option at the time.”

Jessica looked around more as they proceeded inward. "Why do they all look the same? I mean, they're all the same size even."

"To streamline supply and logistics. 'One size fits all' makes it much easier. If your battle armor is damaged, you can simply take what you need from the body of a dead comrade."

"Seems like a lot of effort just so everyone can have the same shoe size."

"Perhaps, but the Ghatazhak were usually deployed a good distance from Takara. Resupply is a major concern when your supply chain stretches over light years."

"May I help you, sir?" a Ghatazhak soldier asked.

"I'm looking for your CO," Jessica said, "Lieutenant Telles."

"Yes, sir," the Ghatazhak soldier answered. "I'll take you to him. If you'll follow me..."

Jessica looked at the major, her eyebrows raising for a moment as they proceeded. The Ghatazhak soldier led them across the room and to the far corner where several partitions had been secured to the deck to create an office cubicle. The Ghatazhak stood smartly at the entrance to the cubicle, announcing himself and their guests to the cubicle's occupant in Takaran. The soldier gestured for Jessica and the major to enter the cubicle, then stepped aside to depart.

Jessica and Major Waddell strode into the cubicle. Lieutenant Telles rose from his seat and stepped out from behind his makeshift desk.

"Lieutenant Telles," Major Waddell began, "I would like to introduce the Aurora's chief of security and intelligence, Lieutenant Commander Nash."

Lieutenant Telles stepped forward and came to attention, snapping a salute.

Jessica returned the salute. "Lieutenant."

"It is an honor, sir," the lieutenant said as he extended his hand.

"I was told you wished to see me."

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Why?"

"I wanted to meet the one who ended the life of our former leader, Caius of Ta'Akar."

Jessica tensed slightly. Her understanding of the Ghatazhak was that they were programmed to see Caius as a god. The soldier they had interrogated back in the Darvano system had been emphatic in his beliefs. This man, however, seemed far more calm and relaxed.

"Why?" Jessica asked. "You looking for revenge?"

Major Waddell looked at Jessica as if she had lost her mind.

Lieutenant Telles chuckled. "I can see how you might think as much," he admitted. "However, nothing could be further from the truth. Please, be seated," he added, pointing to the other chairs in the cubicle. "Caius was an egomaniac with delusions of grandeur. His plans made little sense, and his empire was built on false promises and shaky foundations."

"Then why did you guys follow him?"

"The Ghatazhak follow whomever they are programmed to follow," Lieutenant Telles said rather plainly. "Luckily, we were still awaiting our programming when you and your Karuzari friends brought down the House of Caius. Following such a man would have been... difficult."

"Difficult?" Jessica wondered. "Isn't that why they program you in the first place?"

Lieutenant Telles moved back behind his desk, taking his seat again. "I expected that your understanding of our

programming would be somewhat incomplete. While it is true that we are programmed to be loyal to our leaders, we are not programmed to follow the commands of our leaders with blind obedience.”

“Then what exactly is your programming for?” Jessica wondered.

“Our programming serves two purposes,” the lieutenant explained. “First, it ensures that we will never switch our loyalties to the side of those who oppose our leaders. Second, it enables us to perform certain acts that others might find... distasteful, to put it mildly.”

“So it removes your conscience?”

“Not exactly. It does, however, enable us to analyze our orders and their objectives in a manner that does not include our own personal feelings about the acts of aggression that we might be asked to commit.”

“Sort of an ‘ends justifies the means’ attitude then.”

“I suppose that is accurate.”

“And if you feel that the ends do not justify the means?” Major Waddell asked.

“That is not how the Ghatazhak analyze an action order. We are not concerned with moral ambiguities. Our concerns lie with outcomes and objectives. If the actions we are ordered to take will have the desired result, or will secure the objective our leaders seek, then we consider the order valid and actionable.”

“And if it does not?” Jessica asked.

“Then we advise our leaders of such and suggest that they consider other alternatives, which we are always more than happy to provide.”

“And what makes the Ghatazhak more qualified to make such decisions than their leaders?” Jessica asked.

Lieutenant Telles took in a long breath. "The Ghatazhak are more than just highly trained killers, Lieutenant Commander. We all possess higher than average intellects and are highly educated in all the major disciplines."

"Such as?"

"Physics and engineering, physical and biological sciences, socio-economic studies, history, religion, and of course, the art of war."

"And these disciplines help to make you better soldiers?"

"They help us to understand why things happen and what must be done to make other things happen. The one human constant seems to be that, when all else fails, goals are eventually accomplished through force. The amount of force deemed reasonable depends on the urgency of the need of those opting to use such force. This has been true since the dawn of humanity. The Ghatazhak were created in order to be more intelligent about the use of such force."

Jessica leaned forward, looking the lieutenant in the eyes. "I've seen otherwise, Lieutenant. One of your very own sat in the Aurora's brig and screamed at the top of his lungs that Caius was a god and would someday rule the galaxy."

"Interesting," the lieutenant responded calmly. "This Ghatazhak you speak of, he was Ybaran, was he not?"

"I believe so, yes."

"The Ybaran are animals. Their world is a harsh environment, requiring strength and determination to survive. The centuries have made them into overly aggressive creatures, unsuitable as true Ghatazhak."

"Then how do they become Ghatazhak?" Jessica asked.

"During the early days of the Karuzari uprising, Caius was forced to withdraw from several worlds. One of them was Ybara. Upon withdrawal, he bombarded the world and

blamed the attack on the Karuzari. The effect was massive enlistment by the Ybarans into the Ta'Akar Imperial forces. Caius attempted to create an even more aggressive legion of Ghatazhak in the hopes of quelling potential resistance with shows of frightening, unbridled aggression. However, the Ybarans, being very strong-willed, required deeper programming. In order to maintain control of the Ybaran legions, Caius programmed them to worship him as a god." Lieutenant Telles looked at Major Waddell. "I suspect that you faced such a legion at the battle of Answari, Major. It is quite amazing that you survived." Lieutenant Telles turned his head back to Jessica. "Needless to say, the Ybaran legions only served to drive more volunteers into the arms of the Karuzari, forcing the Empire to withdraw from more than two-thirds of their occupied worlds."

Jessica leaned back in her chair again. "Why are you telling me all of this, Lieutenant?"

"As I understand it, the captain turns to you for advice on actions that require the use of trained soldiers rather than that of ships of war."

"That is correct. To me and to Major Waddell as well."

"Understand that I mean no disrespect to either of you. Lieutenant Commander, your accomplishments in the field are impressive, even to a Ghatazhak. Major Waddell, you should also know that the Ghatazhak hold considerable respect for the Corinari. Your skill and dedication are renowned throughout the Pentaurus cluster and well beyond. However, neither of you is Ghatazhak."

"Your point being...?" Jessica asked, becoming somewhat annoyed.

"You cannot do what we can do."

"I suspect we'll do fine," Jessica said, turning in her chair in preparation to depart.

"You misunderstand my meaning," Lieutenant Telles insisted. "I did not mean to imply that you could not get the job done. I meant that we can get it done more efficiently and with far fewer allied casualties. Your forces are limited at this point. You do not have the manpower to take on the Jung forces required to hold an entire world, especially one as populous as Earth."

"No offense, Lieutenant, but there are only, what, one hundred of you?"

"Ninety-five at the moment," the lieutenant corrected. "Two of my men died at the battle of Tanna, and three others were wounded and will require several days of recuperation before they can return to active duty. Still, a single, properly equipped Ghatazhak can take on a hundred Jung soldiers—a thousand if they are trained to the same pitiful level of those who attempted to hold Tanna." Lieutenant Telles leaned forward, looking Jessica directly in the eyes to emphasize his own points. "Prince Casimir assigned my platoon to the Aurora because he knew that you would need us, that you would need our abilities and our expertise. We are stronger, faster, better trained, and more intelligent than anyone on this ship, possibly even more than anyone in this region of space."

"Definitely more arrogant," Jessica said.

"It is only arrogance if it is untrue," Lieutenant Telles said as he leaned back in his chair. "Casimir knows what we truly are and what we are capable of. That is why he chose not to reintegrate us back into Takaran society. The Ghatazhak are his insurance policy. The Ghatazhak are what will keep the old worlds of the Empire from seeking revenge against Takara. Prince Casimir believes your cause is just, which is why he chose to program that same belief into myself and

my men. Let us do what we do best. Let us fight for your cause.”

Jessica rose from her chair. “I’ll think about it,” she promised, “but I have to be honest with you; I have my doubts.”

“I can ask no more than fair consideration,” the lieutenant agreed as he, too, rose.

Jessica left the cubicle without further discourse, moving quickly across the converted cargo hold. Major Waddell followed her out into the corridor.

“His arguments were compelling,” the major said as they continued down the corridor.

“You believe all that crap he was spewing?” Jessica asked in disbelief.

“You might want to review their combat camera recordings before you make your decision.”

Jessica stopped in the middle of the corridor. “You have battle footage of these guys?”

“Every one of them wore a camera during their action. The images were streamed back to combat command the entire time. It was frighteningly impressive.”

Jessica knew that the major had seen plenty of action. Despite their differences, she respected his knowledge and experience. “They were that good?” she wondered.

Major Waddell looked at the floor for a moment, then looked up at Jessica again as he spoke. “It was as if they were simply doing the math. Locating targets, assessing threats, prioritizing objectives, and finally, calculating their shots just before executing. Despite the fact that they were carrying energy weapons, from what I could tell, every kill was accomplished with a single shot. I have never seen anything like it.”



“So you believe what he was saying about the Ybaran legions?”

“The Ghatazhak that I saw on those combat recordings are not the same Ghatazhak that I fought at Answari. These men were cold, calculating, and without aggression.” Major Waddell sighed. “They were simply doing their jobs in the most efficient manner possible. That is the best way that I can describe it.”

Jessica sighed as well. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should take a look at those recordings.”

“You might want to do so on an empty stomach,” he suggested as they continued down the corridor.

“Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me all of this before?” Jessica wondered.

“It’s been a rather busy few hours.”

\* \* \*

“So everything she said was true?” Luis asked.

“Pretty much,” Nathan said as he sat in one of the chairs in the exam room.

“And the Aurora can jump fifteen light years in the blink of an eye?”

“Actually, she can jump at least sixteen light years at a time,” Nathan corrected, “but I prefer to leave enough energy for a quick escape jump in case we jump into trouble.”

“Considering what’s happened to you so far, that’s probably a good idea,” Devyn said.

“I still can’t believe that you’re the captain of this ship,” Luis admitted.

“Thanks.”

“Nothing personal. You know I love you like a brother, Nathan. It’s just, you were always such a screwup at the academy.”

“I’m not surprised,” Devyn disagreed. “I always knew you had it in you.”

“Well, at least one of my friends has faith in me.” Nathan looked at Luis. “I can’t believe they let you fly the ship. You sucked in the simulator. Hell, remember when I took you up in my grandfather’s biplane to help you get the feel of flying? You just about crashed us into the control tower.”

“Hey, I landed a starship on a moon, buddy—very gently, I might add.”

“Then why did all the air leak out of your command deck?” Nathan challenged.

“We don’t know that my landing caused that leak,” Luis defended.

Doctor Chen entered the room, ending the discussion. “It looks like you’re both in pretty good shape considering what you’ve been through. A little malnourished, and some of your blood work is a little off, but it’s nothing that a few weeks of vitamin supplement packs and some good food won’t cure.”

“Then they’re cleared?” Nathan asked.

“Yes, sir. They’re fine.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Just don’t assign them anything too strenuous for a few days,” the doctor warned.

“I’d say a vacation is in order,” Luis suggested.

“If only,” Nathan said.

“So what happens now?” Devyn asked as Doctor Chen departed.

“We’re moving the data cores over to the Aurora as we speak. I’ve also got my Cheng and some of his technicians

checking out the Celestia to see if we should try to save her or just strip what we can from her and scuttle the rest.”

“You’re going to scuttle our ship?” Luis protested. “I know she doesn’t have any weapons to speak of, but she can fly. She just needs more propellant.”

“We’re in the middle of Jung-controlled space,” Nathan explained, “and the Aurora is the last warship the Earth has, at least until I can send for help from our allies back in the Pentaurus cluster.”

“A thousand light years away?” Luis exclaimed. “Won’t that take a while?”

“We have a jump shuttle that can make it there in a few days assuming nothing goes wrong along the way. I just don’t know how long it will take for them to send help. I don’t even know that they can at the moment. Things were not exactly stable there when we left. Prince Casimir may still have his hands full just keeping the peace until the dust settles from the fall of the empire.”

“So there’s no way we can save the Celestia?” Luis wondered.

“I didn’t say we couldn’t save her,” Nathan said. “I said we need to determine what we are capable of doing. Regardless, we have to be prepared to blow the Celestia if the Jung are about to take her.”

“Well, she’s already rigged to blow,” Devyn said. “Tilly and the spec-ops boys rigged charges on the antimatter containment bottles. One press of the button and the whole moon goes... maybe the whole planet.”

“Meanwhile, I’m posting lookouts to keep an eye out for the Jung. Once we get the data cores on board, if the Jung do come, we’ll blow the Celestia and jump out of here. With any luck, we can take a couple of Jung ships out in the blast.

At least then the Celestia would die with a few kills on her record."

"Should probably have Tilly rig a remote detonator," Luis suggested.

"I already instructed my Cheng to see to it. His first priority is evacuating the data cores, then the remote detonator. After that, he starts a quick inspection of the ship."

"Well, if he goes any farther forward than the main aft bulkhead, he's going to need a pressure suit," Devyn warned.

"He knows. While we're waiting, we might as well start your recovery with something good to eat."

"Good idea," Luis agreed. "Take us to your mess hall. I haven't had a hot meal in months."

"Mess hall? Don't be silly," Nathan said with a smile. "I'm taking you to my private mess."

\* \* \*

Jessica entered the medical treatment room and approached Tony sitting on the side of his bed. "How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess."

"How's Synda?"

"I don't know. No one tells me anything."

"That's a military hospital for you," Jessica said, looking around the room for any medical staff. "I'll find out what's going on." She stepped out into the middle of the room. "Hey! Someone! A little help here!"

A moment later, a Corinairan medical technician came hurriedly into the room to see what was going on.

"You work here?" Jessica asked with indignation.

"Uh, yes, sir," the man responded. "How can I help you?"

"You can help me by finding out the status of this man's friend... the young woman who has been in surgery for the last few hours."

"I don't know anything about..."

"Then find out, and pronto!" Jessica demanded. "That's an order, mister!"

"Yes, sir," the technician responded, quickly exiting the room.

Jessica turned back around to face Tony. "Sometimes you just have to get a little angry to get what you need."

"Seems wrong to leave someone sitting here wondering for so long."

"Yeah, well, this isn't a civilian facility. They aren't used to dealing with concerned family members or close friends. Here, everyone goes back to work, and they hear about the patient's status later through the proper channels."

"Makes sense, I guess. It doesn't exactly inspire confidence though."

"Well, I promise you, you aren't going to find better medical care anywhere... certainly not on Earth."

"Yeah, it's practically nonexistent on Earth these days. Unless you're dying, you have to wait weeks to be seen."

"Well, the nanites they use can fix just about anything in a third of the time it would take our bodies to heal naturally."

"They were worried about giving her nanites when we first arrived. That guy, Josh, said the nanites can cause pain to people that aren't from Corinair." Tony looked at her. "Is that true?"

"My understanding is that there is some debate about that," Jessica said as she leaned against the edge of the bed next to him. "I know that Commander Taylor, who is from

Earth, went through a lot of discomfort during her nanite therapy. She was more busted up though. It could've just been her in particular. I don't know, really. Others on our crew from Earth have been treated using the nanites, but I don't know the specifics."

Doctor Chen came into the room carrying her data pad. "I'm sorry you've had to wait so long for word," she told Tony. "I spoke with Doctor Galloway who is performing the surgery. They will be done within the hour. Synda is still in critical condition. However, she is expected to survive."

"Are the nanites going to cause her pain?" Tony asked.

"It is possible, but we can manage any discomfort she experiences due to the nanites. If the pain is too severe, we can even keep her in a comatose state during the nanite therapy. I don't believe that will be necessary in her case however."

"Will I be able to stay with her?"

"Not for the first few hours during her recovery," Doctor Chen explained. "However, after that, you can spend as much time as you like with her."

"Thanks, Doc," Jessica said. Tony nodded his appreciation as well. Jessica turned back to Tony. "Well, I haven't eaten since before we left Earth. What about you? Are you hungry?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should wait here."

"Nonsense," Jessica insisted. "You heard the doc. You won't be able to see her for a few hours. Might as well get some grub while you wait. Besides, I'm buying."

Tony sighed as he rose from the bed. He looked around the room again as he slowly followed Jessica out of the treatment center. "I have to admit that this is all a bit overwhelming," he said as they entered the corridor. "I've never even flown in a plane before, let alone in a spaceship

—not to mention a spaceship that was supposed to be lost months ago.”

“Yeah, I can see how it would be,” Jessica agreed. “But you do have to admit that it is pretty cool.”

\* \* \*

Josh and Loki stepped through the forward hatch on the starboard side of the Aurora’s main hangar bay and headed across the deck. It was the first time Josh had donned a full flight suit since their escape from Tanna in the 72 Herculis system more than a month earlier. He tried not to smile but was clearly losing the battle. As they passed the edge of the starboard forward transfer airlock and caught their first sight of the newly repaired Falcon, his smile turned into a grin.

“Whoa,” Josh exclaimed.

Loki smiled as well. Although it was to be the Falcon’s first flight since she had been repaired, he had already seen the refurbished, old interceptor.

“The new paint job looks great,” Josh said as he ran his hand along the underside of the Falcon’s nose. He could feel the ship’s fusion reactors humming from inside as he admired the ship’s jet-black finish. “She’s already fired up?”

“Marcus put together our own dedicated ground crew,” Loki explained. “We now have our own crew chief, weapons tech, engineer, and systems specialists.”

“No jump drive specialist?”

“We still have to share one with the jump shuttle,” Loki said. “There *are* only three jump-capable spacecraft on board. They spun up her reactors and did the preflight while we were suiting up.”

Josh tapped Loki on the chest with the back of his hand as he passed by. “Pretty cool, having our own flight crew,

huh?"

"I guess the captain figured that with as many flights as the Falcon will be flying, she needed a full time crew to keep her space worthy at all times."

"Is this the same dissipative stuff as before?" Josh asked, noticing the tiny reflections of light in the Falcon's paint.

"It's supposed to be better," Loki explained. "The Takarans provided the same formula they use to coat the Ghatazhak armor. It will reduce the energy transfer from an energy weapon blast by up to seventy percent. We should be able to take several direct hits in the same location before experiencing hull damage."

Josh squatted down to look underneath the Falcon. "That's definitely new," he said, pointing at a shallow dome nearly a meter in diameter that protruded from the bottom of the ship amidst its main gear.

"They added better sensors as well," Loki explained. "We've got better image resolution on visible light and better signal collection. We also have improved thermal imaging systems."

Josh stood up and backed away from the ship as he walked around the backside to complete his inspection. "What is that?" he asked as he spotted entirely new thrust ports on the Falcon's main propulsion system.

"That's the best part," Loki explained. "They built new covers around the thrust ports to hide direct view of our main propulsion thrust ports. We only have to be a few degrees off the enemy target's sight line, and they won't see our thrust."

"What about our thermal signature?"

"It will still be there, but it will be significantly reduced."

"But those thrust ports used to gimbal," Josh said, somewhat concerned. "If we lose that, we lose a lot of



maneuverability.”

“We didn’t lose it,” Loki told him. “The entire cover separates and retracts up the top and bottom sides, allowing full gimbal of the thrust ports.”

“So we only close them up to hide our departure burns, then?”

“Yes. The idea is that, once we’ve completed a recon, we can accelerate without detection in order to get to a safe jump point more quickly.”

“Hey, anything that shortens our cold-coast time is fine by me,” Josh declared. “Any other surprises I should know about?”

“A few,” Loki said. “The nose turret’s destructive power has been increased thirty percent. The weapons bays have been widened, allowing two additional attachment points in each bay. And the laser comm-array now can auto-track on a fixed coordinate, allowing us to maneuver without having to refocus the array to maintain laser-based communications.”

“Sweet,” Josh said as he headed toward the boarding ladder on the Falcon’s port side. “Let’s mount up.”

Loki followed Josh up the boarding ladder, climbing into the backseat of the Falcon’s cockpit.

Josh snuggled down into his seat at the front of the cockpit, looking over the familiar console of the old Takaran deep-space interceptor. The old ship was his baby. It had been Tug’s ship for many decades. The old man had flown it on missions as the leader of the Karuzari. He had taught Josh to fly it back on Corinair. It was a fast ship, able to accelerate up to ninety percent the speed of light in relatively short order. Since the Corinairans had installed a miniature version of the Aurora’s jump drive in her, she had

become a potent reconnaissance and quick strike platform. This was where he belonged.

He listened to Loki calling off the engine start checklist as if he were listening to his favorite song, answering back to each call out as if he were singing along with the tune.

With their checklist complete, Loki fired up the Falcon's flight systems as the canopy closed and locked into place. Josh gave a thumbs-up sign to the crew chief standing in front of them, and the elevator beneath them began to rise, lifting them quickly up into the long shaft that led all the way up through the top of the Aurora's outer hull. The journey upward took nearly a minute with the dull shaft lights casting odd shadows into the Falcon's cockpit as they traveled upward. Finally, they came to a stop in the transfer airlock just below the outer doors. The inner airlock doors slid closed beneath them, and they waited another minute as the air was sucked out of the airlock. Finally, the outer doors opened, allowing them a view of the massive gas giant hovering over them.

"Holy crap!" Josh exclaimed, his pulse quickening. "I didn't realize we were that close to Jupiter."

The elevator began to move again, lifting them the rest of the way up and coming to rest less than a meter below the Aurora's outer hull surface.

*"Flight, Falcon. In position and ready for launch,"* Loki announced over the comms.

*"Falcon, Flight. Clear for launch,"* the flight controller answered. *"Welcome back, gentlemen."*

*"Flight, Falcon copies clear for launch. Thanks."*

Josh looked down at his console, then quickly around the outside of his ship. "Here we go," he announced as he fired his thrusters. The Falcon lifted smartly off the pad, translating directly upward and away from the Aurora. As

they ascended, Josh rolled his ship to starboard thirty degrees.

“What are you doing?” Loki asked.

“Just wanted to get a look at the Celestia,” Josh explained. “It’s not every day you see a ship that size sitting on the surface of a moon. Who knows if we’ll get another chance?”

Loki was already looking out the side of the canopy. “Weird, isn’t it? She looks just like the Aurora.”

“Finish her up, slap a new coat of paint on her, give her some guns, and we’d have a fleet!”

\* \* \*

“What about your fusion generators?” Vladimir asked Ensign Tillardi as they continued down one of the Celestia’s lateral corridors toward her starboard side.

“We don’t have any,” Tilly admitted.

“They installed antimatter reactors without fusion backups?” Vladimir exclaimed. “Are they crazy?”

“One of the build techs told me that all kinds of things in the build order got rearranged to get the ship ready to fly in a hurry. I guess once you guys disappeared, they got nervous.”

“If they were so nervous, why didn’t they install any guns?” Vladimir asked. “They could have at least dropped in the quads. Your transit tunnels are already in place, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

Vladimir stopped at the entrance to the starboard FTL generator room and pressed the button on the control panel to open the door. Nothing happened.

“It’s locked, sir.”

Vladimir looked at the ensign. "Why?"

"There were some guys from special projects working in there when the attack came."

"What were they working on?" Vladimir asked.

"Something to do with improving the efficiency of the FTL fields," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. "They don't talk much about it. Their spec-ops babysitters are always watching them."

"They're still on board?"

"Yes, sir," Tilly answered. "They're probably in there right now. They only come out to eat, sleep, and use the head."

"Open it," Vladimir ordered.

"Lieutenant Commander, that area has been deemed off limits by special projects," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic explained. "It's classified as top secret."

"You're the CO of this ship, aren't you?" Vladimir said. "Don't you think you should know what is happening on your own ship?"

"I tried," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic defended, "but those spec-ops boys won't listen. They claim to be under orders from Admiral Galiardi himself, and I believe them."

Vladimir looked at the lieutenant commander in disbelief.

"The admiral called me and gave me my orders personally. I was just running a supply team to transfer provisions onto this ship when the attack came."

Vladimir activated the intercom built into the control panel on the bulkhead next to the door. "Attention. This is Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy of the UES Aurora. I order you to open the doors immediately."

*"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot comply with your orders,"* a voice answered over the intercom.

"Identify yourself," Vladimir ordered.

*"Barrows, Clifford T, Ensign, SO-4,"* the voice answered.

"You do realize that I outrank you, Ensign."

*"Yes, sir, I do. But this area is classified. I am under orders directly from EDF command. No one enters either field generator room without express permission from EDF command authority."*

Vladimir turned to Ensign Tillardi. "Open it."

"What?"

"You do know how to override an internally locked door control, don't you?"

"Uh, yes, sir, I do." Tilly glanced at his CO. "I just didn't think I was supposed to admit it—at least, not to a command officer."

"We're not your typical command officers," Vladimir said, pointing at the control panel. He looked at the two Corinari guards that had accompanied them. They got the message and moved into position on either side of Vladimir, weapons raised and ready.

Ensign Tillardi glanced nervously back at the armed guards, as well as his CO, as he removed the control panel faceplate and bypassed the door control lock.

The big doors to the field generator room split down the middle and slid open to either side. The two spec-ops soldiers on the inside quickly raised their weapons.

"Drop them!" the Corinari sergeant demanded as his body tensed and his finger slid from his trigger guard to the trigger itself. He took aim on the spec-ops soldier to the left while his partner took aim on the one to the right.

Vladimir stood in the middle of the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back as he calmly looked at the two special operations troops nervously holding their weapons at the ready. Both men wore scraggly beards and tattered uniforms, much like the rest of the Celestia's haggard crew.

"Well, apparently we have a problem."

"This area is classified, sir!" one of the spec-ops soldiers instructed.

"Yes, you already told me as much," Vladimir responded. He slowly moved his hand up to his comm-set, tapping it to place a call. "Aurora Actual, Cheng."

"What are you doing, sir?" the spec-ops soldier asked, his weapon pointed directly at Vladimir's face.

"You said you needed EDF command authority to allow me to enter, did you not?"

"*Cheng, go for Aurora Actual,*" Nathan's voice answered in Vladimir's comm-set.

"Captain, I have a pair of nervous, unshaven, special operations types pointing weapons at me."

"*Why?*"

"Apparently both of the Celestia's FTL field generator bays are off-limits. I am told that special projects was conducting some sort of experiment." Vladimir looked beyond the two spec-ops soldiers at the massive generators in the room. Several technicians in similarly deteriorated clothing looked on from either side of the equipment. "Bozhe moi," Vladimir exclaimed as he suddenly realized what he was looking at in the distance.

"*What is it?*" Nathan asked, recognizing the Russian phrase.

"Captain, I think the Celestia has a jump drive."

## CHAPTER TWO

"She can fly," Vladimir said, leaning forward on the conference table, "but she barely has enough propellant on board to lift off, let alone to change orbit or reach escape velocity to leave the Jovian system."

"Assume for a moment that propellant is not an issue," Nathan said. "How much work would be required to get her to minimum operational status?"

"It depends on what you mean by minimum," Vladimir answered. "To navigate space, we only need to fix the leak and repressurize the command deck so she can at least support a flight crew. We should also connect the fore and aft sections with a pressurized passageway so we do not have to use EVA suits within the ship."

"How long will that take?"

"A few days if we're lucky."

"What about the flight deck?" Major Prechitt asked. "If we could get it working, we could park some fighters there to help protect her."

"The main hangar bay is open to space," Vladimir explained. "None of the spacecraft transfer airlocks have been installed at the aft end of the bay. However, all of the internal transfer airlocks and elevators are installed and reported to be functional. So it is possible to use the fighter alleys and the cargo deck as the pressurized hangar decks."

"Basically run all flight ops in combat mode, then," Nathan said.

“Almost. The launch tubes are not completed. More specifically, there are no launch airlocks or acceleration rails yet installed.”

“As long as we have working airlocks within the flight deck and we have pressurized areas to process spacecraft, we can conduct flight operations,” Major Prechitt pointed out. “It may not be as efficient, but it will work.”

“It’s better than using a breach box to come and go,” Vladimir agreed.

“Captain, these are all short-term solutions,” Cameron said. “I’m wondering if they are even worth the effort.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked.

“I think we should first be asking ourselves if the Celestia can be turned into an effective combat system. If the answer is yes, then these short-term solutions are a start. However, if the answer is no...”

“She’s right,” Nathan agreed. He looked at Vladimir. “We need to know if the Celestia can be made ready to fight and, if so, how long it would take.”

“Captain, I’ve barely even scratched the surface with my inspections,” Vladimir warned.

“I understand that. Unfortunately, I need to make a decision sooner rather than later.”

“In the OAP, with our fabricators, she could be completed within five to six months. That’s assuming we have unrestricted access to materials and skilled personnel.”

“*And* that the Jung leave us alone,” Jessica added.

“Da,” Vladimir agreed, pointing at Jessica.

Nathan cringed slightly, not liking the direction Vladimir was going.

“On Metis, or even floating freely in space, it could take a year or more.”

“But it can be done?” Nathan asked.



"Yes, sir, it can," Vladimir answered.

"Captain, we have to assume it's only a matter of time before Admiral Galiardi gives up the Celestia's location," Jessica insisted. "When he does, the Jung will probably come in force."

"We might be better off stripping what we can from the Celestia and clearing out of here," Cameron suggested.

"Any chance we can get propellant to her and get her moved?" Nathan wondered.

"Moved to where?" Jessica asked.

"Anywhere other than where the Admiral knows her to be," Nathan said. "Another Jovian moon, an asteroid, one of Saturn's moons... anyplace other than Metis. Even putting her on another cold-coast out into space would be better."

"We can move propellant to her," Vladimir said. "We have several hundred meters of propellant transfer hose. Rigging up a system to transfer some of our propellant to the Celestia is easy, but it will take time to pump enough propellant over to be of value."

"How much time?" Nathan asked.

"At least a couple days. However, during that time, we can be making the other repairs necessary to make her more space-worthy."

"Then we should get started," Nathan insisted. "No matter where we move her, she's going to need at least some propellant."

"There is a better way to secure the Celestia," Vladimir said. "We could get her jump drive working."

"Is that even possible?" Nathan asked, not wanting to get his hopes up. He looked at Abby sitting at the far end of the table next to Lieutenant Commander Kovacic.

"I have spoken with the technicians that were part of the Celestia's jump drive installation team. The Celestia's jump

drive is similar to the Aurora's. However, there are some variations in its design."

"Then it's not based on your team's research?" Nathan wondered.

"Only in the sense that it was derived from the same research data that was found in the data ark. I suspect that Admiral Yamori was running two simultaneous yet isolated teams in the hopes that at least one of them would develop a viable prototype."

"How different are the two drives?" Vladimir asked.

"They work in the same manner using very similar equipment. It appears that the Celestia's drive may be designed to have a greater jump range per charge. My initial inspection shows a greater energy storage capacity than was originally designed into our system. My father was always conservative in his range goals, choosing to concentrate on successful execution before worrying about increasing performance."

"Is it possible to get it to work?"

"Anything is possible, Captain," Abby said. "The jump field generators appear to be fully installed, and the power distribution grid and control array are also in place, as they were built into the Celestia's hull rather than being added on after the fact, as was the case with the Aurora. All that remains is to fabricate and install the emitters."

"Any chance we could use our existing emitters?" Vladimir asked. "We could pull the emitters from our secondary array and use them. That way our fabricators would be free to create the parts we need to perform the most immediate repairs on the Celestia."

"I'm not crazy about the idea of stripping our secondary array," Cameron argued.

"Neither am I," Nathan admitted.

"It would be better to fabricate new emitters," Abby assured them, "as there may be some subtle design differences that would necessitate lengthy testing and calibration. If you want to get the Celestia ready to jump away as quickly as possible, I would not use our emitters."

"How long would that take?"

"To fabricate and install the emitters on the Celestia, maybe a week if we are lucky," Vladimir said.

"That would be assuming that the Celestia's prototype actually works," Abby said. "It has yet to be tested."

"If it's basically the same as ours, why wouldn't it?" Nathan wondered.

"The jump drive is a very complex system, Captain," Abby reminded him. "It took more than a decade of effort on the part of more than a hundred scientists and technicians to develop the Aurora's jump drive."

"Yes, of course," Nathan said. "What I meant was, is there any reason to *doubt* that it will work at this time?"

"Based on what I have learned thus far, I expect that it *will* work, Captain."

"That's good to hear," Nathan said. He leaned back in his chair, taking a deep breath as he considered his options. "I don't think I need to point out to anyone here the advantages of having two jump-capable warships at our disposal. To that end, I'd like to try to save the Celestia." Nathan turned to Vladimir. "Vlad, start the propellant transfer as soon as possible. I want to be able to get her off Metis and on an escape trajectory as soon as possible. We should be able to time her burn to reduce her chance of detection by the Jung. Once she's clear of the Jovian system, we should have enough time to get her emitters installed and jump her out of the Sol system."

"Yes, sir. I will start the most immediate repairs as well," Vladimir said.

"That's fine as long as they don't interfere with the propellant transfer. That comes first, as we don't know how long we'll be able to sit here. If the Jung come our way, we'll have to go into action. So make sure whatever you rig up to transfer the propellant can be quickly disconnected from the Aurora."

"Sir," Cameron began to protest before being cut off.

"I would also like you to rig a remote detonator for the charges on the Celestia's antimatter containment bottles. I want to be able to blow that ship remotely if necessary."

"Yes, sir," Vladimir answered.

"I want two remote detonators as well, just to be sure," Nathan added. He turned toward Cameron. "Commander, start working up a crew roster for the Celestia. Minimal staffing, just what we need to meet immediate needs. You'll also have to work out a way to logistically support her operations using our resources."

"Yes, sir."

"Major Prechitt, assign some of your people to get to work on the Celestia's flight deck. I want to be able to run shuttles in and out of her as soon as possible."

"What about fighters?" the major asked.

"We'll park fighters nearby on the surface of Metis for now and rotate them periodically. Better to operate them from the Aurora for the time being. My main concern is efficient movement of resources and personnel to and from the Celestia. More importantly, I need to be able to quickly evacuate whatever personnel are on board the Celestia if the need to scuttle her arises."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan looked back to Cameron. "Make sure we don't have more people on board the Celestia than she has shuttles to evacuate them with."

"Two shuttles should do it," Cameron said. "We can pack at least twenty people per shuttle, more if the trip is short."

"Sir, may I suggest that you send Senior Chief Taggart to the Celestia?" Master Chief Montrose said in his usual Corinairan brogue. "The man is quite inventive. If anyone can get a flight deck assembled and working without all the proper resources, it would be the senior chief."

"Good idea," Nathan agreed. "Abby, get the specifications for the Celestia's emitters. I'd like us to start fabricating them as soon as possible. We may have to run a series of hit-and-run attacks to keep the Jung busy and away from the Celestia, so the sooner those emitters are fabricated and transferred to the Celestia, the better off we all are."

"Of course."

"Captain," Lieutenant Montgomery said, "it may be possible to install the plasma cannon turret on the Celestia."

"Really?" Nathan said.

"It has yet to be installed in the Aurora, as we were waiting until the additional power conduits were in place. As we already have a mounting system ready, it would be relatively easy to mount the weapon on the Celestia. All we need is power for the weapon and a control through which to operate it."

"That would give the Celestia some teeth," Cameron agreed.

"Fangs is more like it," Nathan said. "Excellent idea, Lieutenant. See to it."

"Yes, sir."

“Let’s get to it, people,” Nathan said. “Dismissed.” Nathan remained seated as the others in attendance began to rise. “Lieutenant Commander Kovacic and Commander Taylor, if you would both remain a moment...”

Cameron remained in her seat next to Nathan, having already anticipated his request. The lieutenant commander, however, appeared surprised as he sat back down.

Nathan waited until the room had cleared before speaking. “Lieutenant Commander, I wanted to speak to you in private about the chain of command in these unusual circumstances. I realize that you have considerably more time in service, and that technically, under the circumstances, you should outrank all of us. After all, our promotions were all done in the field out of necessity. Most of these were done by me after I was officially ordered to assume command by our original commanding officer, Captain Roberts. However, Commander Taylor has reminded me that, technically, she and I are line officers and, therefore, would be next in line to assume command.”

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic suddenly relaxed a bit and appeared somewhat relieved. “I thought for a moment there you were going to try to pass this mess over to me.”

Nathan smiled. “Would that I could,” he said with a laugh. “Actually, I was concerned that you might take exception to my plans to give command of the *Celestia* to Commander Taylor.”

A surprised look came over Cameron’s face. She turned to look at Nathan but said nothing.

“Captain, I assure you, I have no desire to be in command of anything. I’m a supply officer, and I know how to do my job. Commanding a warship is definitely *not* my area of expertise. The only reason I took command in the

first place was because I was given direct orders to do so by Admiral Galiardi."

"That's good to know, Lieutenant Commander," Nathan said, "and I do appreciate your cooperation. In fact, I was hoping you might act as the commander's executive officer for the time being. Logistics will be the key to getting the Celestia up and running again, and that *is* your area of expertise."

"It would be my pleasure, Captain."

\* \* \*

"Captain," Sergeant Weatherly called from the hatch to the captain's ready room, "Mister Hiller is here."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Send him in," Nathan answered. He rose from his desk and came around to greet Yanni as the wide-eyed, nervous, young man entered the compartment.

"I was told to report to the captain," Yanni stated.

"Mister Hiller, I'm Captain Scott," Nathan greeted, extending his hand.

"You're the captain?" Yanni said, a look of surprise on his face. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be disrespectful. I just thought you'd be much older."

"That's quite all right, Mister Hiller. I get that all the time. The fact is, I'm probably not much older than you," Nathan said as he gestured toward one of the chairs. "Please be seated."

Yanni sat down as Nathan moved back around his desk. "Are all captains in the EDF as young as you?"

Nathan considered his question for a moment. "Currently... yes," he commented as he took his seat. "I was

promoted rather quickly due to combat-related deaths. I've only been in command for about five months."

"That's about when this ship was supposed to have been lost."

"Yes, much of our crew and all of our command staff were killed at the beginning of our voyage. I was forced to take command."

"What happened to you?" Yanni wondered. "Where have you been all this time?"

"That's a long story," Nathan said. "We don't have the time to go into it in detail. Suffice it to say that it was quite an adventure, and it has opened our eyes to a lot that we did not know."

"Like what?"

"Mainly, that there are colonies of Earth much farther out into space than we had originally believed."

"What, like outside the core?" Yanni asked.

"Indeed."

"So you're saying that the fringe extends farther out than the fifty to sixty light years indicated by the records in the Ark."

Nathan was a bit surprised himself. Not many on Earth knew of the distance that the fringe extended. "I'm surprised that you are aware of the original distance estimates."

"I work at the Ark complex, remember? We have a lot of time on our hands most shifts. As shift leader for one of the data storage maintenance teams, I was required to do data integrity tests quite often. I occasionally found myself reading more than was required by the integrity checks."

"I can imagine."

"How much farther out does the fringe extend, Captain?"



Nathan sighed. "So far out that you can't really consider it part of the fringe."

"Like a few hundred light years?" Yanni wondered. His eyes were wide with anticipation, like a child being told a fascinating story.

"More like a thousand."

"You traveled a thousand light years?" Yanni said in disbelief. "That's impossible! That would take a hundred years, maybe more!"

"Using conventional linear FTL propulsion methods, yes."

"Then how is it possible?"

"Technically, this is all still classified," Nathan began. "However, since you're going to find out very soon anyway, I thought it best to explain it to you. You see, the Aurora is equipped with a system we call a jump drive. It allows us to jump up to fifteen light years at once in a fraction of a second."

"What? That's unbelievable!"

"That's the way I felt at first. Everything I had ever been taught said it was not possible, but it is."

"But you said a thousand light years. That would be... about sixty-six jumps? How long would that take? Sixty-six seconds?"

"I wish. We have to recharge for several hours between jumps. It took us several weeks to get back to Earth."

"I'm confused, Captain. Why would you go that far out to begin with? Did you already know someone was out there?"

"Actually, our initial jump was an accident. An antimatter explosion on board a nearby Jung warship occurred at the moment that we tried to jump clear. The additional energy caused us to jump to a point just over a thousand light years from Sol."

“You jumped a thousand light years in the blink of an eye?”

Nathan could hear the doubt in Yanni’s voice. “I know it’s hard to believe, but that’s not the half of it. What happened while we were stranded out there is even more difficult to believe.”

“Why? What happened?” Yanni’s doubt was again replaced by curiosity.

“That’s what we don’t have time to discuss.”

“I have all the time in the world,” Yanni insisted.

“Actually, you don’t,” Nathan said. “That’s why I wanted to speak with you. This area of space that we traveled to is called the Pentaurus cluster. Through a series of events, we ended up making some very advanced and powerful allies in that area. They are not aware of what has happened to Earth. I’m hoping that, once I get a message to them, they will be able to send help.”

“You’re going to send a message across a thousand light years of space?” Yanni laughed. “This is fantastic. How is that possible?”

“One of the Takaran scientists has fitted one of our shuttles with a miniature version of our jump drive. However, it has one major difference. It can only jump two light years at a time, but it can jump repeatedly without recharging. We believe that it can make the journey back to the Pentaurus cluster in only a few days.”

“That is truly amazing. It sounds dangerous, though.”

“It definitely has its risks; I’m not going to lie to you.”

A look of concern came over Yanni’s face. “What does this all have to do with me?”

“I’m told the data cores are very sensitive.”

“Of course they are,” Yanni said. “They’re over a thousand years old.”

"Is that why your supervisor instructed you to stay with them?"

"He wanted me to be sure that they were handled correctly and that no damage would come to them."

"Your supervisor was a wise man. Unfortunately, I plan on sending the data cores back to the Pentaurus cluster for safe keeping... and I was hoping you would agree to go with them."

Yanni stared at Nathan, his mouth agape.

"Mister Hiller?"

"You want me to travel across a thousand light years of space?"

Nathan noticed that Yanni looked a little pale. "Are you all right?"

"I've never even been out of Switzerland... I mean, up until a couple months ago, that is."

"The Takarans will keep the cores safe," Nathan explained. "The Jung don't even know they exist, let alone where they are. I need you to go with those cores, to continue to ensure their proper handling. I also need you to help them access the data on those cores, as there may be technologies that we have not yet developed that might aid us in our fight to save Earth from the Jung."

"Captain, the Earth is already lost."

"I intend to take her back, Mister Hiller... and to hold her. To do so, I need your help and the help of our allies in the Pentaurus cluster. I *need* to send them a message, and I *need* to deliver those cores safely into their hands."

Yanni was silent for several seconds, overwhelmed by what was being asked of him. "Captain," he pleaded, "I am only a data systems technician."

"Right now, that's exactly what we need," Nathan assured him.

Yanni looked around the room, unsure of what to say. He took a big breath and sighed. Finally, he spoke. "Are these Takarans nice people?"

\* \* \*

Enjoying his lunch at the small dining table, Eli looked out the massive window at the city of Geneva stretched out before him. Nearly all signs of the invasion months earlier had been removed, and the city shone as it always had, with the tip of its massive lake glistening in the midday sun.

His duties as the Jung-appointed governor of Earth kept him busy in his office from dawn to dusk and then some. There was still so much to do, so much to repair, and so much to change on his homeworld. He was determined to reshape the Earth into an efficient and prosperous world, one that operated without all the petty political subterfuge that he had grown so weary of during his service as his father's assistant. It was unfortunate that his new responsibilities left him little time to spend with his wife and children. However, his wife had yet to accept that his duplicity had been necessary for the greater good of their world. He had exhausted all efforts toward making her understand his master plan and had finally resigned himself to the fact that she never would. She would never know the true story behind his ascension to global power.

The massive door to his office opened to reveal General Bacca, his Jung military commander on Earth. The man was much his elder, and Eli was well aware of the general's disdain for him. Eli continued eating, determined not to allow the general to interrupt his meal.

General Bacca's boots clicked across the wooden floors of the governor's office, coming to a stop a few meters from

Eli's table.

Eli looked up at the general with one eye as he dined. "Pressing news, I suppose."

"My apologies, Governor," the general offered out of decorum. "It seems that your father has revealed the location of the Celestia."

"Really?" Eli said as he took his last bite. He chewed quickly, dabbing at his lips with his linen napkin as he swallowed. "I suppose that is pressing." Eli gestured for the general to sit in the chair opposite him at the small dining table. "Care to join me, General? The squab is quite good."

"No, thank you, sir."

"Ah, yes," Eli said, pretending to remember. "You don't care much for the local cuisine, do you?" Eli placed his napkin on the table and rose. "So, where does she hide, General?"

"On Metis."

"Never heard of it," Eli said as he circled around behind his desk.

"It is one of Jupiter's smallest moons, orbiting a mere one hundred twenty-eight thousand kilometers from its surface."

Eli appeared somewhat stunned by the news. "They put the Celestia on the surface of this moon? Is that even possible?"

"As I said, the moon is quite small. Its gravity would be negligible. It would be relatively easy to set a ship down on its surface, provided a suitable landing site was available."

"Why would they choose to hide her there, I wonder?"

"The moon is tidally locked with Jupiter, causing the same side to always face its parent," the general explained. "With its short orbital period and its close proximity to the gas giant, the window of visibility per orbit is quite limited. It is a clever location to hide an asset: difficult to discover, yet

close enough to easily retrieve when the opportunity presents itself.”

“I told you Galiardi was clever,” Eli said as he took his seat.

“Yes. We have also learned that the small ship that appeared outside Winnipeg was from the Aurora, and it retrieved one of her operatives that had been sent to make contact with the resistance.”

“Interesting.”

“It would be logical to assume that the Aurora is now aware of the Celestia’s location as well.”

“And you got all of this information from my father?” Eli wondered, a hint of concern on his face.

“That and more. He does not have the resolve that Galiardi demonstrated.”

“I would expect not,” Eli said. “I assume you are sending forces to investigate.”

“We have dispatched two gunships. They should arrive within a few hours.”

“Two gunships,” Eli said with surprise. “Do you honestly believe that to be sufficient?”

“Considering the deceptions the resistance has already resorted to, I believe caution is in order.”

“Perhaps,” Eli agreed, “but if you go in with anything less than full forces and the Aurora is there as well, you will have lost the element of surprise.”

“There is still the possibility that President Scott is also employing a deception. It would be in line with the methodologies used by the resistance.”

“My father does not have that kind of willpower,” Eli insisted, “or training, for that matter. I expect the information you obtained from him is genuine.”

"You might be surprised by his resolve, Governor. Nevertheless, I prefer to proceed with caution. Best to overestimate an adversary than to underestimate him."

"If the Aurora is there, she will undoubtedly destroy your gunships, and they will know that we are aware of the Celestia's location. She will scuttle the Celestia and depart, and you will have missed your opportunity to ambush the Aurora. After all, the capture of the Aurora, or at the very least the destruction of her, should be of paramount importance to the Jung."

"The Aurora is but one ship," the general stated confidently. "A formidable one, to be sure, but still only one. The Jung have hundreds of warships and dozens of battle platforms. The Aurora is a nuisance, nothing more."

"General, I think you may be underestimating the Aurora's capabilities."

"My orders are to hold Earth until reinforcements arrive to properly secure the system once and for all. I intend to follow those orders."

"But that ship..."

"Might I remind you, Governor, that the decision to invade the Sol system ahead of schedule was based on *your* recommendation. It is *because* of that action that we find ourselves with such limited resources. Should we prove unable to hold the system until relieved, it will reflect poorly on both our parts. I will not risk the remainder of our forces until such time as I am convinced that your father is *not* attempting the same deception as Admiral Galiardi. I currently have two ways to determine this. I can send in those gunships, risking only what I can afford to lose, or I can resort to even stronger interrogation methods. The choice is yours."

Eli stared at the general for several moments. "You're talking about level three, aren't you? Reprogramming."

"Would it bother you if I were, Governor?" the general asked.

Eli recognized the general's tone. The old man took every opportunity to challenge Eli without actually stepping over the line. Eli, however, had spent decades with his father in the political arena and knew better than to blindly take such bait.

Eli chose his words carefully, delivering them in as calm a fashion as possible. "I may not agree with his politics, but he was a popular public figure, and he could yet prove beneficial in our attempts to win over the hearts and minds of my people, so turning him into a mindless servant of the empire may prove counterproductive." Eli began rifling through papers on his desk as if he had become disinterested in the conversation. "Besides, he *is* my father, and I do not wish to see him suffer unduly. I suspect that you would feel the same if he were your father."

"My father was assassinated by one of his subordinates for allegedly failing to follow Jung directives. The assassin assumed his position and carried out those directives."

"That's got to be a hard pill to swallow," Eli stated as he continued his feigned indifference.

"It is a common method of advancement."

"Seems a bit brutal."

"On the contrary, it tends to ensure that one adheres to Jung directives, lest they too be assassinated."

"I see."

"In fact, if one fails to take such action when warranted, it tends to reflect poorly."

Eli looked at the general, wondering if the old man was issuing a cleverly veiled threat. "Is this method of



advancement utilized often?”

“That is hard to say,” the general admitted. “The empire is vast, and communication over light years is painfully slow, even with our FTL communication drones.”

“Have you ever advanced in such fashion?”

“Once.” General Bacca smiled. “I was doubly fortunate.”

“How so?”

“My superior failed to perform his duties as outlined. I did my duty and took his life.”

“How is that doubly fortunate?”

“My superior at the time was the same man who had taken my father’s life many years earlier,” the general said as the smallest hint of a smile formed at the corner of his mouth. “Sometimes, fate smiles upon us.”

\* \* \*

“Sergeant?” Yanni asked as Sergeant Weatherly led him down the main corridor toward the forward entrance to the main hangar deck. “Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Not at all,” the sergeant responded.

“What do you think of Captain Scott?”

“The captain is a good man.”

“Do you have faith in him?”

“Of course.” The sergeant looked at Yanni. “Captain Scott has done amazing things with this ship. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure, actually. Maybe it’s because he seems too young to be a captain, or maybe it’s because I’m being sent a thousand light years away.” Yanni sighed. “More likely it is because this is all happening so fast.”

“Weren’t you on the Celestia for over two months?”

“Yes, and I had gotten accustomed to that. I had a settled routine, such as it was: I woke, I checked the cores, I

exercised with the shuttle crew, I read... It was not very exciting." He looked at the sergeant as they walked. "I'm not very good at excitement."

"My father used to say, 'You can't be good at everything, so you're better off trying to be the best at what you are good at.' He wasn't very big on excitement, either. Never traveled out of the city he was born in."

"Neither have I," Yanni admitted, "until now anyway." Yanni followed the sergeant through the wide hatch into the forward end of the main hangar bay.

"Well, you're about to join an elite club," the sergeant said as they turned left and headed toward the port side of the hangar deck.

Yanni looked suspicious. "What club is that?"

"Only about a hundred Terrans have traveled a thousand light years from Earth, and only thirty of them are still alive to talk about it. Soon, you'll become the thirty-first."

Yanni swallowed hard. "Assuming I live to tell about it, that is."

Sergeant Weatherly let go an uncharacteristic chuckle. The stoic marine smiled at the young Swiss. "You'll be fine. The Takarans turned out to be pretty nice folk."

"What do you mean, 'turned out to be'?"

"Long story. I'm sure the flight crew will tell you all about it during your journey back to the PC."

"PC?"

"Pentaurus cluster."

"Oh, right." Yanni looked out across the massive hangar bay as they approached the super-jump shuttle sitting on the forward elevator pad. "Have you been there?"

"Takara?" The sergeant laughed again. "Yup. It's a lot like Earth, except more rain."

"And they're nice, you say?"

"Mister Hiller," the sergeant said as he came to a stop, "you're bringing them the entire history and knowledge of the birthplace of humanity... of their long passed ancestors. I suspect you'll be welcomed with open arms. Besides, Prince Casimir and the captain are very good friends. The prince will take good care of you."

"Really?"

"You'll probably have beautiful, young women tending to your every need."

Yanni's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Well, maybe not your every need," the sergeant warned. He turned toward the group of men at the back of the super-jump shuttle. "Lieutenant!" he called out.

Lieutenant Montgomery came over to them, appearing to be his usual polite and not overly friendly self. "How may I help you, Sergeant?" he said, returning the sergeant's salute.

"Lieutenant Montgomery, this is Mister Hiller. He is the technician from Earth who is responsible for the safety of the data cores."

"An honor to meet you, Mister Hiller," the lieutenant said with a nod. "Your arrival is well timed. We were just trying to decide how best to shield your data cores from the effects of the zero-point energy device."

"The what?" Yanni asked, a curious look on his face.

"Sir," the sergeant said, stepping back to depart. He winked at Yanni. "Good luck, Mister Hiller."

"Thank you, Sergeant." Yanni turned back to the lieutenant, his curiosity still piqued. "What were you saying? A zero-point something?"

\* \* \*

Nathan watched from the command chair on the Aurora's bridge as his helmsman, Mister Chiles, manipulated the ship's docking thrusters. The view screen before them was filled with the image of the Celestia sitting on the surface of Metis, which loomed above them. "This just doesn't feel right," he mumbled to his XO who stood next to him.

"Up, down... it's all relative in space," Cameron reminded him.

"At least this big view screen is finally good for something," he said as he leaned his head back to look straight up at the top edge of the screen as the Celestia grew larger in the screen and slid slowly aft.

"One hundred meters," Mister Riley announced. "Speed: one meter per second. Range to Celestia: two hundred meters. Closure of two and a half meters per second."

"At what distance are we going to stand off?" Nathan asked his XO.

"Fifty meters at our closest points," Cameron answered. "Any closer and we'd be constantly adjusting our position to avoid being pulled down on top of the Celestia."

"Is fifty meters far enough?" Nathan wondered.

"It will have to be. The rescue tunnel is only sixty meters long, so even if we stand off at fifty, we'll only have ten meters of slack available. We'll have to counter with station-keeping every twenty minutes or so to avoid ripping the tunnel. However, Mister Chiles has programmed the auto-flight system to maintain our position in precise fashion."

"A pilot after your own heart, eh?"

"If you mean a *good* pilot, then yes," she quipped.

"Firing thrusters," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Forward speed at zero," Mister Riley reported. "Still descending. Closure at one meter per second. Range to

stand off distance is fifty meters. Drifting slightly to port.”

“Correcting,” the helmsman answered as he quickly calculated the amount of thrust necessary to stop the drift. A moment later, he entered a command and the port thrusters answered.

“We’re directly over our targeting point,” Mister Riley reported from the navigator’s station. “Zero drift. Still descending. Point five closure. Thirty meters.”

“Tell the attachment team to stand by,” Nathan ordered.

“Attachment team is already in position and standing by,” Naralena reported from the comm station.

“Twenty meters.”

“Queuing up final parking thrust cycle,” Mister Riley reported calmly.

Four technicians in Corinairan EVA suits stood in a circle on the Aurora’s flight apron and faced aft. Below them, four long rows of heat exchangers stretched out from under the aft edge of the flight apron to the forward edge of the drive of the ship’s massive main propulsion section. In between them was the specialized deployment cart that carried the Emergency Rescue Tunnel.

They leaned back as best they could in their bulky suits, craning their necks and rotating from side to side, in order to see the Celestia as they hovered upside down above her. Small docking thrusters located all around the ship perimeter fired tiny, repetitive bursts of accelerated propellant in shimmering blasts as the Aurora’s helmsman brought the massive ship to a complete stop exactly fifty meters above the Celestia on the surface of Metis.

Two of the technicians climbed up the two ladders located on opposite sides of the ERT deployment cart. Once

they reached the tops of their ladders, the lead technician grabbed the maneuvering controls and fired the small thrusters located at various points around the ring. The top ring of the ERT began to rise off the cart, stretching out the collapsed tunnel behind it as it rose away from the Aurora and toward the Celestia directly above.

*"Team One is ascending toward the Celestia,"* the voice announced over the speakers on the Aurora's bridge. *"ETA to contact: three minutes."*

"It's kind of hard to decide if they are ascending or descending," Nathan commented as he watched the deployment process on the main view screen through the flight apron cameras. "I guess it depends on which ship you're looking from."

"At some point, they'll have to invert themselves," Cameron said, "or the gravity of Metis will pull them in head first."

"It wouldn't injure them though," Nathan said. "The gravity on Metis is too weak."

"True, but it would be... clumsy looking at best."

Nathan nodded indifference as he continued watching. Just as Cameron had predicted, about halfway between the Aurora and the Celestia, the two technicians holding onto the ERT's ring inverted themselves so that they were now descending feet first toward the Celestia.

*"Eighty seconds to contact,"* the technician announced over the comms. The technician controlling the ERT's distal connection ring fired the ring's thrusters several more times to compensate for the tunnel's resistance to expansion as it began to approach its maximum length.

"I'm not sure that thing is going to reach," Nathan said.

"It will reach," Cameron answered confidently.

Nathan turned slightly to call over his shoulder to Naralena. "How's the fuel transfer team doing?"

After a moment, Naralena answered. "The team leader reports the propellant transfer line is paying out correctly. They should be connected and ready to pressure test the hose in about five minutes."

"Very good."

"*Contact,*" the technician operating the ERT ring reported. "*Connecting ERT to the Celestia's topside midship service airlock.*"

"I suppose you've thought about what to do if we have to leave quickly," Nathan said.

"The ERT is self-retracting. When one end disconnects, the retraction winches at the opposite end automatically start pulling it back. It takes about ten minutes to fully retract the tunnel into its storage configuration."

"What happens if there are people inside the tunnel when we have to leave?"

"The ERT has an iris at each end. In the event of a sudden decrease in pressure, the irises automatically close."

"Good to know."

"*Celestia side is secured,*" the technician reported.

"*Team Two is moving,*" the leader of the second team announced.

"All they have to do now is attach the other end of the ERT to our topside midship maintenance airlock, and we'll be ready to start moving people and supplies over," Cameron announced.

"What's first on the repair list?" Nathan asked.

"We've already got a team working on the leak on the command deck. And another team is rigging a temporary

tunnel the senior chief devised to join the command deck with the rest of the ship.”

“No more EVA suits just to go forward, then.”

“Should speed things along, yes. Lieutenant Montgomery’s plasma cannon turret team has attached several equipment-maneuvering units to the turret in order to fly it over to the Celestia.”

“Where are they planning on installing it?” Nathan asked.

“One of the survey teams discovered that the elevator platform for the missile launcher is fully functional, as are the bay doors,” Cameron explained. “Once they move the weapon over, they can close the doors and pressurize the bay in order to work more easily. There are also main power trunks running just under the missile deck, so tapping into them for power should be relatively easy.”

“We might make a warship out of her sooner than expected,” Nathan said as he rose.

“One gun does not make a warship, sir, not even a plasma cannon.”

“I can dream, can’t I?” Nathan stepped forward, patting Mister Chiles on the shoulder as he passed. “Nice work, Mister Chiles.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’m taking a break, Commander,” Nathan announced as he headed for the exit. “You have the conn.”

\* \* \*

Synda’s eyes fluttered slightly, slowly opening for the first time since she had been wounded. Her eyes opened farther as she began to examine the unfamiliar surroundings. She felt pain... and something else: tiny pinpricks all over the inside of her body. The sensation was



extremely uncomfortable and was more intense in her torso than in her arms and legs. A wave of fear and confusion began to sweep over her as her eyes darted about the room. Where she was, what had happened, and why she was in pain: the questions only served to increase her building panic, made worse by the fog that still clouded her mind. Then she noticed Tony's head lying on his folded arms alongside her, and her fear began to ease.

She lifted her left hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Tony," she whispered, her voice weak and harsh.

Tony's head rose slowly at first, then suddenly popped the rest of the way up and turned to look at his friend. "Hey," he answered in hushed tones. "It's about time you woke up."

His beaming smile eased her fear and uncertainty even further. She looked at his face, lines embedded in his cheek from his wristwatch. She had always thought him an odd-looking man, attractive but in a way that might not be obvious to most people. She couldn't help but notice, however, that right now he looked wonderful to her.

"I was starting to get worried," he added.

"What happened?" Synda swallowed with some amount of difficulty, trying to wet her dry throat. "Where are we?"

Tony smiled. "You're not going to believe this, but we're on the Aurora."

Synda's face cringed as a wave of intense pinpricks surged inside her abdomen. "What?" She looked at him in disbelief, then noticed his clothing. "Is that an EDF uniform you're wearing?"

"Yeah, they're washing my clothes. You sort of bled all over me."

"How did we get here?"

"We got ambushed on the surface, remember?"

"Vaguely," she admitted.

"You were hit, so we came back with them."

Synda didn't understand. "But how? How did they get past all the Jung ships? They're everywhere. Surely they didn't just fly right in and..."

"I don't really understand it all, Synda," Tony interrupted. "All I know is that we took off from Earth, there was a bright flash, and the next moment, we were landing on the Aurora."

"The flash," she said, her memory returning. "I remember, when that shuttle arrived. There was a big flash and thunder and wind, and there it was, just hovering there. How is that possible?"

"I think it has something to do with their jump drives. I don't know," Tony admitted. "I just know that we're here on the Aurora. Hell, I even met the captain. You're not going to believe who he is."

"Where's Jessica?" Synda asked, cringing again from the pain.

"She was here earlier. She said she'd be back later. Are you all right?"

"I don't know."

"Are you in pain?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "It's strange. It's like thousands of little, tiny needles, but on the inside."

"Must be the nanites," Tony told her.

"What are nanites?"

"I don't really know. Josh said they were like microscopic robots that they inject into your bloodstream to fix you from the inside."

"Who's Josh?"

"Some guy I met in medical. He was getting some nanites injected in him as well. He told me they might cause

you some pain, something about the nanites not being designed for people from Earth.”

“What?” Synda looked even more confused. Another wave of pain washed over her.

“He said the doctors knew what they were doing. The Corinairans are supposed to be more medically advanced than us...”

“The who? You’re not making any sense,” Synda insisted. She cringed again.

Doctor Galloway stepped through the gap in the curtain. “You are awake,” she said with her usual Corinairan brogue.

“She’s in pain,” Tony told the doctor. “I think it’s the nanites.”

“I will increase the dosage of the pain medication,” the doctor said as she moved around to the opposite side of the bed.

“Will that do it?” Tony wondered.

“It will not get rid of the pain altogether,” she warned as she made adjustments to the intravenous therapy systems mounted on the cart alongside Synda’s bed. “It should make the pain more tolerable.”

“Can’t you just get rid of the pain?” Tony asked.

“I am afraid pain is inevitable,” the doctor answered. She turned back to Synda. “You were badly injured by a Jung energy weapon. Much of your nervous system, both local to the point of injury as well as other places in your body, were overloaded by that energy. The nanites must repair the damage, or you will not regain full sensation throughout your body.”

“Just make the pain go away, please,” Synda begged.

“I will do what I can,” Doctor Galloway promised. She finished changing the dosage on the control panel. “You

should feel some relief in a few moments. We will adjust it incrementally until you are comfortable."

"Can't you just give her the max dose?" Tony begged.

"Too much pain medication is a dangerous thing," the doctor warned. "Be patient; relief will come." The doctor moved back around the bed. "I will be back to check on you shortly," she announced as she disappeared through the curtain.

"Whose idea was it to inject those things in me?" Synda wondered as she tried unsuccessfully to ignore the pain.

"I'm pretty sure you would have died if they hadn't, Synda."

Synda closed her eyes for a moment as a new sensation hit her. Her head became light, and her arms and legs felt lighter. "I think it's starting to work."

"The pain medication? Already?"

Synda opened her eyes again. "Yeah."

"Is the pain gone?"

"No, it's still there. But it just feels more like those things are tugging at my insides instead of stabbing me with needles." She smiled. "It's actually kind of nice."

"Having thousands of nanites tugging at your insides?" Tony wondered.

"No, the medication." She smiled even wider. "It's very relaxing." She turned her head and looked at him. "It's like I drank a lot of beer but without getting all bloated and needing to pee."

"You're drunk."

"Yup." She looked at him again. "So we're on the Aurora? How great is that?"

"Yeah, it's pretty cool," Tony admitted.

\* \* \*

Jessica entered the captain's ready room unannounced and proceeded to her usual spot.

Nathan followed her with his eyes, his head unmoving as she plopped down on the couch under the large view screen on the compartment's forward bulkhead. Nathan looked back at Cameron.

"So I guess you told her," Cameron surmised.

"I suppose they've been on board since we left Takara?" Jessica asked, exhibiting uncharacteristic control of her anger.

"Of course."

"So you've had one hundred super soldiers of questionable loyalties hidden in the bowels of the ship for over a month now?" She looked at Cameron. "What part of this doesn't fall under the purview of the ship's security?"

"There were questions of ethics involved," Nathan defended. "I didn't want to involve anyone else if I could avoid it."

"Cameron knew, right?"

"She's the one who found them," Nathan said.

"What?" Jessica said, looking somewhat confused. "What were they, stowaways?"

"They were in stasis," Nathan explained, "in a big shipping container. Tug told me he was giving me a parting gift. I swear I thought he was talking about all that dollag meat down in frozen storage."

"Why the hell would he give you a bunch of Ghatazhak?" Jessica asked. "He didn't think the Corinari were good enough?"

"They have several thousand Ghatazhak in stasis," Cameron told her. "They don't know what to do with them."

Nathan noticed the confused look on Jessica's face. "They are programmed somehow. It's mostly to ensure their

loyalty, but it's also so they can overlook morality and ethics and do whatever the situation requires of them. Apparently, there are doubts as to whether or not that part of their programming can be undone. Until they are sure that the Ghatazhak are safe to return to mainstream Takaran society, they are keeping them all in stasis. Tug just figured we might need them. Turns out he was right."

Cameron looked at Jessica. "They were pretty amazing to watch in action."

"Scary would be a more accurate word," Nathan added.

Jessica looked at them both. "Yeah, they are impressive."

"You watched the recordings?" Nathan asked.

"Just finished." Jessica sighed. "You still should have told me," she added, pointing an accusatory finger Nathan's way.

"Objection noted."

"So what are we doing?" Jessica wondered as she leaned back on the couch and got comfortable.

"We were deciding what to include in the message to the Pentaurus cluster," Nathan explained.

"How about, 'Help, send everything you've got'?" Jessica mused.

"I was thinking of something a little more tangible," Nathan told her.

"We should include all intelligence we have on the Jung, the core, and Earth," Jessica suggested, "as well as a log of everything that's happened since we left the PC."

"We've already thought of that," Cameron said.

"Did you include everything about the Celestia?" Jessica asked. "Especially the part about her jump drive?"

"Yes," Nathan said. "Mostly, we were wondering what to suggest he send. Warships? Supplies? Manpower? Ordnance?"

“Why don’t you just ask for more Ghatazhak?” Jessica suggested.

Nathan looked at her, surprise on his face.

“Hey, I saw the recordings. I mean, if they have them all lined up like fruit-ice, why not? Can you imagine what a few hundred of them could do?” Jessica laughed. “Let them loose on Earth, and watch the Jung run crying for mama.”

“Are you serious?” Cameron asked. “Let them loose on Earth? You saw what they’re capable of, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. One shot, one kill. Did either of you actually analyze their combat tactics?”

Nathan and Cameron looked at each other sheepishly.

“I didn’t think so,” Jessica scolded, leaning forward to sit on the edge of the couch. “Those guys prioritized their targets in the blink of an eye. They even took their shots based on target priority and maximum efficiency of execution. They left the enemy with zero time to react. It’s like they don’t have the proverbial ‘fog of war’. Those guys see and think with absolute clarity, even under fire.” Jessica leaned back on the couch again. “All those fancy moves? Hell, you can teach monkeys to do that. Those guys were fighting with their heads.”

Nathan looked at Cameron and shrugged. “Okay, add ‘more Ghatazhak’ to the list.”

\* \* \*

The four equipment-maneuvering packs attached to the base of the plasma cannon turret spat their jets of thrust into space as technicians guided the turret down into the Celestia’s open missile launcher bay. Repeated blasts fired from the thrusters as the maneuvering packs countered for the weak, yet ever-present gravity of Metis. Slowly, the

plasma cannon turret settled onto the elevator platform that would normally raise a missile launcher up from its bay. The turret finally settled onto the elevator platform with a small thud that was felt only through the vibration of the bay's deck plates. The technician guiding the turret's ungainly descent stood at the forward end of the bay in his EVA suit, watching as the other technicians checked that the maneuvering packs had completely shut down and were safe.

The massive overhead doors began closing over them, sliding in from port and starboard. They moved quickly, taking less than a minute to close and lock. Internal lights flickered to life, illuminating the entire bay. Despite its size, the Takaran weapon looked rather small, as the bay had been designed to hold a much larger weapon.

As the numerous technicians began disconnecting the equipment-maneuvering pods from the base of the plasma cannon turret, the lead technician looked around the bay. Shortly, the bay would be pressurized, and his people could begin installation of the weapon.

\* \* \*

"Any idea what they're doing down there?" Josh asked from the front seat of the Falcon's cockpit.

*"Not a clue,"* Loki answered. *"I haven't been able to see anything since the Aurora moved in over the top of the Celestia. She's inverted—I know that much—and she's really close to the Celestia as well, maybe fifty meters."*

"Whatever they're doing, I hope they finish soon," Josh said. "I'm getting bored."

*"You've been complaining for weeks about wanting to get back in the cockpit, and now you're complaining about*



*being bored?"*

"I wanted to get back to *flying*," Josh said, "not hovering over the pole of a gas giant for days on end."

*"It's only been a few hours, Josh,"* Loki said. *"Besides, you'd better get used to long, boring flights. I suspect most of them are going to be recon flights from now on."*

"I need some excitement, some challenges. Instead, I'm staring at swirling gas clouds. Hell, flying the Aurora was more exciting than this," Josh exclaimed.

Loki ignored him as he continued to monitor his sensor displays.

*"You could always take a turn monitoring the sensors,"* Loki mumbled.

"At least you got to go on an adventure back on Tanna."

*"Yeah, that was loads of fun,"* Loki replied, *"especially the space jump part."*

"Exactly! That's what I'm talking about. You got to space jump! How cool was that? The most exciting thing I've done lately is crash the flight simulator just for the hell of it."

*"You don't want to space jump, Josh. Trust me on this."*

"I have this overwhelming urge to open up the throttles and do a fast lap around this big ball of gas. Maybe dodge a few moons at high speed just to see how she feels again."

Josh waited nearly a minute for a response from Loki, but it did not come. "That was your cue, Loki. You're supposed to talk me out of doing stupid things, remember?"

Loki continued ignoring him as he studied his sensor display more closely.

"Are you even listening to me, Loki?" Josh turned around the best he could in his flight seat to look back over his shoulder at Loki who was sitting behind him. Loki was staring intently at his displays. His brow was furrowed and concern showed on his face. "What's wrong?"

*"Uh, I think you might get that excitement you're craving, and sooner than you thought."* Loki activated the Falcon's laser comm-array, locking it onto the Aurora's position over Metis. *"Aurora, Falcon. Flash traffic."*

## CHAPTER THREE

*"Two contacts,"* Loki reported over the comms. *"Tactical database puts them as Jung gunships. They just dropped out of FTL. Transmitting sensor telemetry to you now."*

"Tell them to stay on station and keep feeding us their sensor telemetry," Nathan ordered as he came out of his ready room to the port side of the comm station.

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Receiving the Falcon's sensor telemetry," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. "Putting it up on the main view screen."

Nathan watched the main view screen as he passed the tactical station on his way forward. The computer-enhanced images of the two targets appeared in separate windows on either side of the tracking window. Nathan recognized the configurations of the ships, as the Aurora had faced such ships before. Nathan felt a surge of confidence. They had faced far more dangerous ships over the past months and with far less firepower than they currently possessed. "Those are gunships, all right." Nathan turned back toward tactical, a slight smile on his face. "How long until they get line of sight on us?"

"Based on their rate of deceleration and angle of approach, twenty minutes, sir."

"How did they get so close?" Nathan wondered.

"The Falcon reported they dropped out of FTL less than a minute ago," Mister Randeem said. "Their trajectory shows

they came from Earth, so that was one short FTL run."

"I didn't think they made interplanetary FTL hops," Nathan stated.

"Perhaps they normally don't."

"Sound general quarters," Nathan ordered.

"General quarters, aye," Mister Randeen answered.

"Mister Chiles, how long will it take to move us behind Metis?"

"A few minutes at the most, sir," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Plot the maneuver and stand by." Nathan turned aft. "Contact the Celestia. Tell them they have fifteen minutes to evacuate."

"Aye, sir."

"Connect me with the Falcon."

"Connection open."

"Falcon, Aurora Actual," Nathan called over his comm-set.

*"Aurora Actual, Falcon. Go ahead, sir,"* Loki answered.

"In about sixteen minutes, we're going to go behind Metis. I'll need you to tell us when the nearest gunship is almost at her maximum gun range."

*"Understood, sir."*

"Kill your telemetry for now. Only call when you have something to report. Keep your emissions low and stay stealthy. We don't want them to detect you."

*"Yes, sir,"* Loki answered.

"Telemetry lost," Mister Randeen reported.

"Connect me with the Celestia," Nathan ordered as the images being transmitted from the Falcon disappeared from the main view screen.

*"How much propellant do you have?"* Nathan asked over the comms.

"Stand by one," Cameron answered as she moved to the navigator's chair on the Celestia's bridge and checked the displays. "Not even one percent capacity, sir."

*"I don't suppose that's enough to get you anywhere."*

"It'll get us off of Metis," Cameron answered as she punched commands into the Celestia's navigation computer, "but I'm afraid that's about all it will do."

*"I don't suppose another ten minutes of propellant transfer will make a difference."*

"Not really," Cameron answered. "It might give us enough to accelerate into a higher orbit or maybe reach another moon. We wouldn't have enough propellant left to set her down again though, especially if the next moon is larger than Metis." Cameron waited for a response before speaking. "Any ideas, sir?"

Another moment passed before Nathan responded. *"There are only two gunships at the moment, but I don't want to take any chances, not after they used their FTL drives to get out here in such a hurry. For all we know, there could be more ships about to come out of FTL at any moment. Better if you and your people clear out of there for now."*

"We've still got a shuttle attached to the forward airlock," Cameron reminded him. "We could wait and..."

*"That's an order, Commander."*

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered. She sighed. "I was hoping this wouldn't be the shortest command in EDF history," she said to her executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Kovacic. "All right, people. We've been ordered to evacuate. Report to the port personnel airlock and board the shuttle."

“Move it! Move it!” Marcus hollered from the entrance to the rescue tunnel. “We have five minutes before they cut us free! Anyone left in that tube is gonna be flopping around in space like a big worm!”

Technicians stepped into the midship maintenance airlock one by one. Each crewman entered and ascended the ladder up through the Celestia’s three-meter-thick hull, passing through the rescue tunnel’s connection ring on the other side. Once through the ring, they found themselves out of the pull of the Celestia’s artificial gravity. They pushed off hard from the inner edge of the ring, propelling themselves upward into the two-meter-wide tunnel.

“Pull yourselves along with the rope and don’t bunch up!” Marcus ordered. “If you don’t make it through before the iris closes on the other end, get your ass back down here ASAP, or you might find yourself floating in space with your eyes bugging out and your blood boiling! That’s bound to make each and every one of you uglier than you already are!”

Ensign Tillardi passed by the senior chief on his way to the airlock.

“Hey,” Marcus said, grabbing Tilly by the shoulder, “you’re this bucket’s acting Cheng, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Did everyone make it out of your section?”

“Yes, Senior Chief. I checked all the aft sections on the way forward.”

“Did you report to the bridge that engineering was clear?”

“Yes, before I headed forward.”

“Then why the hell didn’t they tell me?” Marcus complained. “Goddamn it!” Marcus tapped his comm-set.

"Bridge, midship airlock. Have all teams checked out yet?"

*"We're just waiting on word from you, Senior Chief,"* Commander Taylor answered over the comms. *"Has Ensign Tillardi made it to you yet?"*

"Yes, sir. He's standing right next to me."

*"Then you're clear to evac, Senior Chief. Close the hatch on your way out."*

"What about you, sir?"

*"We'll be on our way to the evac shuttle in a few minutes,"* Cameron told him. *"We'll see you on the Aurora."*

"Yes, sir," Marcus answered, tapping his comm-set again to disconnect the call. "Why are you standing around, Ensign?" Marcus asked Ensign Tillardi. "Get your ass up that ladder!"

The Aurora's bridge lighting was tinted red, indicating that the ship was at general quarters. Nathan paced nervously across the back of the Aurora's bridge in front of the comm station. "How much time is left?"

"Three minutes until we need to detach and start our move," Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan stopped pacing and turned toward Naralena at the comm station. "Do we still have people in the rescue tunnel?"

"One moment," Naralena answered. "Thirty-nine have made it back through the tunnel," she reported a moment later. "Eleven are still making their way through the tunnel. Senior Chief Taggart reported he was the last one entering the tunnel about a minute ago."

"What about the bridge crew?"

"The command deck evac shuttle is departing the Celestia now," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical

station. "They should be on our deck in ninety seconds."

"Not a moment too soon," Nathan said under his breath.

Mister Randeem turned around to face the captain. "Sir, it takes at least two to three minutes to travel through that tunnel, even with no one in front of you. With ten others in front of you..."

Nathan sighed. "Naralena, please remind the senior chief that time is short."

"Don't bunch up, damn it!" Marcus yelled up the tunnel as he pulled himself along with the center guide rope. The long, two-meter-wide tunnel swayed and shuddered as crewmen traveling its length in hurried fashion brushed up against its reinforced fabric sides.

*"Senior Chief, captain says to hurry up,"* Naralena called over the comms. *"You're down to two minutes."*

"For crying out loud!" Marcus grumbled as he continued pulling himself along as quickly as possible. "What the hell does she think I'm doing?" Marcus suddenly felt something strike his head. "What the...?" He stopped and looked up the tunnel. Ensign Tillardi had lost his grip on the center rope and had toppled into the side of the tunnel, causing it to shift sharply to one side. The ensign's head had caught one of the tunnel's support ribs, causing him to spin around and kick the senior chief in the side of the head. "What the hell's the matter with you?" Marcus hollered.

"My jacket is caught!" Tilly replied as he tugged to try to free his jacket from the support rib.

"Stop yanking on it, you dumbass! You'll tear the tunnel open!"

"But I'm stuck!"

"Take the damned thing off, you idiot!" Marcus yelled.



Ensign Tillardi did as he was instructed, slipping off his jacket, then continued up the tunnel.

"We have nobody in front of us now, so move your ass, kid!"

"Flash traffic!" Naralena announced. "Falcon reports the targets are splitting. Target One is accelerating."

"ETA on the accelerating target?" Nathan asked.

"One moment," Mister Randeem answered.

"Falcon reports target one has gone into FTL!" Naralena added.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "Two hundred thousand kilometers and closing. Transferring track to tactical."

"It's a Jung gunship!" Mister Randeem reported. "It has to be target one."

Nathan couldn't believe what had just happened. "How is that possible? FTL is in a straight line..."

"Target one will have gun range on us in one minute!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Disconnect the ERT!" Nathan ordered.

"Closing tunnel iris," Mister Randeem reported.

"Captain," Naralena warned, "there are still two men in the tunnel!"

"Tell them to head back," Nathan ordered.

"Disconnecting tunnel. We're free to maneuver."

"Helm! Topside thrusters! Get us clear of that tunnel, then bring our nose to target and accelerate!"

"Firing topside thrusters," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Flight, Captain! Launch a shuttle to recover those two men as soon as they get back aboard the Celestia!" Nathan

ordered into his comm-set. "Tactical, power up the plasma torpedoes and prepare to fire!"

"Son of a bitch!" Marcus swore as the tunnel broke free from the Aurora and swung wildly to one side.

"They left without us!" Tilly exclaimed in shock. "Damn it! How could he do that to us?"

"If the captain cut us free, he had a damn good reason to do it!" Marcus declared as he spun around in the tunnel. "Those Jung ships must be closer than we thought!" Marcus began pulling himself back down the tunnel toward the Celestia. "We've gotta get back to the Celestia! If a single, stray rail gun round pierces this thing, we're fucked!"

"Why is the tunnel moving so much?" Tilly asked.

"Must be the Aurora's thruster wash!"

"*Senior Chief!*" Naralena called over Marcus's comm-set. "*Are you okay?*"

"Oh, sure," Marcus answered as he pulled himself along the center rope. "I'm just fucking great! How about you, sugar?"

"*How many of you are still in the tunnel?*"

"Just me and Ensign Dumbass... I mean, Tillardi."

"*Jung ship came out of FTL. They'll have weapons range in thirty seconds,*" Naralena warned. "*Get back to the Celestia as fast as you can. The captain has launched a shuttle to pick you up.*"

"Give him a big kiss for me," Marcus exclaimed as he pulled himself along as quickly as possible.

"Contact the Falcon," Nathan ordered. "Verify that this isn't a third target come to crash the party."

“Target one is firing her rail guns!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Second contact!” Mister Navashee reported.

Enemy rail gun rounds walked across the top of the Aurora’s forward section, sending reverberations throughout the ship. Nathan felt the vibrations in the deck beneath his feet. “That’s the light stuff. They’re feeling us out. They may have orders to take us alive.”

“Target is maneuvering hard, Captain,” Mister Randeem reported from tactical. “Erratic zigzag pattern. Varying her orbital inclination as well. She may be trying to keep us from getting a clean shot with our plasma torpedoes.”

“That would explain why she’s using her smaller guns,” Nathan realized. “If I remember correctly from our first encounter with them, their larger rail guns don’t track as quickly. Open fire with all forward rail guns, Mister Randeem. Drop the quads out the bottom and prepare them to fire on the target as we pass.”

“Opening fire with all forward rail guns, aye. Dropping the quads out the bottom.”

“Mister Chiles,” Nathan said, turning forward. “Roll us over and show her our belly as we pass. As soon as she passes our quads, pitch up so our topside comes to face the target quickly as we turn back toward Metis.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mister Randeem, that target may make a run on the Celestia. If we have to chase her back toward Metis, be careful that we don’t inadvertently pound our own ship with rail gun fire.”

Pushed aside by the Aurora’s thruster wash as she departed, the unconnected end of the sixty-meter-long

rescue tunnel swung over and fell slowly toward the Celestia, assisted by the weak gravity of Metis. The tunnel began to lay down across the Celestia's hull as it twisted and turned like a gigantic worm.

"We're almost there!" Marcus yelled. The tunnel wall slammed into him as the tunnel itself began shifting to the right. Marcus noticed the curve in the tunnel ahead of him and felt himself starting to fall. "Oh, shit! Turn around! Feet first!" he hollered. Marcus spun clumsily around, finally ending up in a feet first fall down the two-meter-wide rescue tunnel. He bounced off the sides of the tunnel wall again and again as he continued to fall. The tunnel seemed to be moving to his left. Before he knew it, his feet hit the curve in the tunnel wall, and he crumpled against the left side of the tunnel. Ensign Tillardi landed next to him as the entire tunnel fell to one side, and they both found themselves lying on their backs against what was now the tunnel floor.

"What the fuck just happened?" Tilly shouted.

"The goddamned thruster wash pushed us over. The tunnel is falling to its side!"

"What?"

"There ain't nothing holding the other end now!" Marcus scrambled to his feet and began running clumsily down the tunnel, stooping over slightly to avoid hitting his head on the low tunnel ceiling. "Come on! We've gotta get to that airlock!"

The pounding of rail gun fire continued as the Aurora rapidly closed on the first Jung gunship.

“One kilometer and closing fast!” Mister Randeem reported. “Quads are ready to fire!”

“Stand by on that roll, Mister Chiles,” Nathan warned. He turned his head to the left toward his sensor operator. “Mister Navashee, any sign of that second target?”

“Not yet, sir. She’s not due to break the horizon for another thirty seconds.”

“Five hundred meters!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Snap roll!” Nathan ordered. “Show them our quads!”

Four massive, quad-barreled rail guns were now sticking out of the bottom end of their transit tunnels. The Aurora rolled quickly to port, bringing the guns to bear on the rapidly approaching Jung gunship. Blue flashes of electrical energy sparked along the massive rails as the guns began spewing hundreds of projectiles. The meter-wide projectiles flew toward their target at startling speed, striking the hull of the Jung gunship with incredible force. The impacts tore into the enemy ship’s hull sending chunks of it spinning wildly off into space. The Aurora’s weapons automatically tracked the passing ship, attempting to concentrate their fire in the same location in the hopes of penetrating the enemy gunship’s inner hull, but the smaller gunship was closing too quickly.

The rescue tunnel suddenly collapsed only meters in front of Marcus as a section of the tunnel from behind them fell on top of the tunnel in front of them. Marcus came to a stop, nearly tripping forward in the process. “Shit!”

“What the hell do we do now?” Tilly wondered.

Marcus looked at the squished tunnel ahead of them. There was nearly enough space for a man to crawl through. "Follow me!" he declared as he dove onto his stomach and began scurrying along the bottom of the tunnel. The rings in the walls of the tunnel that served to strengthen it and keep it open dug into his knees and hands as he scooted along. He pushed himself forward into the crevice, lifting up with his back to wedge open the collapsed tunnel and make room for himself. The tunnel was not terribly heavy, as the gravity on Metis was minuscule. But the additional bulk did cause the tunnel rings to dig into his skin even further. "Damn, I shouldn't have eaten so much dollag for lunch," he swore as he continued crawling through the crevice.

A moment later, he was through the other side and standing up again, rubbing his knees. He turned around and hollered at Ensign Tillardi. "Lie flat, face down, with your hands covering your head!" Marcus waited a moment before continuing. "You ready?" He heard a muffled reply and assumed that the young ensign on the other side had answered in the affirmative. He squatted down and pushed upward against the squished roof of the tunnel, causing the tunnel section lying on top to roll away a bit. The collapsed ceiling of the tunnel popped back up, continuing to do so for another meter before stopping. Marcus looked down between his legs and saw Ensign Tillardi lying face down with his hands covering his head.

The ensign raised his head when he realized the tunnel had rolled over him. He looked up at the senior chief. "Damn!"

Marcus reached down and grabbed the ensign by his collar to pull him up. "Come on!" As they continued down the quivering tunnel, he heard several loud pops from

behind followed by a whoosh of air as it began to flow past him from front to back.

"The tunnel's been punctured!" Tilly exclaimed, yelling to be heard over the sound of escaping air. "We're losing pressure!"

"Keep going! We're almost there!" Marcus said as they continued forward.

"If the tunnel tears..."

"Shut up and run!" Marcus could see the end of the tunnel as it raised up slightly to clear the edge of the connection collar, then turned sharply downward toward the Celestia's midship topside maintenance airlock. As he climbed up the small incline, he heard several more pops behind him, and the flow of air toward the far end of the tunnel became stronger and louder. He could feel the air thinning, as it was becoming harder to breathe. The tunnel was also beginning to collapse slightly under its own weight as the internal air pressure rapidly escaped through the holes.

Marcus cleared the small rise and jumped down the two-meter drop to the hull of the Celestia. He moved to one side just as Tilly dropped down next to him. The young ensign's lips were turning blue, and he looked like he was about to pass out from hypoxia. Marcus quickly opened the outer hatch and stepped into the opening below him, falling through the three-meter tunnel and landing at the bottom of the airlock below. Again, he stepped to one side as the ensign fell down the tunnel and landed ungracefully next to him.

Marcus activated the control panel and closed the outer hatch, then began the pressurization cycle in the airlock. The airlock door opened, and they stepped into the safety of the Celestia's inner decks once more. Marcus stepped

through the hatch and dropped to his knees, falling backward into a sitting position and leaning up against the bulkhead.

Ensign Tillardi collapsed on the deck as well, in a less graceful fashion. After a few moments' rest, Tilly finally managed to speak between breaths. "Thanks, Senior Chief."

"No problem!" Marcus said, still panting. "Just don't expect me to save your ass on a daily basis."

"I'll try to remember that," Tilly answered, smiling. Several more seconds passed before he spoke again. "How long have you been in the EDF?"

"I'm not in the EDF," Marcus answered, "at least, not technically."

"You're not from Earth?" Tilly asked, somewhat surprised.

"Never been there."

Tilly smiled more broadly. "Funny; you swear like you're from Earth."

"Some things are universal, kid."

\* \* \*

"The second ship has line of sight on them now," Loki reported from his seat in the back of the Falcon's cockpit. "They're accelerating."

"Toward Metis?" Josh asked.

"I'm not sure. I think so." Loki studied his sensor displays for another moment. "Wait, I think they're climbing... They're trying to change orbit to a different inclination."

"So they're not headed for Metis?"

"No, they're trying to change course and come up over the top of Jupiter."

"What the hell for?"

"Maybe they spotted us," Loki surmised.



"No way," Josh argued. "We're too far away, and we're running cold. They'd have to scan actively this way, and they haven't, right?"

"No, they haven't, at least not that I can detect," Loki said, realizing his friend was right. "Then why aren't they going to help the other gunship?"

"They're trying to get clear of Jupiter," Josh said as he flipped on the Falcon's maneuvering systems. "They're gonna call home for reinforcements."

Loki's attention was diverted from his screens by the sound of the Falcon's maneuvering systems coming to life. His head jerked up to look over the forward console at the back of his pilot's head. "What are you doing, Josh?"

"I'm gonna stop him from calling for help," Josh declared as he fired his thrusters and pitched the Falcon's nose toward Jupiter, which sat far below them.

"No, no, no," Loki objected as Jupiter rose up in front of them. "Our orders are to stand watch and let the Aurora know if anyone else is coming, Josh."

"If anyone else was coming, they'd already be here, Loki!" Josh explained. "If we don't stop them, there will be someone else coming. We'll lose the Celestia for sure then!"

Loki could hear the main propulsion system coming to life from behind him. "Josh, if they can see the Aurora, the Aurora can see them! If the captain wants us to attack, he'll let us know!"

"The captain's busy!" Josh insisted. "Plot me a jump to directly astern and below the second gunship! We'll jump in, put a pair of anti-ship missiles into her tail, and take out her main engines..."

"It won't matter, Josh! In less than a minute, they will have applied enough delta V to climb up to a line of sight with Earth, even without their main drive..."

"Then we have to jump now!"

"This is not our call!"

"Are you gonna make me calculate the jump myself?" Josh asked. "Cause you know, it's been a while, and I might be a little rusty... put us into the side of Jupiter or something..."

"All right! All right!" Loki agreed as he started entering the jump into the computer. "Don't fire the mains! Just give us a little forward momentum. If we're going too fast, we won't be able to get a shot off before we whiz past the target."

"Good thinking," Josh said. "Thrusting forward."

"You know, I could lock out your controls and take over from back here," Loki said as he finished calculating the jump.

"But you won't," Josh said, a grin on his face. "Give me a five second lag to jump so I have time to spin around and set up the shot."

"Jumping in five.....four....."

Josh spun the ship around one hundred eighty degrees, so the interceptor was flying backward.

"Three.....two....."

Josh opened the weapons bay and deployed two anti-ship missiles into firing position below the Falcon's belly.

"One.....jump."

The cockpit filled with the blue-white jump flash. Josh opened his eyes as his helmet's improved auto-darkening visor disengaged the filters that protected his vision from the jump flash. Directly above them only fifty meters away was the enemy gunship, and it was pulling away fast. "Damn! Well done, Loki!" Josh tapped his flight control stick, causing the Falcon's nose to rise slightly toward the fleeing target's aft end. "Lock the missiles on her main drive ports!"

"I'm on it!" Loki declared. "Target locked."

"Firing two!" Josh announced as he pressed the missile launch button. He waited a moment as the missiles left their rails and streaked away. Then he tapped his flight control stick again and applied full power to their main drive.

"Three seconds!" Loki announced as they pulled away from the target. "Don't pull too far away, Josh..."

Two flashes of yellow-orange light filled the cockpit as the missiles found their targets. A secondary explosion followed, lighting up their cockpit again.

"Direct impact!" Josh announced with joy.

"Her mains are down!" Loki reported. "But she still might have enough momentum to climb up over the top. We need to take out her comm-array."

"I'll get us in close, and you blast her with the nose turret!" Josh told him as he rolled the interceptor to port and pitched his nose back toward the drifting gunship.

The interceptor closed quickly on the gunship. Josh maneuvered the Falcon alongside it, slowing slightly to give Loki an easier shot. "There it is!" Josh yelled. "On top! Directly amidships!"

"Josh! Not so close! They've still got guns, you know!"

"Take out the comm-array!"

Loki swung the Falcon's nose turret around and opened fire, sending bolts of plasma into the gunship's comm-array. The array came apart after only a few shots, and Loki walked the spray of plasma down the side of the gunship and across one of the nearest gun emplacements. "I got it! Now get us out of here!"

The Falcon lurched to one side as rail gun rounds slammed into her hull just aft of the cockpit.

"Fuck!" Josh swore as he fought to maintain control of the ship with the force of the impacts causing the ship to

yaw to starboard and roll.

Loki felt his body lurch to port, his restraints digging into his shoulders. He grabbed the side rails just below the canopy to steady himself as more rail gun rounds slammed into their side. "Get us out of here!"

Josh looked forward as he prepared to apply full thrust. A wall of small puffs appeared out of nowhere directly in front of them. "What the hell?" he exclaimed, his eyes widening. "Loki! What is that?"

"Hold on!" Loki said while he fought to adjust his sensors as the Falcon continued to shake from rail gun impacts. "Shit! Those are tiny mines, Josh! They're trying to block our way out!"

"Screw that crap!" Josh declared as he applied reverse thrust.

"No!" Loki warned. "They're deploying them all around us!"

"What?" Josh looked around, panicked. "What do we do?"

"Hard to starboard!" Loki ordered. "Take us out perpendicular to the target! Full power!"

Josh spun the Falcon's nose ninety degrees to starboard and fired their main engines. The interceptor accelerated away from the gunship. More tiny puffs appeared ahead of them.

"More mines!" Loki warned.

"Fuck!" Josh maneuvered the Falcon around the dispersing group of mines, barely missing the outermost weapon as it streaked toward their port side. More puffs appeared in the distance as the gunship tried to block the Falcon's last escape route.

"Jump us out of here!" Josh begged.

"I can't! If we hit one of those mines while we're jumping..."

“Hang on!” Josh declared as he attempted to maneuver around the next group of dispersing mines.

\* \* \*

“The Falcon is in trouble, sir!” Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora’s sensor station.

Nathan rose suddenly from his command chair at the center of the bridge. “What?”

“They jumped in and attacked the second gunship. Josh and Loki took out the gunship’s main drive and their comm-array. They’re being fired on.”

“Why haven’t they jumped away?” Nathan wondered. “Comms!” Nathan could hear Naralena calling the Falcon.

“Tubes coming to bear,” Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station.

“Fire as soon as you have a solution,” Nathan ordered.

“Sir, at this angle, the debris field may impact the Celestia,” Mister Randeem warned.

“No choice.” Nathan turned toward the helm. “As soon as we take out that gunship, come about wide to starboard, away from Jupiter. I want a clear jump line out to the second target as soon as possible.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Firing solution in five seconds!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Captain!” Naralena called out. “The second gunship is deploying miniature mines around the Falcon. She can’t jump out!”

“The Falcon’s taking a beating,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Firing plasma torpedoes!” Mister Randeem reported from tactical.

Nathan spun back around as four red balls of plasma streaked toward the first gunship. One by one, they struck the target, breaking her first into two pieces, then causing those two pieces to explode.

"Target destroyed!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Come about!" Nathan ordered.

The image of the exploding gunship moved quickly to the left on the main view screen as the Aurora turned quickly to starboard. In only a few seconds, the obliterated target was off the screen.

"Did we ever get a rescue shuttle away?" Nathan asked as he waited for the Aurora to complete her turn.

"No, sir," Mister Randeem replied. "We were maneuvering too hard."

Nathan looked at Naralena sitting at her forward-facing comm station directly behind Mister Randeem. "Did they make it back?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena reported. "Senior Chief Taggart reported in a minute ago. He and Ensign Tillardi are back on board the Celestia."

Nathan let go a sigh of relief.

"Ten seconds to jump," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's chair.

"As soon as we jump in on the target, roll us over so we can use our quads," Nathan told the helmsman.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Captain?" Mister Randeem said.

"No plasma weapons on the second target," Nathan ordered. "We don't know how she'll come apart, and the Falcon is still awfully close to her."

Mister Randeem nodded his understanding as the navigator started his jump count.

"Three.....two....."

“Turn complete,” Mister Chiles reported.  
“One.....jump.”

A blue-white flash of light flooded the second gunship's hull as she continued to fire on the fleeing Falcon. The flash quickly subsided, revealing the Aurora as she made her pass above the Jung gunship. The Aurora rolled over to bring her underside toward the target. As she started her pass, her four quad rail guns hanging from her midship opened fire, pounding the small gunship with massive projectiles that tore deep into the hull of the enemy ship. The force of the impacts pushed the gunship's nose down toward Jupiter. Chunks of the target's hull flew in all directions as the impacts walked across her topside. Several secondary explosions reported from deep inside the drifting gunship. By the time the Aurora had passed overhead, the enemy ship had stopped firing.

“Target is dead,” Mister Navashee reported. “Her weapons are silent. She has no main propulsion, and her reactors are offline.”

“Any chance she'll get them back up?”

“No, sir. I'm surprised their antimatter reactors still have containment, to be honest. They are, however, losing orbital altitude rather quickly. Estimate crush altitude in twenty-three minutes.”

Nathan looked at the image of the dead Jung gunship on the main view screen. He thought about the battle they had fought with two identical gunships only moments after their first jump test five months ago. He thought about Captain Roberts, Commander Montero, and all the other members of

the Aurora's original crew who had died that day. He thought about all the people on Earth who had probably died during the Jung invasion. Lastly, he thought about his family. "Is the Falcon clear?" His voice was cold and dispassionate.

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

"Helm, zero thrust. Spin us around and bring our tubes to bear on the target."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Mister Randeem, stand by to fire plasma torpedoes. Full spread. I want that target destroyed."

"Captain, they *are* helpless," Mister Randeem reminded.

Nathan turned around and glared at his tactical officer.

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem answered. "Plasma torpedoes standing by."

The captain continued staring at his tactical officer, a fiercely determined look in his eyes. "The Jung do not surrender..."

"Our nose is on the target," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"...and we shall not ask," Nathan finished.

"I have a firing solution, sir," Mister Randeem announced.

"Fire." Nathan did not turn around to look at the main view screen.

"Torpedoes away," Mister Randeem reported. "Target destroyed."

"Maintain general quarters," Nathan stated calmly. "Deploy a pair of Talons to replace the Falcon on lookout. As soon as the Falcon is on board, send her flight crew to my ready room." Nathan began walking slowly toward his ready room at the back of the bridge. "Then get us back to the Celestia."



Commander Taylor entered the bridge, her eyes catching Nathan's as he passed and entered his ready room. She looked at Naralena and Mister Randeen. She knew something had happened. Something was wrong.

\* \* \*

"Captain?" Commander Taylor called from the ready room door.

"Yes, Commander," Nathan answered without looking up from the view screen on his desk.

Cameron entered the room, closing the door behind her. "Everything all right, sir?"

"Fine. What's up?" he asked, his attention still on his view screen.

Cameron shrugged off the captain's indifferent response. "Talons are on lookout, and the Falcon just touched down. I was wondering if you wanted us to return to Metis or just send a shuttle back to pick up Senior Chief Taggart and Ensign Tillardi."

"Take us back to the Celestia," Nathan ordered. "I want to get back to work as soon as possible."

A puzzled look fell across Cameron's face. "The Jung *know* we're here."

"Correction, the Jung suspect we're here. In a few hours, when Metis comes back around to the Earth side of Jupiter and neither of their gunships reports in, *then* the Jung will know that *someone* is out here."

"Nathan, we can't keep beating them back. Sooner or later, they'll send more ships—*bigger* ships."

Nathan leaned back in his chair, giving his executive officer his full attention. "Put yourself in their place, Commander. They have limited ships with which to hold the

Earth until reinforcements arrive from Alpha Centauri. Intelligence puts those reinforcements at *least* four months out, possibly five."

"Possibly three," Cameron reminded him.

"They may send another strike force our way, but they're not going to send everything."

"They don't have to send everything," Cameron said. "They just have to send the right ships and use the right tactics. The Jung aren't the Takarans, Nathan. They're not going to let you jump around them and pick them off one by one. They're already trying to counter our jump drive technology. You saw how they trapped the Falcon. They're paying attention. They're thinking of ways to deal with us. That gunship wasn't expecting to lay thousands of tiny mines for the Falcon. They didn't even know that the Falcon existed until now. They were going to use them on us. They want to capture the Aurora."

"They're going to have to try harder," Nathan said, his tone full of confidence. "A *lot* harder." Nathan reached for his intercom. "Helm, Captain. Move us back into position over the Celestia. I want to continue with the propellant transfer as soon as possible."

"*Aye, sir,*" Mister Chiles answered over the intercom.

"Then you still intend to try to save the Celestia," Cameron said.

"Our plans are unchanged, Commander. We will do everything possible to save the Celestia up until the moment that it is no longer feasible, at which point, we *will* scuttle her."

"I want to save the Celestia just as much as anyone," Cameron insisted, "perhaps even more so, but the Jung aren't going to leave us alone just because you destroyed two of their gunships."

"I plan on keeping them occupied from time to time," Nathan said, the slightest hint of a grin on his face.

Cameron saw the mischievous smile and rolled her eyes. "God, I hate it when you get that look on your face."

\* \* \*

*"Bozhe moi!"* Vladimir cried out as he watched the Falcon roll off the starboard forward elevator pad. His eyes scanned the battered interceptor, taking note of the many chunks of hull missing from the ship as it rolled to a stop in front of him. "What did you do to her?" he called out to Josh and Loki as their canopies opened. "I just fixed her!"

Josh glanced over his shoulder at Loki as they climbed out of their flight seats, a guilty look on his face.

"What happened?" Vladimir asked.

"Uh, we ran into a little trouble," Josh said as he descended the boarding ladder.

"It's all external damage, sir," Loki said from the boarding platform beside the Falcon's cockpit. "All our primary systems are still working. We never even had to go to backups."

Vladimir ignored Loki and started barking orders at deck hands.

Commander Taylor entered the main hangar deck through the forward hatch and walked up behind Vladimir. "Problem?"

"Look what they did," Vladimir exclaimed. "I just fixed her, and look what they did to her!"

Cameron looked over the Falcon. "Can she still fly?" she asked Josh as he walked toward her.

"Yes, sir," Josh answered as he handed his helmet to the Falcon's crew chief. "She's banged up, but she's still good to

go.”

Cameron looked at Loki for confirmation.

“He’s right,” Loki agreed. “It’s all hull damage as far as I can tell.”

“I’ll decide that for myself,” Vladimir said.

“No, the Falcon’s crew chief will decide that for himself,” Cameron reminded him. “You’re still attached to the Celestia, remember?”

“We’ll take care of her,” the Falcon’s crew chief promised.

Vladimir looked at Cameron, confused. “What? He doesn’t still want to try to save...”

“Of course he does,” Cameron interrupted. “Round your guys up and get them on a shuttle. We leave in five minutes.”

“No rescue tunnel?” Vladimir wondered.

“Senior Chief Taggart reports that it’s damaged,” Cameron told him. “It’s shuttles only for now, so get that port fighter alley ready as soon as possible. We need to have some semblance of flight ops on that ship.”

“Finally, some good news,” Vladimir said. He leaned in closer to Cameron. “I never did like that rescue tunnel.” Vladimir reached for his comm-set and began calling for his Celestia repair teams as he turned and walked away.

Cameron turned back to Josh and Loki. “Get out of your flight gear and report to the captain’s ready room. He wants a word with the two of you.”

Josh and Loki exchanged worried looks as Commander Taylor turned and headed aft toward the waiting shuttles.

\* \* \*

"If I were you, I'd just shut up and take my lumps," Loki told Josh as they stepped through the outer hatch to the Aurora's bridge.

"Do you really think I'm planning on going in there and arguing with him?" Josh wondered.

"I never know what you're thinking."

Josh stepped through the inner hatch. His eyes caught those of Lieutenant Yosef as he turned to his right to enter the captain's ready room. Loki followed him, his head down.

Josh stepped through the hatch into the ready room. "You wanted to see us, sir?" he asked sheepishly.

"Close the hatch," the captain stated calmly. He waited until Loki had closed the hatch and both young men were facing him. "Before I ask why you disobeyed orders, I want to make it perfectly clear that nothing you say will excuse the stupid stunt you just pulled." Nathan looked at them each, one at a time. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they answered in unison.

"I have taken into account the fact that neither of you has any military training, and that discipline, at least the way we see it, is somewhat foreign to you both. However, I believe you've both been on this ship long enough to understand what is expected of you. Am I correct in that assumption?"

"Yes, sir," they answered again.

"Good. Then please tell me why the hell you thought it was a good idea to leave your assigned position and attack a ship that was ten times your size and was far more heavily armed... all by yourself?"

"It was my idea," Loki said. "I thought..."

"No, it wasn't," Josh interrupted. "I know what you're trying to do, Loki, and thanks, but stop it." Josh turned his

head back toward the captain. "It was my idea, sir. Loki tried to talk me out of it, but I didn't listen."

"Why am I not surprised?" Nathan said.

"That it was my idea, or that Loki tried to talk me out of it?" Josh wondered.

"That you didn't listen," Nathan answered.

"Oh."

"So why *did* you think it was okay to take on a gunship all by yourself?"

"They were making a run for the pole, sir," Josh explained. "I figured they were trying to get a message back to Jung command on Earth."

"They probably were, but that still isn't a good enough reason to risk the only viable recon asset we have, Mister Hayes. I suspect Mister Sheehan here knew that."

"Actually, I didn't think of that," Loki admitted.

"What did you think?"

"I just thought that it wasn't our place to make that decision," Loki told the captain.

"Finally, someone who realizes their place in the command structure of this ship." Nathan stood, walking around his desk. "The reason decisions are made by people in command is not just because we have the rank. It's also because we're aware of the entire picture. As a pilot in the cockpit of a single spacecraft, you, Mister Hayes, most decidedly do *not* have the entire picture." Nathan paused, allowing a moment to let his rising frustration dissipate slightly. He sat against the top of his desk directly in front of the two young pilots. "The Falcon is an extremely valuable asset, not only as a recon platform but as a weapons delivery system. However, it is a very specialized tool that must be used in a special manner. That doesn't include getting into a boxing match with a gunship!" Nathan felt his

frustration begin to rise again. "Why the hell did you jump in between the target and the Aurora? Not only were you in our line of fire, preventing us from firing on her from a distance, but you were also in that gunship's line of fire. They had every one of their rail guns tracking us. If you would've jumped in on her opposite side, you could've taken out her main drive *and* her comm-array and gotten away without a scratch!" Nathan rose and moved around behind his desk, taking his seat once more. "The only reason I'm not putting you both on the super-jump shuttle and sending you back to Takara is because I need every pilot I can get my hands on right now. I need my fighter pilots in their fighters, not jumping around in the Falcon. Despite your shortcomings, the two of you *know* how to fly the Falcon." Nathan looked up at them, then fixed his eyes on Josh in particular. "However, the next time you pull a boneheaded stunt like that, I will drop you both on the next inhabited world. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they answered together.

"Mister Hayes, report to medical. I want your nanites checked and updated after every flight."

"Captain, I..."

"I wasn't asking, Mister Hayes."

"Yes, sir," Josh answered. He exchanged glances with Loki, then turned and exited the ready room, closing the hatch behind him.

Nathan relaxed slightly in his chair, looking at Loki and thinking. "You know, you and Josh remind me of Commander Taylor and me. We were a good flight team. I was reckless, flying on instinct instead of logic and process. She was the opposite, always calculating and analyzing everything before making a decision. You know what made us a good team?"

Loki shook his head. "No, sir."

"We were a good team because she would always tell me when she disagreed with me. Hell, she still tells me when she disagrees with me."

"I did try, sir."

"I know you did, Loki. But you have to do more than try. If I were about to fly the Aurora into a wall, she'd likely knock me out and take the controls from me. You have a set of flight controls in the back of that ship. When he refused to listen to you, you should have taken control of the ship and locked him out. That's what we call 'forceful backup', a concept that I suggest you familiarize yourself with. Hell, you should have reached up and smacked him upside his helmet, for that matter. He's your pilot, Loki, not your superior officer."

"You're right, sir," Loki admitted. "It's just that Josh has always been pilot in command, and I've always been second seat."

"Damn it, Loki, you're not in a harvester anymore! There's more at stake here than scooping up rocks, and you know it!"

"Yes, sir."

Nathan paused to take a breath. "Josh is a great pilot—we all know that—but he lacks discipline, and he needs to learn how to follow orders. Not just because it's his duty, but because others are depending on him to do so. In some cases, their very lives will depend on it. Therefore, their lives also depend on you making sure that Josh follows his orders."

"Yes, sir."

"I know it's not fair, but that's the way it is."

"Don't worry, Captain," Loki said. "I'll make sure he follows orders from now on."



“Very well. Now, report to the hangar deck and help your crew chief repair your ship. I need you guys back out there as soon as possible.”

\* \* \*

Yanni’s stomach felt like it was tied in knots. He stood looking at the super-jump shuttle, the ship that was about to carry him a thousand light years away. It seemed so small a ship to him, much too small to be making such a journey. The Aurora was built to travel faster than light, and her propulsion system composed more than half her mass. Yet the ship that was to carry him so far away from home in only a few days fit easily inside the Aurora.

“Are you all right, Mister Hiller?” Nathan asked from behind.

Yanni snapped out of his thoughts, startled by the captain’s question. He turned and looked at him. “Not really, no.”

Nathan looked around the main hangar bay. It was a massive space, full of activity. “It is a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“It’s not that,” Yanni told him. “I just can’t help thinking that I may never be coming back.”

Nathan sighed. “I’m not going to lie to you, Yanni; that is a possibility.” Nathan noticed the change in the young man’s demeanor. “Do you have any family on Earth?”

“A sister,” he said. “Our father died when we were young. Our mother passed nearly ten years ago. I haven’t seen my sister in several years, though. Only occasional conversations over the net. I don’t even know if she survived the invasion.”

“What’s her name?”

"Addy. Addy Greber. She lives in Basel."

"If we're successful in liberating Earth, I'll make sure she knows what became of you."

Yanni looked at the captain and smiled ever so slightly. "Thank you. She probably won't believe you, but thank you anyway." Yanni looked at the shuttle again. "They tell me that Takara is a nice place. Have you been there?"

"Yes, I have, several times, in fact. Their ruler is a personal friend. That's why I'm here, actually, to give you this." Nathan handed Yanni a data pad. "This contains all the intelligence information about our current situation and what our immediate plans and needs are. I've instructed your flight crew to make sure you and the data cores are delivered directly to Prince Casimir of Takara. I ask that you give this data pad to him personally."

"Of course."

"It also contains personal messages from those of our crew who are from the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster. They are for their families, to let them know that they are alive and well. More importantly, it is to let them know that it may be some time before they return to their homes." Nathan looked at Yanni. "This is very important to me and my crew."

"I understand, Captain."

"You're about to embark on a grand adventure, Mister Hiller," Nathan told him, "one that will surely change your life forever, just as it changed mine." Nathan put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Safe journey."

Yanni nodded his thanks to the captain, then turned and headed up the cargo ramp of the super-jump shuttle.

Nathan stepped back as the ramp began to rise and the shuttle's engines began to spin to life. Rotating, red beacons along the shuttle's underside began to spin, warning all around her that she was under power and about to move.

The shuttle rolled slowly backward as traffic directors walked along her back corners, ensuring that no one was caught by surprise by the moving shuttle. A few minutes later, the shuttle disappeared in the center transfer airlock, and Nathan turned and headed back to the command deck.

\* \* \*

"So how do things look?" Nathan asked. Cameron, sitting in her ready room on the Celestia, appeared on the left side of the view screen. Vladimir, standing in the Celestia's engineering office, appeared on the opposite side of the screen.

*"The rescue tunnel can be fixed, but it will be too short to use as we did before,"* Cameron explained. *"The Aurora would need to be very close. It's just too risky."*

"What about the fighter bays?" Nathan asked.

*"I have sealed off the starboard side of D deck, just after it splits aft of the cargo deck,"* Vladimir told him. *"The leaks are all on the starboard side, so we were able to pressurize the main cargo bay, the port side of D deck, and the port fighter bay. All three elevator airlocks on the port side are working, so we can begin using the port fighter bay for flight operations."*

Nathan turned toward Major Prechitt who was sitting to his right. "How does that sound to you, Major?"

"There are still several equipment crates blocking full access to the main hangar bay, but we should be able to get them either moved down to the cargo deck or pushed up to the front starboard portion of the bay. If so, we can use the rest of the deck, along with the flight apron, as one big flight deck. We can cycle the cargo shuttles through the larger forward port elevator airlock, the tactical shuttles through

the midship elevator airlock, and the fighters through the aft elevator airlock.”

“Fighters?” Nathan wondered.

“I think it would be prudent to stage at least twelve of our fighters on the Celestia. She is currently defenseless. Even after they get the plasma cannon turret working, she is still going to need help against fighters and possibly even incoming missiles. That turret can’t track fast enough to keep up with such high-speed, highly maneuverable targets.”

“You’re talking about using fighters as point-defenses,” Nathan realized.

“Yes, sir. If we’re going to be leaving the Celestia unprotected to conduct hit-and-run strikes elsewhere, she’s got to have something.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Major,” Nathan assured him. “It just never occurred to me that you could use fighters in such a way. Good thinking,” Nathan told him. He turned back to the images of Cameron and Vladimir on the view screen. “What about connecting the command deck to the rest of the ship?” Nathan asked.

*“We’re going to take some bulkheads from the starboard side of D deck and use them to create a connecting corridor. It will not be pretty, but it will work.”*

“You’re not going to need them on D deck?” Nathan asked.

*“We do not have time to patch all the holes on the starboard side right now, so no. We need them more to connect the command deck.”*

“Very well. How are things progressing with the plasma cannon turret?”

*“Slowly but surely,”* Cameron told him. *“Lieutenant Montgomery believes he can have the weapon ready to test*

*fire in about six or seven hours."*

"I'm not sure we have that much time, Commander," Nathan warned.

*"I told the lieutenant as much. He insists he and his men are working as quickly as possible."*

"Would it help if we assigned more people to the task?"

*"They're already tripping over each other as it is,"* Cameron told him. *"Besides, the Aurora can't afford to lose any more of her crew, not if you want to remain combat effective."*

"Okay, now the big question: how long until you can lift off?" Nathan asked.

*"Several of the maneuvering thrusters are still not answering diagnostic requests,"* Vladimir told them. *"We will have to send EVA teams out to plug portable diagnostic units into the affected maneuvering thrusters from the outside. This is a little bit of a problem, as most of the affected units are along the lower edge of the hull. We may have to dig a little to access the diagnostic ports."*

"How long?"

*"A few hours, at least,"* Vladimir said. *"And that is just to run the diagnostics. If too many of them are damaged, we may not be able to compensate adequately with the remaining thrusters."*

"And if that happens?"

*"If that happens, the Celestia may be stuck on Metis for a very long time."*

"You're telling me that you cannot fix them?" Nathan said. "I thought you could fix anything."

*"Fixing them is not the problem,"* Vladimir defended. *"Accessing them is the problem. This ship was not designed to sit on the surface on her belly, Captain. It was meant to float in space... always. Trust me; it was not an engineer*

*who decided that landing her on her belly on a giant, potato-shaped rock was a good plan."*

Nathan sat back in his chair and sighed. "If you are able to get her off the surface, can she fly?"

*"I believe so, yes," Vladimir said. "We have not found anything wrong with her main propulsion systems. They need to be calibrated properly, but they will work."*

"How fast will she go?" Nathan wondered.

*"I would not run these engines at maximum power, Captain. With a long burn, maybe two percent light."*

Nathan was silent. His dream of having two jump-capable warships with which to liberate the Earth was quickly fading away. "Doctor Sorenson, I don't suppose you have any good news to report."

"After looking at the specifications for the Celestia's emitter design, I'm sure we can fabricate them. The Takarans even think they can improve upon the design and increase their efficiency."

"Let's not toy with the designs just yet," Nathan said. "Let's just try to get her jump drive working."

"Of course, Captain."

"Any idea on a time frame?"

"Several weeks at least, maybe longer," Abby told him.

"Any chance you can improve upon that time frame?"

"With or without destroying the Celestia on her first jump?" Abby answered.

Nathan sighed again. "Any other good news to report?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

*"We found lots of coffee in the unpressurized areas of D deck," Vladimir said.*

"Good," Nathan said. "I'm pretty sure we're going to need it."

*"Sir, in light of the current situation, you may want to reconsider our alternatives,"* Cameron suggested.

"To which alternatives do you refer, Commander?" Nathan asked.

*"We could strip a lot of usable equipment from this ship. There's still a lot of stuff in the main hangar deck and the cargo deck all boxed up and waiting to be installed. All of that could be moved in a few hours."*

"Anything we can't fabricate?" Nathan asked, already knowing the answer.

*"No, sir,"* Vladimir answered.

"We'll continue with the current plan, Commander. We still have eighty-seven minutes until the Jung conclude that something happened to one or both of their gunships. We'll continue to transfer propellant and support your repair efforts until the Jung return. If we are unable to defend the Celestia, your people will bug out on shuttles, and we'll scuttle the Celestia, preferably with a few Jung ships within the annihilation range of her antimatter containment breach. If necessary, the Aurora will attempt to keep the Jung away from the Jovian system by engaging them elsewhere while you and your people continue to work. If we do so, we'll leave the Falcon near you in order to alert us if the Jung should sneak back while we are gone so we can jump back to defend you."

Nathan scanned the command briefing room, looking at the faces of his staff. "If there's nothing else to discuss..."

"Sir," Jessica said, "I believe we should try to make contact with the resistance, let them know that we found the Celestia and what our plans are."

"To what end?" Nathan asked.

"Maybe they can help somehow."

"How?"

"I don't know. Maybe they can start some trouble on Earth, keep the Jung off-balance until we get the Celestia out of here. I mean, you sent me down there to establish contact with them. I gave them the comm-schedule, and we've already missed two of the comm windows with them. They're going to be wondering what happened to us."

"I'm not sure it's a wise use of resources at the moment," Nathan said.

"Maybe not, but there may be people down there, members of the EDF, who outrank us. There may even be members of the United Earth Republic or leaders of the major nations of the republic. Technically, we do answer to them. Even if we don't, the people of Earth need to know that we're out here, that we're fighting for them. Just that knowledge alone could be a tipping point."

"Don't they already know?" Nathan asked. "After all, we jumped in and took out a few Jung ships a few weeks ago. We even attacked a few ground targets."

"The Jung may have played that down in the eyes of the public. From what I saw, they have a very powerful propaganda system in place. The more contact the resistance has with us, the less effective the Jung propaganda system becomes."

"Very well," Nathan said. "We can't spare the jump shuttle right now, as we need every shuttle we have to support the Celestia's repair efforts."

"The Falcon is still space-worthy," Major Prechitt said. "Full of holes, but space-worthy. Assuming, of course, that Mister Hayes doesn't try to attack anything..."

"Jess, brief Loki on the contact procedures for the resistance. Have them launch and make contact as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."



## CHAPTER FOUR

"Jump complete," Loki reported.

"Why can't they just transmit a signal to the resistance from Jupiter?" Josh wondered as he checked his flight displays. "If they're using a laser comm, it's not like it's being broadcast in all directions."

"The laser signal spreads out a bit over distance," Loki told him. "By the time it hit Earth, it would be too easy to intercept."

"Yeah, but it's encrypted, isn't it?"

"I'm just following orders, Josh. You should just be happy that the captain is still letting us fly."

"How many times do you want me to apologize?"

"A few more wouldn't hurt," Loki answered. "Hail transmission is complete. Pitch up three degrees and come forty to port."

"And why all this jumping around?" Josh wondered as he adjusted the Falcon's course. "Why can't we just sit here and wait for their response?"

"Because that's what the Jung would expect us to do."

"Wouldn't they expect us to do what we would expect them to expect us... you know what I mean."

"I'm just the navigator and systems operator, Josh. Lieutenant Commander Nash gave us the comm procedures, and our job is to follow them."

"Course change complete," Josh reported. "So you're saying that I'm overthinking this?"

"Yes."

Josh's eyebrows shot up. "That's a first, eh?"

"Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

The Falcon's newly updated jump management system automatically turned Josh's helmet visor opaque to protect his eyes from the blinding jump flash. It was an odd sensation. One moment, he was looking at his instruments, and the next moment, he was staring at the opaque, silvery inside of his helmet visor.

"Jump."

The familiar blue-white flash washed over the Falcon's cockpit. A second later, Josh's visor became clear again, allowing him to see his console once again.

"Jump complete," Loki reported. "Retargeting laser comm-array."

"How long are we supposed to wait for an answer?" Josh asked.

"Ten minutes at this position," Loki answered. "Then we move to the next position and hail them again."

"So we jump, hail, jump, listen... then repeat? How many times do we repeat?"

"Three times or until someone answers. If they answer, we use a different set of waypoints to carry on the exchange," Loki answered.

"And if no one answers?"

"Then we jump back to the Aurora and report in."

"What happens if we jump back and the Aurora's not there?"

"They'll leave a jump marker behind," Loki told him.

"A what?"

"I forgot to tell you. Lieutenant Montgomery developed a jump marker. It's just a tiny buoy, about the size of your fist. If we get back and the Aurora is gone, we just transmit a

jump marker hail in all directions and the device will answer us with the Aurora's destination and time of jump."

"Cool, but what happens if someone else finds it?"

"You have to transmit the current key for it to respond, and it's so small that it's nearly impossible to detect. Besides, it fries itself after it transmits its data."

"That's a pretty good idea," Josh said. "That's always bothered me, you know? Wondering if the Aurora will be there when we get back. Every time we jump, that goes through my head."

"Mine, too."

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Montgomery and two members of his team entered the Celestia's bridge. "Commander," he said to Cameron as he entered, "from which console would you like to control the weapon?"

"How complicated will the weapon be to operate?" Commander Taylor asked.

"The system is mostly automated," the lieutenant stated. "The operator only needs to assign targets and priorities. The weapon receives tracking information from the ship's sensors, as well as course and speed data from the Celestia's flight computers. Once targets have been assigned and prioritized, the weapon will track the highest priority target and notify the operator when it has locked onto the target and is ready to fire. At that point, it is a simple press of the button to fire the weapon."

Cameron looked at her executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Kovacic.

"Either tactical or sensors," the lieutenant commander said. "Not much else left other than the flight console and

comms.”

“You may interface the weapon with the tactical console,” Commander Taylor instructed the lieutenant.

“As you wish, Commander,” the lieutenant answered, bowing his head smartly the way Takaran officers always did when accepting direction from their superiors.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic watched as the Takaran lieutenant took a step back and then pivoted around in perfect military style to proceed to the tactical console. His two assistants followed him in similar style, leaving the lieutenant commander and his captain standing in the doorway to the Celestia’s ready room.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic followed Cameron as she turned and entered the ready room. “Are they always that formal?” he asked.

“The Takarans were a monarchy,” she explained, “with a complex hierarchy of noblemen. Their society had very strict rules about such things. Failing to show proper respect to a superior was not well tolerated, from what I’ve heard.”

“You said they *were* a monarchy,” the lieutenant commander stated. “So what are they now?”

Cameron sat down behind her desk. “I’m not really sure, to be honest. Their new leader was planning on disbanding the monarchy and the system of nobles and replacing it with a parliamentary system, but we left before that took place.”

“These are the guys you defeated, right?”

“We helped to dethrone an illegitimate leader, allowing the rightful leader to take his place.”

“What, like the real king or something?”

“A *prince*, actually. I know, the idea of a king may seem unusual to us, but there were several such governments still in existence on Earth when the plague struck. The Takarans may have been an offshoot of one of those governments.

They have had a monarchy for nearly nine hundred years, and for most of that time, it worked well for them.”

“I guess I just assumed all of that died out with the plague,” the lieutenant commander said.

“Based on what we’ve learned thus far, we suspect there may be many more civilizations out there that originated from Earth or one of her core worlds. It seems people fled the core worlds in droves to escape the bio-digital plague. It became somewhat of an overnight business—hastily conceived colonization missions into deep space. We discovered an ill-fated one on our way back.”

“Yeah, I read the reports. I have to admit, it’s a bit hard to imagine—people from Earth spread out for thousands of light years.”

“Yes, it is hard to imagine.”

“So do you trust these guys?” the lieutenant commander asked, one eyebrow raised in doubt. “You guys *were* at war with them. You even attacked their capital and destroyed many of their ships. Now you’re just going to trust them?”

“I understand your concerns, Lieutenant Commander, but the Takaran scientists and technicians that came with us were selected by Prince Casimir himself,” Commander Taylor explained. “If he says they can be trusted, that’s good enough for me.”

“Just checking, sir. That is my job, right?”

Cameron smiled. “Yes, it is.”

\* \* \*

“Jump flash,” Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora’s sensor station. “It’s the Falcon, sir.”

Nathan and Jessica both turned toward Naralena at the comm center at the back of the bridge.

"Falcon reports they were unable to establish contact with Earth's resistance, sir," Naralena reported. "They're requesting instructions."

"How long until the next contact window?" Nathan asked.

Jessica looked at her data pad. "A little over three hours."

"Have the Falcon land and top off. Then they can relieve the Talons on lookout duty," Nathan instructed.

"Captain, the resistance cell that I made contact with would not miss a comm window, not without reason."

"Such as?"

"If they aren't making contact, it's because they can't," Jessica said, "which means they're either on the run, captured, or dead."

"We missed several contact windows," Nathan pointed out.

"True, but we have limited opportunities. They don't. Don't forget, we were ambushed during our evac, which means they either followed us or they had someone on the inside. Either way, it all adds up to one thing. The cell I contacted was probably compromised."

"They're the ones that told you where the Celestia was located. If they were captured, that would explain those gunships. The conundrum is why they only sent two gunships," Nathan said. "If they didn't have faith in their intel, it's possible they didn't want to risk significant assets."

"Even if they did have faith in their intel, they were probably expecting an unarmed ship. Regardless, we're still going to need to make contact with another cell," Jessica insisted.

"Why? We found the Celestia."

"We're going to need crew as well," Jessica reminded him. "There have got to be a lot of EDF people still alive down there. According to the resistance cell I made contact

with, most of the Intrepid's crew made it out before she went down. Word has it they made it down to Australia. If we could covertly make contact with them, we might be able to pull off a couple of evac jumps and bring some of them back to crew the Celestia."

"That's not a bad idea," Nathan admitted. "We barely have enough crewmen to fill a full shift on each ship, let alone key relief staff." Nathan looked at Jessica. "You do realize that you got lucky last time. You managed to make contact fairly easily. You might not be so lucky next time."

Jessica smiled. "I wasn't planning on using luck this time."

\* \* \*

Tony entered the bridge, his eyes growing even wider when he saw the image of the Celestia sitting on the surface of Metis, hovering above them, and inverted. He paused and turned his head to the side to try to make sense of what he was seeing when Sergeant Weatherly called to him.

"This way, Mister Guerrero."

Tony turned and looked at the sergeant, surprised by the use of his last name. "Yeah, sorry," he apologized as he followed the sergeant into the ready room.

"Tony," Jessica greeted, "I heard Synda finally woke up. I'm sorry I haven't had time to go down to medical to see her."

"She sleeps most of the time," Tony said. "They keep her pretty doped up because of the nanites." Tony turned and pointed back at the hatch. "What was that other ship on the view screen out there?"

"That's the Celestia," Nathan told him.

"I thought she was destroyed when the Jung attacked."

"No, she escaped as the Orbital Assembly Platform was destroyed."

"And she's sitting on a moon? That's Jupiter, right?"

"Yes, that's Jupiter," Nathan confirmed. "And that moon the Celestia is sitting on is Metis."

"So, the Aurora was reported lost but wasn't, and the Celestia was reported lost, but wasn't... What about those other ships that were lost... what, twenty years ago or something? Are they still alive as well?"

"What ships?" Jessica wondered.

"I think he's talking about the Defender and the Valiant," Nathan told her. "No, Tony, what reportedly happened to those ships was true, at least as far as I know," Nathan admitted.

Tony's eyebrows raised and then lowered. "They said you wanted to see me about something."

"Yes," Jessica said, "why don't you take a seat." Jessica pointed at one of the chairs in front of Nathan's desk.

Tony looked at Jessica and Nathan as he took his seat, suspicion in his eyes. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"The resistance cell we made contact with isn't answering our hails. We suspect that something has happened to them."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"We need to establish contact with another cell, preferably several of them. I was hoping you could help us make contact through those mobile routing servers again."

"Sure, but you'd have to be on the surface to do it."

"That's kind of what I figured," Jessica said, her face cringing slightly. "Are those mobile routing servers all over the globe?"



“For the most part,” Tony said, “at least, in all the most populated areas, anyway.”

“So they’re in Australia as well?”

“Sure, at least in the major cities. Why?”

“That’s where we were hoping to make contact next,” Jessica explained, “in Australia.”

“Why Australia?” Tony asked.

“Most of the Intrepid’s crew bailed out as she was going down over Sidney.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that. Didn’t it crash into Sydney?”

“Yes. We’re a little shorthanded, crew-wise. We thought the local cells in Australia might be able to round up members of the Intrepid’s crew for us to use on the Celestia.”

“Makes sense.” Tony thought for a moment. “So you’re going back to Earth?” Tony looked at both their faces.

“I am,” Jessica said, looking directly at him.

“You want me to go back with you, don’t you?” He looked at Jessica, then at Nathan. Neither of them responded. “What about Synda?”

“Synda’s going to be recovering for weeks,” Nathan said. “She needs to stay here.”

“Will I be able to come back,” Tony wondered, “so I can stay with her, help her out?” He looked at both of them as if pleading his case. “She needs someone to take care of her while she recovers, right?”

“Sure, you can come back,” Jessica promised, “same way we came back last time.”

“Only with less shooting, right?” Tony asked.

“Definitely with less shooting,” Jessica answered.

“Okay, I don’t see why not.”

“The mission isn’t without risk,” Nathan pointed out. “Maybe you can teach Jessica how to access this mobile

network.”

“It’s not that easy,” Tony explained. “You actually need to have some hacking skill in order to get in. They made it that way on purpose. I mean, I might be able to teach you how, but if you fail, the system will lock out your device, and you’ll have to find another one.”

“How likely am I to fail?” Jessica asked.

“It took me six tries to figure it out. I’m no major league hacker, but I do have some skills. It would probably be much quicker to have me go down there with you.”

Nathan and Jessica looked at each other. Nathan looked back at Tony. “You’re not a member of the EDF, so I cannot order you to go. In fact, it’s probably against regulations for me to even ask you to go.”

“I get it,” Tony said. “Really, I do. Besides, how dangerous can it be? We’re just going to jump down to the surface in one of those jump ships of yours, right?”

“Not exactly,” Jessica admitted.

\* \* \*

Jessica and Tony exited the outer doors of the bridge security airlock into the main corridor. “I’ve got to take care of a few things before we go,” she told him. “Maybe you want to go and say goodbye to Synda before we leave.”

“Yes, I’d like that. How long do I have?” Tony wondered.

“We’ve got about an hour before the Earth is at the correct point in its rotation for us to execute the insertion jump,” she told him, looking at her watch. “We’ll need about twenty minutes to gear up before we go, so don’t take too long.”

“Okay. Where should I go after I say goodbye to Synda?”

"I'll meet you in medical," Jessica told him. She turned to the security escort who was accompanying Tony as he moved about the ship. "Take him back down to surgical recovery. I'll join up with you later."

"Yes, sir," the Corinari guard acknowledged.

Jessica watched as Tony and the security guard headed down the ramp, then turned around and stepped into the security office. The compartment had several desks around the perimeter, each with several large view screens used to monitor the thousands of cameras located both within and outside of the ship. "Who wanted to see me?" she asked as she entered the compartment. A technician at the far corner desk raised his hand. Jessica headed across the room toward him. "What's up?"

"I thought you might want to see this," he told her. "I've been reviewing all the footage from inside the Aurora, as well as the Celestia, starting from the moment we first rendezvoused with her."

"How'd you get the Celestia's files?" Jessica wondered. "They don't even have a functioning security office."

"Maybe not, but many of their cameras are working. In fact, they have been recording since they left Earth nearly three months ago. I just copied them over to our video storage system," he explained. "Look at this." The technician typed in a command and started the replay of a video clip on one of his screens.

Jessica leaned forward, studying the images on the screen.

"Watch what the subject does," the technician told her.

Jessica continued watching. Her head suddenly jerked back slightly, and her eyes squinted in concern. "What the hell is that thing?" She leaned forward. "Can you pause and zoom in on that?"

The technician typed another command, then tapped the screen with his fingers.

"Is that what I think it is?" Jessica wondered.

"It's either a transmitter or a transponder of some type. It doesn't match anything in your tech database, and it certainly isn't Corinairan or Takaran technology."

"Son of a bitch," Jessica mumbled.

"Shall I send a team to apprehend the subject?" the technician asked.

Jessica sighed. "No, not yet. Monitor only. I have a better idea. Tag that file for the captain and my eyes only, and send it to his ready room video queue. I'm going to go talk to him right now."

"Yes, sir."

"*Need to know* only on this, and no one else needs to know, understood?" Jessica ordered.

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \*

"The Falcon will be on lookout the entire time," Nathan explained to Cameron over the vid-comm displayed on the view screen on his ready room wall. "If the Jung show up while we're gone, the Falcon will jump to our engagement area to notify us. We'll immediately disengage and jump back to defend you. Meanwhile, your fighters will provide point-defenses and intercept as needed until we return. If it appears that the Jung are going to take the ship, set the timer on the containment bottle charges, evac your crew via the jump shuttle, and get clear."

"*There's not enough room on the jump shuttle for everyone,*" Cameron reminded him.

"I'm recalling all but thirty of your crew," Nathan told her. "It will be tight, but you'll fit. As long as you reach us quickly enough, the extra people won't overtax the shuttle's life support systems."

*"And if you're no longer available?"*

"Either jump back to Tanna, or take your chances landing on Earth," Nathan told her.

*"Understood. What about the fighters?"* Cameron asked over the vid-comm. *"How are they going to get clear?"*

"If you're about to abandon ship, I suspect there will not be any of my fighters left, Commander," Major Prechitt stated.

*"Good point,"* Cameron agreed. *"What are your first targets?"*

"Our first jump is primarily to deliver Lieutenant Commander Nash and Tony to Earth. There is a damaged cruiser in orbit. She's attached to that grouping of troop ships they hooked together to create a makeshift spaceport. That's our first target."

*"I would advise you not to take out that spaceport,"* Cameron warned them. *"It's a stationary target right now. If you take out the only thing they have to defend, there's not much reason for their ships to stay close to Earth and away from us."*

"Good point," Nathan agreed. "After Jess and Tony are away, we'll take out the cruiser docked to her but leave the spaceport alone. After that, we'll jump out to a turn waypoint, then jump back to you."

*"And after that? What do you plan to hit next?"*

"I'm hoping that one attack will keep them thinking long enough for us to get you flying. However, we'll reassess the situation after we return. This is going to be a fluid situation, at least until we get you off of Metis and back into space."

*"Understood,"* Cameron agreed.

"How long until your plasma cannon is up?" Nathan asked.

*"Lieutenant Montgomery is making the connections to the weapon now; He's tying it into the ship's systems, so it can be operated from the tactical console. He expects the first test firing within the hour. If all goes well, it should be ready for full-power operations shortly thereafter."*

"That's good news," Nathan said. "In order for us to drop Jess and Tony and attack that damaged cruiser without having to loiter for too long, we'll have to jump in forty-eight minutes. Get all but your thirty most necessary people back to the Aurora before then. We'll see you when we get back."

*"Good hunting, sir,"* Cameron said. *"Celestia Actual out."*

Nathan turned to Major Prechitt and Jessica as Cameron's image from the Celestia's ready room disappeared from the main view screen, replaced by the recording of the view from Captain Roberts' ocean-front property on Earth. "It's going to take some getting used to, hearing her say 'Celestia Actual'."

\* \* \*

Eli rose, glaring at General Bacca who was standing on the other side of the desk. The general's unflappable demeanor never ceased to amaze him. "I don't suppose you've sent anyone to investigate why your gunships haven't reported in."

"The reason is clear," General Bacca stated calmly. "Either the Aurora has rendezvoused with the Celestia and is protecting her, or the Celestia is not as unarmed as we have been led to believe."

"If you had sent greater forces as I had suggested, the problem might have been resolved by now," Eli grumbled.

"Or we might be missing more than two measly gunships," the general responded, one eyebrow raised.

Eli looked sternly at the old general. "We have an old expression on Earth. It's so old, I don't even know how far back it goes. 'Fortune favors the bold.' You might want to try it sometime, General."

"The Jung have many such expressions," the general retorted. He then let loose a string of words in his native language.

"That almost sounds poetic," Eli said. "Too bad I don't speak Jung."

"Loosely translated, it means, 'Bold warriors seldom become wise generals.'"

"So I assume you intend to wait and see what the Aurora does next."

"No, Governor. I suspect that the reason the Aurora is defending the Celestia is because the Celestia is both unable to defend herself, and she is currently unable to leave Metis."

"Based on what?" Eli challenged. "A moment ago, you said it was possible that the Celestia was not as unarmed as you were led to believe."

"Based on the belief that your father does not possess the training or fortitude to feed us false or otherwise misleading information."

"How can you be so sure? My father can be quite stubborn when he puts his mind to a task."

"Our interrogators are quite skilled at their jobs, Governor. If they believe he is telling the truth, so do I."

"Admiral Galiardi slipped a deception past your interrogators, did he not? Isn't that why you have a disabled

cruiser sitting at your spaceport?”

“We had our doubts about that bit of intelligence. However, I believe it was at your urgings that we sent a cruiser to investigate the location given to us by the admiral, was it not, Governor?”

Eli saw the smile on General Bacca’s face and decided it was better not to press the issue. “If you are correct, and my father is telling the truth, wouldn’t now be the perfect time to attack with full forces?”

“Perhaps, but I don’t believe that full forces are necessary. Significant forces, yes, but not full forces. I believe proper tactics using limited forces to be more appropriate, given our current resources.”

“For a member of a military that believes in attacking with overwhelming forces, you are amazingly hesitant to do so, General.”

“Overwhelming forces make all battles winnable, Governor,” General Bacca said. “However, it is logistics that wins wars.”

\* \* \*

Tony stood at the foot of Synda’s bed in the surgical recovery suite of the Aurora’s medical section. He studied her face as she lay peacefully sleeping. He thought about the millions of nanites that were swimming around in her body, rebuilding and repairing her damaged tissues. She looked weak to him... better than when she had first come out of surgery, but still not the feisty, independent young woman he had known back at the gym. He had known her for years, ever since she had first come to Winnipeg and enrolled at the same gym as him. She had been such a scrawny girl back then, but she had trained hard and grown



strong over the years. It pained him greatly to see her this way, frail and weak once more. He wondered what would have happened had he gone looking for her after the invasion. Would they have headed north together? Might they be safe in the wilderness at this very moment, instead of being stranded on the last warship of Earth?

"Still sleeping?" Jessica whispered as she entered the room.

"Like I said, they keep her pretty much knocked out most of the time." Tony sighed. "I was hoping to say goodbye to her before we left."

"Probably for the best," Jessica said. "She'd only be worrying about you instead of focusing on getting well." Jessica paused for a moment, looking off to one side. "Just a moment," she said as she tapped her comm-set. "Go for Nash." She listened intently for a moment before speaking again. "Understood. Nash out."

"Something important?" Tony asked.

"No, just routine security stuff."

Tony looked back at Synda for a moment. "Do you believe that every decision we make along the way brings us to where we are?"

"What?"

"It's something my father used to say." He turned back toward Jessica. "He believed that every decision, no matter how remote it might seem, had to have happened in order for you to get to where you are at any moment in your life."

"Is this like the butterfly wings making a tsunami on the other side of the world?" Jessica asked.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I don't know. I never really think about that kind of stuff. I'm more of a 'minute by minute' kind of girl."

“Really? I can’t help but think of such things. What if I had never met Synda? What if I had never hooked up with Mack? What if you had never come across Synda’s hideout?”

“See, that’s why I don’t think about that stuff,” Jessica said. “It can drive you nuts. At the very least, it can get in the way of making snap decisions. I prefer to do what feels right at the time.”

“I think I do the same,” Tony explained. “I just think about it a lot afterward; that’s all.”

“Well stop it.” Jessica looked at her watch. “It’s time to go, anyway. We jump in thirty-five minutes, and we still have to suit up.”

Tony looked at Synda’s face one more time before he left. His eyes suddenly squinted together, and his head perked up as he realized what Jessica had said. “Suit up?”

\* \* \*

“We’ll break the horizon and be on the Earth side of Jupiter in eleven minutes,” Ensign Schenker reported.

“If we don’t test it now, it will be another four hours before we get another opportunity,” Cameron told the lieutenant.

“I’m not entirely sure the targeting system will work properly,” Lieutenant Montgomery stated, “not without proper calibration.”

“Can it be aimed manually?” Luis asked from the tactical console. “It has a gun camera, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, of course...”

“Then I can point it at something and shoot.”

“The chances of hitting something with any level of precision using such methods is astronomical at best,” the

lieutenant protested.

"We're not going to be shooting at tiny targets, sir, just big ol' honkin' warships."

Lieutenant Montgomery looked confused. "Honkin'?" He turned to Commander Taylor. "Commander..."

"Can it be manually aimed?"

"Yes, of course it can," the lieutenant answered.

"Then point it out into space on a trajectory that will keep it hidden from Earth and fire a few test shots," she ordered, "and do so in less than ten minutes, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Montgomery answered. He turned to the sensor operator. "Ensign Schenker, is there anything along the Commander's requested firing angle that we could use as a target? Some debris, perhaps?"

"There's plenty of debris from those two gunships still floating around. Give me a minute."

Lieutenant Montgomery turned back to Commander Taylor. "A target will give us a better idea of how much the calibration of the targeting system might be off. We will not have time to make the adjustments and test fire again before we reach the Earth side of Jupiter, but I should be able to calculate the deviation and make the necessary adjustments during our Earth-side transit."

"I have a target for you, Lieutenant," Ensign Schenker reported. "It's about the size of a small shuttle. Feeding the track to tactical now."

Luis looked down at his tactical console as the track appeared on his tactical display. "Assigning target," Luis reported.

"The weapon's targeting computer will read the target's speed and course data and adjust its aim accordingly," the lieutenant explained.

"We have a target lock," Luis reported. "Weapon is tracking the target. Weapon's power is set at one percent."

"You're clear to fire when ready, Ensign," Cameron said.

"Firing the weapon." Luis pressed the button on his touch screen. The perimeter of the button flashed red, indicating that it had been activated. He looked up just in time to see a bolt of red plasma energy streak away from the aft, top edge of the view screen as it raced toward its target at nearly the speed of light.

"Clean miss," Luis reported.

"By how much?" Cameron asked.

"At least five kilometers, sir," Ensign Schenker reported from the sensor station.

Cameron sighed. "You can fix that, I'm assuming," she said to the lieutenant.

"Of course. The important thing is that the weapon interfaced properly with the Celestia's systems, and it did fire."

"He's right, sir," Luis said. "That target is at least two hundred kilometers away, and it's only about one hundred meters across. Put a Jung cruiser a few kilometers away from us, and we'd likely nail her. Maybe not exactly where we wanted, but we'd hit her nonetheless."

"How much time is left?" Cameron asked her sensor operator.

"Eight minutes, thirty seconds," the ensign responded.

"I'd sure love to see a full-power shot before then," Cameron told the lieutenant.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that will not be possible," Lieutenant Montgomery said. "It takes several minutes to run the diagnostics after each firing. Raising the power and firing again before the post-firing diagnostics have been completed would be a foolish risk."

“We may be forced to use that weapon long before we get another chance to test fire it,” Cameron warned the lieutenant.

“I am confident the weapon will fire at full power without any problems, Commander,” the lieutenant stated with conviction. “However, regardless of my confidence in the weapon, I still would not recommend making such a shot until we have run proper diagnostics—unless, of course, we have no choice, which is not the case at the moment.”

“Very well,” Cameron agreed. “Do what you can, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Comms, contact the Aurora and report that our plasma cannon turret is tentatively operational,” Cameron ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Souza answered from the comm station.

Cameron looked at Lieutenant Commander Kovacic. “I hope we don’t have to use that thing any time soon.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I kind of hope we do,” the lieutenant commander admitted. “We’ve all spent the last two months watching the Jung take over our homeworld, Commander. I, for one, would love to fire at least one shot at the bastards.”

“Careful what you wish for, Lieutenant Commander,” Cameron warned.

\* \* \*

Tony stood in the EVA prep compartment near the Aurora’s starboard cargo airlock. His arms were spread wide as technicians passed his life support vest over his head and onto his shoulders. “This is it?” he exclaimed, baffled by the

seemingly light weight of the pressure suit he was wearing. "This is all I get to protect me in space?"

"What did you expect?" Jessica asked as technicians secured her life support vest.

"I don't know. Something a little bulkier perhaps." He pulled at his sleeve. "I mean, we're going to be reentering the Earth's atmosphere, right?"

"They're fine," Jessica assured him. She turned to the crew chief overseeing their jump prep. "Everything check out okay, Chief?"

"Yes, sir," the chief answered. "I checked them over personally, sir."

"Don't I need a heat shield or something?" Tony wondered.

"It's built into your jump rig," Jessica explained.

Tony looked at Jessica's suit. "Why is yours different than mine?"

"Yours is a Corinairan interceptor pilot's pressure jump rig," Jessica explained. "It's more automated. It's designed to bring an injured pilot all the way down safely, even if he's unconscious."

"And yours isn't?"

"I'm wearing a Ghatazhak jump rig," she told him. "Fully manual and no thermal shielding. It gets really hot in these, and I mean really fucking hot."

"Then why don't you just use one like mine?" Tony wondered.

"We've only got so many of them left," she told him, "and we need them for our pilots."

Tony nodded his understanding, then looked at his suit sleeves again. "It just doesn't seem strong enough to be used as a spacesuit," Tony complained as he tugged at the material.

“Well, technically, you’re not going to be in space for very long,” Jessica said.

Tony flinched as the technicians tightened up his life support vest and activated it. A cool sensation swept over him as the suit’s temperature control system chilled the water circulating through the thousands of tiny tubules throughout the suit. It was just enough to bring his body temperature down to a comfortable level. “Whoa, that was pretty cool, literally.”

“It runs both hot and cold,” Jessica told him, “whatever is needed. It works really well. I wish the Ghatazhak suits worked as well.”

“They do,” one of the technicians told her. “They just don’t fit you properly. Besides, the Ghatazhak are trained to tolerate temperature extremes.”

“Of course,” Jessica said to the Corinairan technician. “I almost forgot. By the way, remind me to smack Lieutenant Montgomery when I get back, will ya?”

The technician smiled. “Yes, sir.”

Tony followed the guidance of the technician and moved over, leaning up against a meter-tall apparatus attached to a wheeled stand that resembled an upright cart. The technicians began fastening him to the apparatus, wrapping straps over his shoulders, around his waist, and between his legs. “Is this like a parachute? It seems kind of big.”

“It’s more than just a parachute,” Jessica told him. “It’s actually a three stage system. On the bottom is the maneuvering system for steering in space, along with de-orbit thrusters. It also holds the thermal shield generator, which protects you during reentry. Then there’s the parachute system, which includes a drogue, a primary deceleration chute, and a main chute.”

“Where’s the backup chute?” Tony wondered.

Jessica laughed. "There is none."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. If your main doesn't work, there's not going to be enough time to open a reserve anyway."

Tony looked confused again. "Why? If we're jumping from space, there should be plenty of time, right?"

"You've heard of a HALO jump?" Jessica asked.

"That's where they jump from really high up and open at a low altitude, right?"

"Well, this is a *really* high altitude, low open jump."

"How low?"

"Better you didn't think about that part," she told him. "It's all automated. Just let the auto-nav system take you all the way down. And remember to keep your knees bent when you land."

Tony looked at Jessica. "Is it too late to change my mind?"

"Yup." She leaned into the technician nearest her. "Make sure his auto-nav is set to give him a soft landing."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure this thing is going to work?" Tony asked.

"Trust me," Jessica assured him. "They're in perfect shape."

Tony tried to stand with his entire jump rig now attached. "Jesus! This thing weighs a ton! How the hell are we supposed to walk in this thing?"

"We don't," Jessica said. "They wheel us into the cargo airlock, then they lower the artificial gravity so we can handle the extra bulk. It'll feel like a day pack."

The technician placed Tony's helmet over his head and secured it to his neck collar. Tony heard a hiss of air and felt a gentle breeze blowing against the base of his neck as the



helmet sealed up and became part of the life support system.

*"Can you hear me?"* a technician standing in front of him said through the comm-set in the helmet.

"Yeah, I can hear you." Tony could hear his own voice reverberate within his helmet. "This is weird."

*"Yeah, it takes some getting used to,"* Jessica's voice said over the comms.

"I'm surprised," Tony said. "I expected it to be stuffy in here, but it's actually nice and cool."

Jessica laughed. *"Enjoy it while you can."*

\* \* \*

"Line of sight with Earth in two minutes," Mister Riley reported. "Jump point in ninety seconds."

"Flight ops reports twenty Talons are stationed on the Celestia," Naralena reported from the comm station. "Jump shuttle is in the Celestia's bay as well and is ready for evac. Falcon is in position over Jupiter on lookout duty. Deck is now red."

"Threat board?" Nathan asked.

"Jovian system shows clear, sir," Mister Randeem reported from tactical.

"Set general quarters," Nathan ordered calmly.

"General quarters, aye," Naralena answered.

The lighting on the Aurora's bridge dropped in intensity and took on an obviously red hue as the call to general quarters was heard throughout the ship. Nathan rotated his command chair around slowly as he watched his bridge crew prepare for action. Additional bridge officers took up positions at each of the auxiliary stations on either side of the bridge near the exits, ready to assist or take over any

regular bridge station as needed. Additional security personnel showed up at the port and starboard entrances, handing heavier weapons to the guards already posted. Nathan scanned the various stations as he rotated full circle, watching as status lights on the various consoles turned green to indicate that the other departments in the ship showed ready.

"All stations report ready," Naralena reported. "Ship is at general quarters."

"Thirty seconds to first jump point," Mister Riley reported.

"Jumpers are entering the starboard cargo airlock."

Tony felt his body become lighter as the technicians rolled him into the Aurora's starboard cargo airlock. "Whoa, you weren't kidding. I feel like I just drove over a small hill at high speed."

*"Try to step off the platform,"* the technician told him.

Tony stepped off the cart's low platform and onto the deck of the airlock. "This is so strange." He bounced up and down on his toes—only slightly at first—then jumped up a little higher. "Hey, this is great. You guys ever use this artificial gravity stuff to play basketball?"

*"Take it easy,"* Jessica warned. *"I don't want you falling over and breaking something before we even get out the door."*

"Yeah, right," Tony said, standing firm.

*"Are you good?"* the technician next to Tony asked.

"Yeah, I'm good."

*"Very well. Good luck, sir."*

"Yeah, thanks." The interior lighting in the airlock and the corridor suddenly turned pale blue. "Why did all the lights

change color?"

*"New protocol. All the lighting turns pale blue five seconds before we jump,"* Jessica explained.

"We're going to jump now?"

The lights reverted back to their normal, red-tinged hue. Jessica smiled. *"We just did."*

*"Closing inner airlock doors,"* the Corinairan technician reported over the comms.

"Then we're over Earth? Oh, shit!" Tony exclaimed.

*"Calm down. We're not there yet,"* Jessica told him as the inner doors to the cargo airlock slammed shut.

*"Depressurizing airlock,"* the technician reported.

*"First we jump out to a maneuvering point and change course so we can get a proper insertion angle. Then we jump to Earth."*

*"Jumpers, Comms,"* Naralena called over their helmet comms. *"Insertion jump point in thirty seconds."*

"Fuck," Tony mumbled. "No one is ever going to believe I did this. I don't even believe I'm about to do this."

Jessica grinned. *"You want me to take a picture of you on the way down?"*

*"Nash, Captain,"* Nathan called over the comms.

*"Nash, go ahead."*

*"Keep it simple, Jess. Keep a low profile, plug into the net, and make contact as quickly as you can. And don't forget to maintain your comm appointments."*

*"Don't worry, Skipper. We got this."*

*"Good luck."*

"How are you so calm?" Tony wondered.

*"Like I said, this ain't my first jump,"* Jessica told him.

"So you're not even a little bit scared?"

*"Hell no, I'm a lot scared."* She smiled from inside her helmet. *"Feels great, doesn't it?"*

The lighting in the airlock turned pale blue.

*"Just remember, when I head for the exit, so do you. Follow me right out the hatch and jump off into space. Your momentum will carry you away from the ship, and your auto-nav will take care of the rest."*

"What do I do if the auto-nav doesn't work?"

*"It'll work. One more thing,"* she said as she grabbed Tony's left forearm and raised it slightly, *"no comms on the way down."* She smiled and pressed a button on his wrist-mounted control unit.

Tony heard a small click in his helmet. He looked at Jessica. Her lips were moving, but all he heard was his own breathing.

The pale blue lighting in the airlock suddenly changed to the red-tinged hue. The outer hatch at the far end of the airlock silently rose into the ceiling, revealing a four-meter-long tunnel the same height and width as the airlock. At the end of the tunnel, the outer door had already opened.

Tony's breath quickened and his pulse raced as the inner doors raised and revealed the Earth rotating below them. The light reflecting off the planet filled the tunnel and the airlock. Tony had seen pictures of the Earth from orbit, but they did not have the effect he felt in that instant. Space had just been a concept to him up until this very moment.

Tony felt Jessica touch his left shoulder. He turned slightly to see her. She was leaning forward and nudging him to go. He did the same. He leaned forward and ran clumsily across the airlock and down the tunnel, doing his best to keep up with his far more experienced partner. He watched her as he ran slightly behind and to her right, seeing her run right off the end of the tunnel and out into space. Tony felt himself losing his balance, starting to fall to his left. Two steps later,

he found himself floating in space and rotating slowly to his right.

The view of the Aurora began to fill his visor, moving across his field of vision from right to left as he continued to rotate. She was massive with smooth, flowing curves and purposeful grooves and indentations. She had multiple scars and even chunks of hull missing from recent battles, but she looked as strong as could be as she moved away from them.

Something in his backpack hissed. Tony felt himself spin around sharply. Another hiss stopped his rotation, and he found himself looking at Jessica who was floating a few meters in front of him and to his left. Small squirts of gas shot out of points on her backpack, causing her to flip head over heels. He could see her face through her clear visor. She smiled at him and waved. Then his own backpack hissed, and he, too, flipped over.

He felt something hit him from behind. It was like someone had swung a baseball bat and struck him hard in the back. "Fuck!" he cried out. There was a low rumbling sound that vibrated throughout his entire body. He remembered Jessica's description of the sequences of a space jump. "De-orbit burn. It's just a de-orbit burn," he said to himself. He tried to remain calm, taking solace in the knowledge that, thus far, his auto-nav system appeared to be working. Then he remembered what the de-orbit burn was for... It was to start his reentry.

"Jumpers have started their reentry burn," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"Keep an eye on them," Nathan ordered. "I want to know when they touch down."

"Aye, sir."

"Threat board?" Nathan inquired.

"No contacts to report."

"Odd," Nathan said, "they still have eight ships in the system. You'd think they would have them at least somewhat spread out around the world they're trying to hold."

"They could have jumped out to take another run at the Celestia," Mister Randeem suggested.

"Possible. If that's the case, the Falcon will let us know."

"Jumpers' de-orbit burn has completed. They'll hit atmospheric interface in three minutes," Mister Navashee reported.

"Very well."

"Captain," Mister Navashee added, "I'm picking up multiple surface contacts. Transferring to tactical."

"They're interceptors, sir," Mister Randeem announced. "Eight, ten, twelve. Twelve interceptors are airborne and climbing quickly."

"Are they headed for us or the jumpers?" Nathan wondered, concern creeping into his voice.

"Their course and speed indicate they are on an intercept vector for us, Captain," Mister Randeem said. "ETA to intercept is five minutes."

"Until the jumpers hit the atmosphere, they won't even be noticeable," Mister Navashee assured the captain.

"Let's get some altitude, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir. Accelerating to higher orbit."

"New ETA for inbound interceptors at current rate of acceleration is six minutes, twenty seconds," Mister Randeem reported.

"Very well."

"New contacts," Mister Navashee reported, "just over the horizon."

"Three contacts:" Mister Randeem added, "two frigates and a cruiser. They're running counter orbit and climbing. They mean to intercept us as we climb, sir."

"Mister Riley, new jump plot. I want to be well behind and slightly above those targets but still within plasma torpedo range."

"Aye, sir. Plotting jump."

"Receiving new heading for jump," Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "Coming to new heading now."

"Jump plotted. Ten seconds to jump point."

"Targets have raised their shields, Captain," Mister Navashee reported.

"Stand by on forward plasma torpedoes, Mister Randeem."

"Forward plasma torpedoes standing by."

"Helm, as soon as we come out of the jump, kill the mains and flip over to bring our tubes to bear on the cruiser first. We'll fire three pairs of plasma torpedoes," Nathan explained, "first on the cruiser, then on the two frigates. That'll have you swinging the nose from left to right, nice and neat."

"Aye, sir."

"Five seconds to jump," Mister Riley reported. "Four..."

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Three..."

"Frigates are firing missiles."

"Two..."

"Eight missiles inbound, four from each frigate," Mister Randeem announced.

"One..."

"Time to impact..."

"Jump."

The jump flash flooded the bridge with light momentarily.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Killing mains and pitching over," the helmsman announced.

Nathan watched the view screen as the Earth rose from the bottom and filled their view. Seconds later, the Earth hovered above them, and they could see the glowing engines of the three Jung ships as they sped away from them.

"Fire when ready, Mister Randeem."

"Firing solution on the cruiser. Firing one and three."

Bolts of plasma energy streaked past them on the view screen, passing on either side as they traversed the distance between the Aurora and the Jung ships in the blink of an eye.

"Bringing the nose slightly to starboard," Mister Chiles announced.

Two blinding flashes of light shown momentarily as the plasma torpedoes struck the Jung cruiser's shields.

"Direct hits," Mister Navashee reported. "No damage noted. Minor weakening of their aft shields."

"Just put our nose between the frigates," Mister Randeem stated from the tactical station. "At this range, I can still angle the tubes onto the target."

Mister Chiles glanced over his shoulder at Captain Scott, who nodded his approval. "Our nose is pointed between the frigates."

"Locking on the first frigate," Mister Randeem announced. "Firing one and three."

Two more plasma torpedoes streaked away from the Aurora.

"Retargeting."

"Single hit," Mister Navashee reported. "Target two's aft shields are down."



"Locking on target three."

"I guess the cruisers have better shields," Nathan said.

"Firing one and three on target three," Mister Randeem announced.

"Two hits!" Mister Navashee reported. "Target three has lost all aft shielding, and one of her main engines is down."

"All ships are taking evasive maneuvers," Mister Randeem announced.

"New contact!" Mister Navashee called out. "Dead ahead, just coming over the horizon."

"It's a battleship, sir!" Mister Randeem reported. "She's not accelerating though. She's just maintaining her standard orbit."

"She doesn't need to," Nathan said, "not with all her guns and missiles. Helm, pitch back over to standard flight attitude."

"Pitching over to normal attitude, aye."

"New contacts," Mister Navashee added. "Coming over the horizon as well! It's their spaceport, Captain. There's a cruiser docked there as well. Looks like she's undergoing repairs. She's only showing minimal internal power."

"What side is the cruiser on?" Nathan asked.

"Topside," Mister Navashee reported. "The spaceport is between the cruiser and the Earth."

"Perfect," Nathan said. "New jump plot. Put us past the battleship and almost to the spaceport on a track to pass five hundred meters above the spaceport."

"Plotting jump, aye," Mister Riley answered.

"Deploy the quads, Mister Randeem," Nathan ordered. "Target will be that cruiser."

"No plasma torpedoes?" Mister Randeem asked.

"I'm not looking to take out the spaceport just yet, Mister Randeem. However, feel free to send a few plasma shots

toward that battleship before we jump."

Mister Randeem smiled. "Aye, sir. Targeting the battleship."

"New jump plotted," Mister Riley reported. "Jump point in ten seconds."

"Mister Chiles, as soon as we jump, roll over to bring our quads onto the target before we pass over her," Nathan ordered. "Mister Navashee, how are our jumpers?" Nathan asked.

"Jumpers will hit the atmosphere in fifteen seconds."

"I've got a lock on the battleship," Mister Randeem announced from the tactical station.

"Jumping in five..."

"Firing one and three."

"Four..."

Two more plasma shots streaked away from the Aurora.

"Three..."

"Direct hits..." Mister Navashee reported.

"Two..."

"No damage. Their shields are holding."

"One..."

"I guess we know who has the best shields then," Nathan muttered to himself.

"Jumping."

"Rolling to port," Mister Chiles announced from the helm as the jump flash subsided.

"Jump complete."

"Locking all quads on the cruiser!" Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan watched as the distant group of troop ships that formed the Jung's makeshift spaceport moved around the left perimeter of the view screen until they came to rest in the upper middle section.

"Roll complete," the helmsman reported.

"The cruiser is trying to power up," Mister Navashee announced.

"She's trying to get her shields up," Nathan said.

"Quads are locked on target," Mister Randeem announced.

"Fire quads," Nathan ordered.

"Firing quads," Mister Randeem answered.

"Zoom in on the target," Nathan ordered. The image of the Jung spaceport immediately grew in size until it filled the view screen. The damaged cruiser was docked to the spaceport's topside, just as expected. Massive rail gun slugs from the Aurora's quad rail guns began pounding the helpless cruiser, tearing into her already damaged upper hull just forward of her main propulsion systems. Chunks of her hull flew in all directions as the kinetic energy of the rail gun rounds walked forward. Eventually, they found an already existing breach in the cruiser's hull and tore deeper inside. Secondary explosions flashed from inside the cruiser's hull, and she broke in two just aft of her mid-ship line.

"New contacts!" Mister Navashee announced. "The battleship is firing missiles."

"Eight missiles inbound!" Mister Randeem reported. "Impact in one minute."

"Our jumpers?" Nathan asked.

"They're in reentry now," Mister Navashee reported. "They'll be through in two minutes."

"What about those interceptors?"

"They've aborted, sir. They appear to be returning to base."

"Escape jump, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered. "That should be enough to keep them busy for the moment."

\* \* \*

Tony's heart was racing, his breathing rapid and shallow. He tried not to look at the temperature readout on the inside of his now opaque visor, but the numbers kept catching his eye... and they always seemed to be going up. He was so hot. He was sweating, and he now realized why Jessica had made him drink so much water before they suited up.

The sound of the steadily thickening air rushing past his helmet was deafening. The vibrations reverberated throughout his suit and right down to his bones. He wanted so badly to call out to Jessica, to seek reassurance that everything was all right, that he was going to survive. He was beginning to understand why she had turned off his comms just before they exited the Aurora.

Finally, the internal temperature readout stopped climbing. It hovered at sixty-two degrees Celsius. He could feel the water surging through his suit as it struggled to keep him from roasting alive as he fell. After another minute, the temperature readout began to decrease. The sound of the air passing over him had lessened as well and was no longer rattling his very bones.

Tony's visor suddenly become clear once again. It was dark outside. He could see the faint images of clouds far below him, lit only by the dim light of the Earth's waning moon. He looked at the altitude readout on the inside of his visor. He was passing twenty thousand kilometers. He didn't want to look at his speed.

He remembered what Jessica had told him about spreading his arms and legs, about trying to remain parallel to the planet below to help slow his rate of descent. He forced his arms and legs outward, pressing with all his might

against the air rushing over him. He felt his body start to pitch upward, and soon he had managed to get his body perpendicular to his angle of descent.

Tony could now look around more easily. He looked around for Jessica but could not find her. He wondered if she was ahead of him or behind him. Could she be off course? What if something happened to her? Even if his auto-nav functioned properly, would he be able to make contact with the resistance without her? If he did, would they even believe his claims?

A glimmer of light to his left caught Tony's eye. The glimmer repeated several times, each time becoming brighter... or perhaps closer. He watched as the flashes grew closer. Something was coming toward him. The flashes of light were reflections of moonlight off of something.

The flashes of reflected moonlight quickly morphed into the darkened shape of something larger, something human. As it grew even closer, he realized it was Jessica. An enormous surge of relief washed over him as she coasted up next to him. She used her arms and legs in expert fashion to steer herself through the atmosphere as she fell. Her head turned toward him, and the lighting inside her visor clicked on, bathing her smiling face in pale, amber light. She flashed him a thumbs-up, then maneuvered out again, moving just far away enough to avoid accidents, yet close enough that he could still see her.

Several minutes passed as Tony continued to fall. He passed through several layers of clouds. His muscles tired from holding his arms and legs outstretched against the rushing wind. Several times he lost control and began to roll or tumble. More than once, he thought he might not regain control. Then, after regaining control of his body's attitude for the fourth time, a long, black cloth began to deploy from

Jessica's backpack far off to his left, and she began to rise up above Tony and out of his line of sight. *Her drogue chute has deployed*, he realized. His next thought was, *Why hasn't mine?*

A light flashed inside his visor, and he felt a pop from behind his head. A loud rumble began from behind him, and he felt as if someone were pulling on him from behind. *Is that my drogue?* he wondered. A moment later, his question was answered.

Tony felt a sudden yank from behind. His shoulder and crotch straps dug into his suit. He felt his legs suddenly swing down underneath him as his body changed position into a feet-first fall toward the Earth below. His instinct was to reach up for his lines, but he remembered his instructions and clasped his arms around the life support pack mounted on his chest. *"Let the auto-nav do its thing... It will work."* He remembered Jessica's voice so clearly.

Tony looked at the data displayed on his visor. His rate of descent had slowed considerably, but he was still traveling incredibly fast, and his altitude was still decreasing at an uncomfortable rate. He looked down at the city lights below. He could see several cities, each separated by vast stretches of darkness dotted with occasional lights. They twisted around from side to side below him as he dangled from his drogue chute. The cities below him, however, were coming up to meet him far too quickly. He began to make out more and more features: vehicles moving over roadways, streetlights. They were all becoming too clear.

Tony felt another pop from behind him, this one was far more intense. He felt something massive leaving his backpack... *My main chute*. A wave of relief began to wash over him once again as his shoulder and leg harnesses dug into his body... but not as deeply or as painfully as before.

Something was wrong. The altitude and descent rate indicators in his visor had turned red and were flashing, and the ground was still rushing up toward him at over five hundred kilometers per hour. "Oh, God!"

Panic washed over him as he continued to fall. He could feel something pulling at him from above, tugging unevenly against his crotch and shoulders. He reached up and grabbed for his parachute lines but could not get a hold of them as they thrashed about. He managed to tilt his head back slightly and catch a glimpse of his main parachute as it flopped around uselessly in the wind. He could see that his drogue chute was still deployed, although it was moving around far more wildly than seemed appropriate.

"Oh, God," he kept repeating. The data display on his visor continued to flash red as his altitude decreased. His rate of descent was also decreasing but not nearly enough, from what he could tell.

Tony glanced down at the ground below his kicking feet. He had only seconds left. He looked up again, trying desperately to reach his rigging.

A cold realization washed over him, and he stopped trying to reach his rigging overhead. He looked down at the ground again as it rushed up to meet him. Then he looked straight ahead at the rising horizon and screamed, "You said it would work!"

Jessica watched the data on the inside of her visor as her altitude reached single digits. Servos whined from behind her head as her jump rig automatically flared at the last second to place her gently on the ground with only the slightest forward momentum. Her feet touched the ground, and she took several running steps forward, then went down

to one knee and braced herself as she slapped the retract button on her chest piece. She leaned forward against the tug of her main parachute as it was pulled back into her backpack. After several seconds, her chute was fully retracted. She quickly unlatched her helmet and dropped it to one side, then unlatched her backpack, letting it drop behind her. With the bulk of her jump rig now released, she could stand up more comfortably.

Jessica rose to a semi-crouched position as she pulled her sidearm. She searched the dark field around her, checking for any signs of danger. She had seen several Jung shuttles in the area on her data display. Although they could have just been standard patrol shuttles, they could have picked up the energy signatures of their thermal shielding during their reentry and calculated their landing area.

Satisfied that there were no shuttles in sight, Jessica stood up straight and looked around the field, searching for Tony. As she continued to search the field, she removed her torso piece and tossed it next to her helmet and jump rig.

In the distance, Jessica could see the lights of Sydney. She could also make out the outline of a barn in the same general direction as the city lights. She started walking toward the barn, making her way cautiously across the field.

Jessica froze in her tracks. Something in the distance was moving. Something large and dark was moving up above the line of the grass as it swayed in the evening breeze. It was rising and falling. No, it was billowing... It was a parachute.

Jessica ran in a semi-crouched position toward the billowing chute. It had to be his chute.

Jessica stopped dead in her tracks. Her mouth dropped open at the sight before her, and she muttered one word. "Fuck." Tony lay twisted and mangled, still clad in his



pressure suit. He was lying face up, his helmet cracked and his visor shattered. His left leg was folded underneath his back, and his right leg was broken and bent into an odd shape with part of his femur sticking out of his suit mid-thigh. There was blood flowing freely out of the tear in his suit at his right thigh where the bone was protruding. His mangled chute was flopping in the breeze, billowing gently upward with each gust of wind like the side of a giant, sleeping beast.

Jessica took two more steps forward, moving closer to him. She knelt down next to him, forcing herself to look at his face. His eyes were open in horror, and his mouth was agape as if screaming. She pulled out a small light and turned it on its lowest setting, pointing it at his shattered helmet visor.

His eyes moved, shifting toward her. He was still alive. His lips moved slightly, as if he were trying to speak, but no sound was heard. His eyes pleaded to her, and he was obviously in great pain.

Jessica hung her head down for several seconds. Finally, she raised her head again and sighed. "Jesus, Tony," she whispered, "you weren't supposed to live through the impact."

Tony's eye's changed, as confusion had found its way through overwhelming pain.

"What, you think we don't have surveillance systems all over our ships?" Jessica reached into her thigh pouch and pulled out a data pad. She reached over and carefully rolled him slightly to his right, then wiggled the data pad into the thigh pocket of Tony's left leg, the one folded back under his torso. She turned to look at him again, shining the light on his face once more. "Sorry about that."

Tony coughed, then barely managed to utter a single word. "Please."

"You're in a lot of pain, aren't you?" Jessica sighed again. "Not surprising, really. I mean, you did just fall from orbit and slam into the ground with nothing more than a drogue and a damaged main chute to slow you down." She cocked her head to one side, looking at him. "I really wish I could put you out of your misery, Tony, but that would ruin everything, and you'd be dying for nothing. This way, at least your dying act will be one that helps your people instead of selling them out."

Tony's eyes began pleading with her again.

"Look, I'm truly sorry it had to go down this way, but you had to know that something like this might happen when you decided to sell out your own people, right?"

Jessica paused, looking around the field again to check for any signs of approaching danger as she waited for Tony to die. After another minute, she put one knee on the ground and leaned in a little closer to him. "Look, I don't know why you decided to work for the Jung. Maybe you had your reasons; I really don't care. But there are bigger things at stake here, and you know it." Jessica sighed again, wishing the dreadful scene would come to an end. She looked at his eyes. For a moment, she thought she saw acceptance in them. "I tell you what: if it will make you feel any better, I promise I won't tell Synda. I'll make something up. I'll tell her you saved my ass or something, that you died a hero."

A grateful look came over Tony's face as he took his last breath. Jessica watched as his gaze became fixed, and the life left his eyes forever. She stood and looked around the field again, then back down at Tony's now lifeless, mangled corpse. "Whoever said war sucks wasn't fucking kidding,

were they?" She turned and headed back toward her jump rig, quickly disappearing into the tall, dark grass.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The image on the Aurora's main view screen shifted from a field of stars to an extreme close up of Jupiter. The orange and brown gas giant filled the upper two-thirds of the screen, with its tiny moon, Metis, barely gracing the bottom edge of the screen.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced as the jump flash faded. "We're in orbit over Jupiter, approaching Metis."

"Very well, Mister Riley," Nathan said. "Comms, stand down from general quarters. Contact the Falcon and tell them to jump to their next comm-point."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Move back into position to continue propellant transfer operations, Mister Chiles."

"Aye, sir."

The view on the main screen began to rotate, Metis and Jupiter reversing positions as the helmsman rolled the Aurora one hundred eighty degrees.

"Green deck, Mister Randeem," Nathan ordered. "Tell flight ops to launch a pair of Talons to replace the Falcon on lookout duty."

"Green deck, aye."

"Roll complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "Moving into position above the Celestia. ETA to station: one minute."

"Very good. Resume propellant transfer as soon as we're in position," Nathan said as he rose from his seat and

headed aft. "Naralena, raise Commander Taylor on the Celestia and patch her through to my ready room."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

Nathan entered his ready room and went to his seat behind the desk. As he sat, his intercom beeped.

*"I have Commander Taylor for you, sir,"* Naralena stated over the intercom.

"Put her through."

Cameron's face appeared on the view screen on the forward bulkhead of Nathan's ready room. Cameron had obviously just entered her ready room on the Celestia and was also moving in to sit behind her desk. *"How did it go?"* she asked as she took her seat. *"Jessica and Tony make it down all right?"*

"They were still in reentry when we left, but everything appeared to be fine. She'll make contact with the Falcon as soon as they're down and secure."

*"How many ships did you see?"*

"Two frigates, a cruiser, and a battleship," Nathan said, "in that order. We took a few shots at them in passing but jumped past them and took out another cruiser that was docked at their makeshift spaceport for repairs."

*"Any casualties?"*

"None. No damage, either. We didn't get close enough to anyone or stay in one place long enough for them to get any good shots at us. I'll send you a copy of the combat data recordings for you to take a look at."

*"So just the one wounded cruiser?"*

"We weakened a few shields and took out one of the frigate's main engines. It looks like their smaller ships have weaker shields."

*"What about the battleship?"* Cameron asked. *"Did you get any shots off at her?"*

"A couple of plasma torpedoes," Nathan said. "They didn't even blink at that."

*"So what's next?"*

"We continue transferring propellant to you while we wait to hear from Jessica so the Falcon can return to lookout duty over Jupiter. Then we jump back and take a few shots at that spaceport, just to make them nervous. I have a feeling they need that thing in order to service their warships. If we can make them more worried about defending their spaceport than they are about going after you, we might actually be able to get you off that rock."

*"That would be nice,"* Cameron agreed. *"It's more nerve-racking than I thought being stuck down here, unable to move."*

"How do you think I feel? My XO, my chief engineer, and a third of my crew are down there. I was just getting used to having you watching over everything down in combat."

*"You managed fine without anyone in combat before we had a full crew,"* Cameron said. *"Besides, you're the one who's hell-bent on raising this ship again, remember?"*

"You'd think you would be a little more eager to see her raised, Commander. It is your first command, after all."

*"Not exactly what I had in mind."*

Nathan smiled. "Any progress while I was gone?"

*"You were only gone for thirty-seven minutes, Nathan."*

\* \* \*

Josh's helmet visor changed from fully opaque to clear again as their jump flash subsided.

*"Jump complete,"* Loki announced from his seat at the back of the Falcon's cockpit. *"We are now at comm waypoint seventeen."*

"What's the plan this time?" Josh asked, frustration obvious in his voice.

*"We wait here for ten minutes. If we don't hear from Lieutenant Commander Nash, we jump to comm-point eighteen and wait there for ten minutes."*

"How many times do we have to jump and wait?"

*"Three times. If we don't hear from her by then, we jump back to the Jovian system until the next comm window."*

"Man, I put myself through double doses of nanites, all for this? Jump, wait, jump, wait..."

*"Enough, Josh,"* Loki snapped.

"I'm just saying..."

*"No, you're just complaining... like usual. Frankly, I'm getting tired of it."*

"Someone needs a nap," Josh quipped.

*"Laser comm-array deployed and locked on target,"* Loki stated. *"Transmitting hail."*

Josh looked out the port side of the canopy at the Earth far off in the distance. It was a tiny, blue speck, not much bigger than the stars around it. "How far are we from Earth right now, anyway?"

*"Four light minutes."*

"Why four?"

*"It's just enough time for us to send a hail, receive a response, and either send a confirmation or a continuation request."*

"Why not park two minutes out?" Josh wondered. "Or three?"

*"They can see our jump flash, Josh, remember?"* Loki said. *"At this distance, we have just enough time to make contact and still get out of here before a Jung ship can spot us and FTL it out here to intercept us."*

“Unless, of course, they’re sitting there with the FTLs all warmed up and ready to jump once they see our pretty, blue flash.”

*“That’s a distinct possibility,”* Loki admitted. *“That’s why we jump to random waypoints and always at different angles to the Earth.”*

“They could still turn quickly and FTL it to us in that time,” Josh said.

*“You’re just arguing for the sake of arguing, Josh,”* Loki responded.

“Seriously, Loki. It could happen.”

*“I already admitted it could. So, what’s your point?”*

“No point, really. I’m just saying.” Josh turned and looked out the window again. “You know what? I miss flying the harvester. Dodging big rocks, scooping up the smaller ones: that was flying.”

*“The harvester was a broken down hunk of junk, and you know it,”* Loki said. *“You’re just depressed because we got our asses chewed by the captain.”*

“I’m not depressed,” Josh insisted. “I don’t get depressed.”

*“The hell you don’t,”* Loki argued. *“The first two weeks you were in medical... What do you call that?”*

“Drugs. Drugs and nanites.”

*“Maybe.”* Something caught Loki’s attention on his sensor display. *“Hang on. I’m picking up something on passive.”*

“What?”

*“Movement. There’s a ship leaving Earth.”*

“Can you tell which way they’re going?” Josh asked.

*“Not yet, give me a minute. They’re turning... turning and accelerating.”* Loki’s tone suddenly changed. *“Come about to four one four point three, twenty up, quickly.”*



"What's up?" Josh asked as he brought the Falcon's nose around to the new course.

*"I think they're headed for Jupiter. At least, that's the direction they're turning."*

"Shouldn't we wait and see for sure?"

*"Their light is four minutes old, Josh,"* Loki said as he entered a new jump. *"If they went to FTL, they're already there!"*

\* \* \*

*"Captain, Comms,"* Naralena called over the intercom.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

*"Falcon reports a Jung cruiser departed Earth approximately five minutes ago."*

"Course and speed?"

*"They went to FTL, sir. Best guess is that they were headed our way."*

"Discontinue propellant transfer operations," Nathan ordered as he rose from his seat behind his ready room desk. "Emergency disconnect and set general quarters. I'm on my way."

*"Aye, sir."*

The lighting in the captain's ready room took on a red hue as Nathan exited the compartment and stepped onto the bridge. "Helm, as soon as the propellant transfer rig is free, move us away from Metis."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Any word from the Talons on lookout?"

"Negative. No contacts in the area," Mister Navashee answered.

"Connect me to the Falcon."

"All compartments are at general quarters, Captain," Naralena reported. "The Celestia has also set general quarters. Channel open to the Falcon."

"Very well." Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Falcon, Aurora Actual."

*"Aurora Actual, go for Falcon,"* Loki's voice answered over the comm-set.

"I want you to jump back to Earth and keep an eye out for any more departing ships." Nathan silenced his comm-set a moment and turned toward his navigator. "What's the travel time from Earth to Jupiter's current position at ten times light?"

"Four point eight two minutes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

Nathan tapped his comm-set to continue his conversation. "Position yourself about two to three light minutes out, and don't stay in one position any longer than two minutes," Nathan ordered. "Jump back if you detect any more departures, especially if they're headed for the Jovian system. Do not engage any contacts."

*"Understood, sir,"* Loki answered.

"Aurora Actual out."

"Propellant transfer rig has been disconnected," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's station. "We're free to maneuver."

"Thrusting up and away from Metis," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"New orbit, Mister Chiles," Nathan said. "I want us higher than Metis with room to maneuver, but do your best not to get too far ahead of her. We're their shield for now."

"Aye, sir."

Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Flight ops, Captain."

*"Captain, go for flight ops,"* the controller answered.

"Launch three pairs of Talons and have them loiter in geostationary orbit over Jupiter, high altitude. I want a pair over the equator on either side, and the last pair under the planet's southern pole. I want full view and open contact all around the system. Passive only until contacts are made, then active. Weapons tight."

*"Understood."*

"Sir, won't that confirm our presence to the Jung?"

"I'm pretty sure they already know we're here, Mister Randeem. The fact that they went to FTL over five minutes ago tells me they're not going to come straight at us like before, and I want to be sure we see them coming."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan turned forward. The Celestia and the small moon she was resting on fell away from them and slid aft as the helmsman thrust the Aurora forward and began to climb to a higher orbit.

"Talons have been launched," Mister Randeem reported.

"Comms, patch me through to Commander Taylor on the Celestia," Nathan ordered.

"One moment, sir."

Nathan watched the view screen as the sensor telemetry appeared in smaller windows along the bottom edge of the main view screen.

"Channel is ready, Captain," Naralena said.

Nathan tapped his comm-set again. "Celestia Actual, Aurora Actual."

*"Go for Celestia Actual,"* Cameron answered.

"I'm going to assume that the Jung know we're here now and that stalling for time isn't going to work as we'd hoped. How is your propellant level?"

*"We've got enough to lift off, maneuver around the Jovian system, and even break orbit if necessary."*

"Do you have enough to make a run for deep space?"

*"We could if we go straight from liftoff to a departure burn, but we won't be able get up to any respectable speed after breaking orbit. Besides, in order to depart while in the shadow of Jupiter, we'd have to wait another three hours at this point, and they'd still see us as we orbited around the Earth side of Jupiter during our burn."*

Nathan sighed. "How is your laser comm-array?"

*"It works, but the tracking motors are slow. There's no way we'll be able to track you if you start jumping around. However, we can use the jump shuttle's laser comm-array."*

Nathan grimaced, realizing he should have already thought of a way to share real-time combat data between the two ships. "Good idea. I'll have the Talons feed directly to you so you're aware of the situation, as I suspect it's going to become rather fluid. I'll have them laser comm into your omnidirectional array. Then you can laser it out to us to keep us updated."

*"And if you jump?"*

"If we jump local, we'll send our destination coordinates to your jump shuttle via the laser comm link first. If we jump out of the area, we'll get an update from you when we return."

*"Understood,"* Cameron answered.

"Comms, make a note of this data configuration with the Celestia. I suspect we'll be using it again in the future."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee announced from the sensor station. "Two light minutes out. Transferring track to tactical."

"Course?" Nathan wondered.

"Jung cruiser," Mister Randeem added from the tactical station. "Looks like they just came out of FTL. They're on an

intercept course. Putting it up on the screen."

Nathan turned toward the main view screen as the tactical plot of the Jung cruiser appeared. "Their intercept angle will give them a perfect shot at the Celestia," Nathan realized. "Time to intercept?"

"They're doing quarter light, sir. Best guess to weapons range is six minutes."

"They must have FTL'd it to a lateral point, then turned before they FTL'd again," Nathan said, "but why?"

"Sir?" Mister Randeem asked.

"They don't need the angle," Nathan explained. "That cruiser's guns could crack Metis in half even from max range, taking the Celestia out with it." Nathan turned and looked at Mister Randeem. "And why didn't they come out of FTL already *in* weapons range? They could've gotten a kill shot off before we could react."

"A miscalculation in their FTL jump?" Mister Riley suggested from the navigation chair.

"A six-minute miscalculation?" Nathan said. "Unlikely. No, they want to draw us away from Metis, away from the Celestia. They may mean to take her intact." Nathan turned forward again. "Helm, turn us to an intercept course and prepare to jump. I want to be just above and ahead of the contact."

"Aye, sir."

"Commander," Nathan said into his comm-set, "you should expect company at any moment. I don't think they'd be trying to draw us out unless they had something in mind."

"*Captain,*" Cameron objected, "*if they want to draw the Aurora away from Metis, shouldn't you be doing the opposite... staying put?*"

"We don't really have a choice," Nathan answered over the comms. "We can't just sit here and wait for them to get within range and open fire."

"Sir, at our current rate of closure, we're going to whiz right past them when we come out of our jump," Mister Riley warned.

"Put us about a million kilometers ahead of them," Nathan said. "That will give us about ten to twelve seconds to put a couple of nukes in their path. They won't have time to maneuver or put up point-defenses."

"I'll need to angle the bow downward just before we jump," Mister Chiles said. "There won't be enough time after we jump."

"Good idea," Nathan agreed.

"Sir, I recommend we jump as close as we can to their course and still have enough clearance to pass over them," Mister Randeem suggested. "I can use a lower power thrust on the torpedoes, just enough to get them to intercept the cruiser at the right moment. I can angle the plasma cannons upward and get off a round to soften up their forward shields just before the nukes hit."

*"You probably don't want to be in the vicinity when those nukes detonate," Cameron warned. "There may be significant debris coming off the target that could end up along your jump path."*

"So we have twelve seconds to fire a pair of nukes, fire a pair of plasma shots, and jump out again," Nathan said. "Piece of cake, right?"

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Loki said as the Falcon's jump flash subsided. "Starting passive scans."

*"What's our range this time?"* Josh asked as he looked out at the stars.

*"Two light minutes. Why?"*

*"No reason. What do you see?"*

*"I only see the spaceport and four ships,"* Loki answered.

*"What do you mean 'only'?"*

*"I mean I only see four ships. There should be seven Jung ships left in the system. We saw one jump away, so there should be six left. I only see four."*

*"Are you sure?"*

*"I've got the battleship orbiting just beyond the spaceport, and a cruiser and two frigates leading and trailing on the same orbit."*

*"Maybe the missing ships are orbiting on the other side."*

*"Previously calculated ephemeris data indicates that none of the Jung ships could possibly be eclipsed from this vantage point."*

*"Okay, mister 'I attended a flight academy,'"* Josh replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm. *"You wanna explain that in Angla?"*

*"They've been using equatorial orbits, Josh. We're two light minutes above the Earth's northern axis. We can see all sides."*

*"Except under the Earth's southern axis,"* Josh said. *"Maybe two of them decided to use a polar orbit."*

*"Or maybe two of them went to FTL to follow that cruiser,"* Loki said. *"We should jump to the other side and check."*

*"That's not on our jump schedule,"* Josh said as he checked the waypoint list given to them by the Aurora's flight controller.

*"We need to check, Josh."*

*"I'm not getting chewed out a second time."*

"Josh, the captain doesn't want us to be mindless robots; he wants us to think on our feet," Loki insisted. "Besides, his orders were to keep an eye out for departing ships. We're just trying to verify whether or not any ships actually *did* depart."

*"I'm already on thin ice with the captain, and so are you. Granted, your ice isn't as thin as mine, but if we go jumping around at will, it just might be."*

"I'm plotting the first of two jumps to get us to the other side," Loki stated. "Either bring us on course for the first waypoint or I will."

*"Fine,"* Josh agreed reluctantly. He brought the Falcon into a smooth turn to port, dipping the nose down in the process.

"Jumping in three....."

*"On course for first waypoint,"* Josh announced as he finished his course change.

"Two....."

Their visors became opaque to protect their eyes from the jump flash.

"One....."

*"At least we'll be able to keep each other company in the brig,"* Josh mumbled.

"Jump." The blue-white jump flash washed over them. "Jump complete," Loki announced as their visors became clear again. "Come twelve degrees to port and hold current speed."

*"Turning,"* Josh answered as he adjusted their heading for the second jump. *"I can hear the captain now."*

"It's not like we're attacking someone again," Loki said.

*"Course change complete,"* Josh reported.

"Jumping in three....."

*"Would you really have taken control?"*



"Two, yes."

"*Really?*" Their visors went opaque again.

"One.....jump." Again the blue-white flash washed over them.

"Jump complete," Loki reported as their visor's cleared.  
"Starting scans."

"*Maybe we don't have to tell them about our little course deviation,*" Josh suggested.

"Our flight data is automatically transmitted as soon as we enter the Aurora's traffic pattern," Loki explained as he studied the images resolving on his display.

"*Whose idea was that?*"

"Come about and put us on a course back to Jupiter," Loki ordered.

Josh turned partially around, looking over his shoulder at Loki behind him. "*No one there?*"

"Nope, they're gone. I don't see them anywhere in the system, either."

"*That means...*"

"That they went to FTL as well," Loki finished for him.

\* \* \*

Commander Taylor stood next to Ensign Delaveaga at the tactical station on the Celestia's bridge. "If that cruiser is trying to draw the Aurora away from us, then another ship will be coming out of FTL nearby at any moment."

"We're already at general quarters, sir," Luis said, "and the plasma cannon is powered up and on standby. It can be ready to fire in seconds."

"Just the same, I'd feel better if we had our fighters off the deck and patrolling the area." Cameron turned to face the comm station at the back of the Celestia's bridge.

“Ensign Souza, tell flight to launch our fighters. Have them orbit Metis for now.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Souza answered from the comm station.

Cameron turned and looked at Lieutenant Commander Kovacic standing on the other side of Ensign Delaveaga. “I know,” she said, raising her hand, “I’m probably just being overly cautious.”

“You’re not expecting me to complain, are you?”

Twenty Talon fighters sat lined up in five rows of four in the Celestia’s main hangar bay. Facing aft, the pilots waiting patiently in their cockpits chatted on side channels, read their data pads, or just rested while they waited for launch orders. When the order came, they immediately got to work and began spinning up their engines.

Corinairan flight technicians wearing full pressure suits ran about the Celestia’s open main hangar deck as they disconnected jury-rigged umbilical lines from the first four Talons in the aft most row. As the last technician pulled his umbilical to the side of the bay and clear of the row of Talons, the deck boss signaled the nearest fighter in the first row to proceed aft onto the Celestia’s flight apron.

The pilot of the first Talon rolled his fighter toward the aft end of the main hangar bay, each fighter next in line following the one before him out. As the first fighter in line rolled out onto the apron, he fired his ascent thrusters and leapt off the deck. He pitched his nose up as his momentum continued to carry him aft. Once his nose reached forty-five degrees in upward pitch, he fired his forward thrusters and began his climb out, yawing over to his left and rolling level

with the surface of Metis as he brought his ship to a stable orbital velocity around the tiny moon.

The well-choreographed routine of the deck crew repeated itself four additional times, the pressure suit clad technicians moving purposefully about the hangar deck as they cycled the twenty Talon fighters out of the bay and into space in less than two minutes.

\* \* \*

"Ten seconds to jump," Mister Riley announced from the Aurora's navigation station.

*"We've received your waypoints,"* Cameron said over the comms.

"We'll strike them on the way out and on the way back," Nathan told her. "We'll be back shortly."

*"Understood,"* Cameron answered. *"Celestial Actual out."*

"Five seconds," Mister Riley announced.

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles announced from the helm.

"Four..."

"Two nukes, high-yield, ready for snapshot," Mister Randeem reported.

"Three..."

"Plasma torpedo tubes are at maximum upward deflection."

"Two..."

"We'll be firing the plasma shots four seconds after the nukes have been launched."

"One..."

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Just like we planned, gentlemen."

"Jumping."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Aurora's bridge, brilliantly illuminating its interior for a split second. The flash subsided, and the cruiser, only a tiny dot on the view screen, began to grow in size with astonishing speed.

"Nukes away!" Mister Randeem announced from the tactical station.

Two Corinairan intercept missiles, armed with high-yield nuclear warheads and modified to launch from the Aurora's torpedo tubes, left her forward tubes at an unusually slow departure speed. Four seconds later, a pair of bright red bolts of plasma energy shot from the Aurora's upper torpedo tubes on both sides. As the conventional weapons drifted into the course of the rapidly approaching Jung cruiser, the plasma shots streaked away from the Aurora, striking the cruiser's forward shields a split second after they were launched. The cruiser's shields glowed reddish-orange as they absorbed most of the energy of the Aurora's plasma torpedoes. However, several of the cruiser's forward shield emitters exploded due to the overload caused by the plasma shots.

Several seconds later, the Aurora disappeared in another flash of blue-white light. The cruiser opened fire with her forward point-defenses, tearing apart one of the two approaching torpedoes. The other torpedo found its target, detonating in a brilliant flash as it struck the cruiser's already weakened shields. The cruiser's shields failed, and enough of the blast reached the hull of the cruiser, tearing it apart and sending large chunks in all directions.

\* \* \*

"Jump flash," Ensign Schenker reported from the Celestia's sensor station.

"It's the Falcon," Luis reported from tactical.

"Flash traffic from the Falcon," Ensign Souza announced. "They report two Jung frigates are missing from Earth orbit."

Cameron turned quickly to face the comm station. "Do they know where they went?"

"Current location is..."

"Contact!" Ensign Schenker interrupted. "Just came out of FTL!"

"Jung frigate!" Luis reported. "Two hundred kilometers out!"

"She has weapons range," Cameron realized, her eyes widening. "Comms, order our fighters to engage the frigate."

"Contacts!" Ensign Schenker reported. "Four of them moving fast! Probable missile launch!"

Cameron turned to Ensign Delaveaga at the tactical station. "Bring the gun to bear on that frigate, but don't fire until ordered. We don't want to hit our fighters."

"Yes, sir."

"Comms, tell the fighters to concentrate on the incoming missiles. Tell them to prepare to clear our line of fire once the missiles have been intercepted."

"Yes, sir."

"Where's the other frigate?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered. "They said there were two of them missing, right?"

"Good question," Cameron said. "Send the Falcon the Aurora's jump plots and tell them to let her know we're under attack."

"Fighters are firing on the incoming missiles," Luis reported.

"Any more missile launches?" Commander Taylor asked the sensor operator.

"No, sir."

"One missile down," Luis reported.

"Falcon has jumped away," Ensign Schenker reported from the sensor station.

"Two missiles down," Luis reported.

"Maybe they're feeling out our defenses," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic suggested.

"Three missiles down!"

"Quite likely," Cameron agreed. "Those frigates have multiple missile launchers. They could easily fire eight missiles at once."

"Another contact!" Ensign Schenker announced, his voice showing signs of panic. "Opposite side!"

"It's another frigate!" Luis realized. Stress was becoming evident in his voice as well.

"Range on the second target?" Cameron demanded.

"One twenty-five and closing fast!" Luis answered.

"She's counter orbit to us," Cameron realized. "Bring the plasma cannon around on the second frigate! Quickly!"

"Bringing the cannon around," Luis answered. "All incoming missiles from contact one have been destroyed!" Luis declared. He looked at his tactical display. "Half our fighters are coming about," he said, surprised.

"Flight reports they're sending half the fighters to act as point-defense against contact two, sir!" Ensign Souza reported from the comm station.

"Get that gun around!" Cameron ordered.

"It's rotating, sir, but it's not fast enough!"

"How long?"

"Thirty seconds!"

"Contacts!" Ensign Schenker reported.

"Four inbound missiles from contact two!" Luis reported.  
"ETA: twelve seconds!"

"Damn it!" Cameron exclaimed. "How long until the Talons can intercept?"

"Twenty seconds!" Luis said, realizing that their fighters would not be able to intercept the incoming missiles in time.

"Sound the alarm! Brace for incoming ordnance!" Cameron ordered.

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced. "We're thirty light seconds past the target."

"Hard about, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Hard about, aye," the helmsman answered.

"Nicely done, gentlemen," Nathan congratulated. "Mister Navashee, see if you can get a damage assessment on that target as we turn."

"Aye, sir."

"I noticed several of the cruiser's shield emitters exploding as we passed, sir," Lieutenant Yosef reported from the sciences station. "Another round of plasma shots might have collapsed her shields."

Nathan turned to face the tactical station directly behind him. "Mister Randeen, how many seconds do you need between plasma torpedo shots?"

"It takes thirty seconds to recharge to full power after each shot."

Nathan turned forward again. "Helm, once we come around, match the cruiser's speed plus a few meters per second. We'll jump in ten kilometers aft of the target and pound her stern with plasma torpedoes."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered. "Turn will complete in twenty seconds."

Nathan turned around again to face his tactical officer. "I'd like to get at least three or four rounds of plasma torpedoes into her stern," Nathan said.

"Aye, sir."

"With any luck, that will collapse her shields and give us a clean shot at her main drive."

"I would think so, sir." Mister Randeem smiled.

"The cruiser's forward shields are down," Mister Navashee reported. "She's probably got quite a bit of hull damage to her bow as well. I'm seeing a lot of hull debris in the area."

"Excellent. Once we pound her stern, we'll accelerate and climb over her, pounding her topside with our quads as we pass overhead. Then we jump back to..."

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee interrupted. "It's the Falcon!"

"Flash traffic," Naralena added. "Falcon reports a Jung frigate has just jumped in near Metis. She'll have a firing solution on the Celestia in thirty seconds."

"New course!" Nathan ordered. "Get us back to Metis now!"

"Calculating new jump," Mister Riley announced.

"How long until this cruiser has weapons range on Metis?" Nathan asked.

"Four minutes, twenty seconds," Mister Randeem answered.

"Jumping in ten seconds!" Mister Riley reported.

"As soon as we come out of the jump, deploy all weapons, including the missile launcher," Nathan ordered. "I want to be ready to shoot as quickly as possible."

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem answered.



"Five seconds," Mister Riley continued.

"Tell the Falcon to jump to just out of the cruiser's weapons range..." Nathan began.

"...Four..."

"...Shadow and monitor until we get back but do not engage..."

"...Three..."

"...Jump back and alert us if she changes course or speed."

"...Two..."

Naralena did not answer, instead transmitting the instructions to the Falcon before the Aurora jumped.

"One.....jumping."

The bridge filled with the blue-white light of the jump flash as the Aurora instantly transitioned from their position far beyond the Jung cruiser and the orbit of Jupiter to its new position approaching Metis. A series of *thuds* was both heard *and* felt, as the decks of the bridge shuddered beneath their feet.

"Jump complete."

"Taking fire!" Mister Randeem reported.

"From where?" Nathan demanded.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Two Jung frigates!"

"Where are they?" Nathan said.

"The one that's firing on us is astern of our starboard beam, forty degrees above. Range is ninety-seven kilometers and closing."

"Return fire!"

"I can't, sir," Mister Randeem reported. "The Celestia's fighters are all over her."

"Then how is she firing at us?"

"I don't think she is," Mister Randeem explained. "I think it's just rail gun spray that missed our fighters and is hitting us."

"Captain!" Mister Navashee interrupted. "Four missiles are locked on the Celestia. Impact in ten seconds!"

"Mister Randeem!"

"Locking on them with forward rail guns now!" Mister Randeem reported. "Helm, give me a quick roll to port so I can bring in more guns!"

"Eight seconds!"

"Do it!" Nathan ordered.

"Rolling!" Mister Chiles responded as the Aurora began to roll to port.

"Five seconds!"

"Firing rail guns!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Four....."

Nathan watched as the image of Metis at the bottom of the main view screen began to travel across and up the port side of the screen, moving into the top middle of the screen directly above their heads.

"Three....."

Rail gun fire spewed out at incredible speeds, sending a cascade of half-meter-diameter slugs raining down into the path of the enemy missiles as they raced toward the Celestia. As they neared their intercept points, the rail gun rounds broke apart, fragmenting into hundreds of smaller pieces and spreading out slightly as they continued to travel into the path of the missiles.

"One down!" Mister Navashee reported. "Two down!"

"Two....."

"Three down!"

"One....."

Nathan cringed when the fourth missile erupted as it, too, was struck by the Aurora's fragmented rail gun fire. Even from this distance, he could see that the Celestia was being struck with fragments of the exploded missiles, especially the last one to have been intercepted.

"All four missiles destroyed!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Where's the shooter?" Nathan asked.

"Dead ahead, slightly above... I mean, below us," Mister Randeem answered.

"Helm, pitch down until you see the target," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, put two plasma shots into the target."

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles answered.

"Standing by on the plasma torpedoes," Mister Randeem answered.

"Comms, check on the Celestia," Nathan ordered.

"I have a firing solution," Mister Randeem announced.

"Fire at will!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing tubes one and three!"

"Celestia reports hull breaches in her forward sections. Unknown damage," Naralena reported. "No casualties."

"Two direct hits!" Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan turned to his left toward his sensor operator. "How bad is she?"

"Her forward shields are weak but still intact, sir. She rolled at the last second. Otherwise, we would have hit her with all four shots."

"Can we get off another shot?"

"Negative," Mister Randeem reported. "Target is about to pass under us. She's firing her rail guns at us now."

"No kidding," Nathan mumbled as the deck again shook beneath his feet. "Roll us over and show them our belly."

"Rolling over," Mister Chiles reported.

"Come about as soon as you finish your roll. Let's make a run at the other frigate."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Mister Randeem, as soon as we make our turn and our aft tubes come to bear, let's leave our friend with a pair of nukes to deal with."

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem answered. "Loading nukes in the stern tubes."

Cameron nearly stumbled as the bridge of the Celestia shook from the impact of incoming debris still raining down on them. "Is that frigate still coming?"

"And closing fast!" Luis answered from the tactical station on the Celestia's bridge.

"If she fires another round of missiles..." Ensign Schenker began.

"Not at this range," Cameron said. "She'll go to guns."

Luis shook his head. "She's firing rail guns."

The bridge began to shake even more violently as the words left Ensign Delaveaga's mouth.

"How's our gun?" Cameron asked as she grabbed the side of the tactical station to maintain her balance.

"Almost there!" Luis watched his screen as the targeting sights for their one and only weapon, the Takaran plasma cannon turret, moved toward the image of the incoming frigate on his screen.

"They're pitching up!" Ensign Schenker called out from the sensor station.

"Compensating, raising the barrels, and... firing!"

Cameron turned her head forward as a barrage of bright red bolts of energy leapt up from above and behind the position of the Celestia's forward facing cameras. The angle

of the stream of plasma bolts raised slightly as Luis continued to fire.

“Full mag!” Cameron demanded, wanting to see the destruction that she hoped was taking place. The image on the view screen changed, and it was suddenly filled with the image of the Jung frigate charging at them and pitching upward as it prepared to pass over them. “They’re showing the belly! Keep firing!”

Luis kept the weapon firing. The image of the Jung frigate on the view screen flashed red as the plasma shots first bounced off the frigate’s lower shields. Then, the frigate’s shields gave way as numerous emitters along the underside of her hull began to short out and explode. Bolts of red plasma tore into the underside of the frigate as she passed overhead, ripping her open from stem to stern until the shots finally hit one of the frigate’s propellant tanks. The frigate exploded from inside her hull, breaking her into two sections of differing mass. Her forward section began to tumble end over as her aft section pitched down, exposing her inner decks to the Celestia’s line of fire. Plasma shots found the frigate’s aft section’s interior. More internal secondary explosions ripped the aft section apart, sending massive chunks of the ship in all directions. Several pieces traveled forward, given extra velocity by the force of the secondary explosions and sending the pieces crashing into the tumbling forward section. It, too, exploded, breaking apart into hundreds of smaller sections and strewing her insides, as well as her crew, across the vacuum of space.

Cheers erupted across the Celestia’s bridge, including some from Lieutenant Commander Kovacic.

“Finally!” the lieutenant commander exclaimed. “After months of listening to depressing reports about the subjugation of our own world, we get some payback!”

"Whoa!" Mister Navashee yelled in excitement. "The Celestia just pounded that frigate with her plasma cannon!"

"Aft cameras!" Nathan ordered. "Zoom in!" The main view screen immediately switched to the aft view and magnified. The screen was filled with chunks of debris both big and small, as well as numerous bodies.

"Way to go, Cam," Nathan said.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported, breaking the moment. "Eight inbound. Probably missile launches from the other frigate."

"Back to forward view," Nathan ordered. "Comms, order those fighters to break off their attack and return to cover the Celestia."

"Aye, sir."

"And tell them to spread out wide. I don't want to pound them with our point-defense fire."

"Yes, sir."

"Time to impact?" Nathan asked.

"Twenty seconds," Mister Randeem reported.

"Are we on an intercept course yet?" Nathan asked.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered from the helm. "Our turn is complete."

"Pitch down two degrees so we can bring more of our forward rail guns into play."

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles answered.

Nathan spun around. "Can you still get our forward plasma tubes on that frigate?"

Mister Randeem smiled. "Just barely."

"Fire as soon as you have a solution, Mister Randeem," Nathan ordered, "and don't stop firing until that ship looks just like the other one."

Mister Randeem's smile became even broader. "Yes, sir." He looked at his displays. "Fighters have cleared our firing solution. Firing point-defenses. Angling the tubes now."

Nathan turned forward and looked at the main view screen.

"I have a solution on the target," Mister Randeem reported. "Firing."

A pair of red bolts of plasma flew forward directly over their heads and to either side of the main view screen. A few seconds later, another pair streaked forward in similar fashion. Then a third pair.

"Target destroyed," Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him. "Threat board?"

"Jovian system is clear of threats," Mister Randeem reported.

"Comms, how's the Celestia?" Nathan inquired.

"She's taken more damage from debris from the frigate, sir, but she reports that she'll survive," Naralena stated.

"Sensors, status of that cruiser?"

"She's still about thirty light seconds out, sir."

"Mister Riley, prepare to jump us back out to that cruiser, same as before."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Comms, tell the Celestia we'll send the Falcon back while we take care of that cruiser, and we'll be back shortly."

"Aye, sir."

"We have unfinished business," Nathan said, looking at his tactical officer, a confident look on his face.

"Jump plotted," Mister Riley reported.

"Initiate jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in five.....four..."

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"Abort the jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jump cycle aborted," Mister Riley answered as he canceled the sequence.

"Flash traffic from the Falcon," Naralena announced. "Falcon reports that the cruiser turned toward Earth and went into FTL."

Another sigh of relief washed over Nathan.

"Very well. Stand down from general quarters," Nathan ordered.

"Standing down from general quarters, aye," Naralena answered.

Nathan tapped his headset. "Flight, Captain."

*"Captain, go for flight,"* the flight control officer answered over Nathan's comm-set.

"Bring the Falcon and all Talons in the area on board and refresh. Replace the Talons on lookout. Get the Falcon refueled and back up as soon as possible, then send them back to Earth monitoring and comm duty."

"Aye, sir."

"And as soon as you get the Celestia's birds refreshed, send them back to their ship."

*"Yes, sir."*

"Helm, as soon our birds are recovered, take us back to our position over the Celestia and restart propellant transfer operations."

"Yes, sir," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Nice work, everyone," Nathan said as he turned and headed aft. "Hopefully, the Jung will spend enough time licking their wounds for us to get the Celestia off that damned rock and out into space again." Nathan continued aft, passing behind the tactical station and around the



comm-center toward his ready room door. "You have the conn, Mister Riley."

"I have the conn, aye," Mister Riley answered.

Nathan entered his ready room, closing the hatch behind him. He moved around behind his desk and sat down carefully in his chair, placing his hands flat on his desk in front of him. He could feel the adrenaline coursing through his body. More frighteningly, he could feel the satisfaction of having just destroyed two more Jung ships. Even the bloated, grotesque faces of the Jung crewmen floating out in space did not bother him.

He picked up his hands and turned them over, holding them up to look at them. His hands trembled, and his palms were sweating. He wiped them on his pant legs, placed them carefully on the arms of his chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes as he waited for the adrenaline to subside and the post-battle fatigue to wash over him.

\* \* \*

After having moved far enough away from Tony's corpse, Jessica had disposed of her Ghatazhak jump rig and her pressure suit, turning it into a pile of dust in the usual fashion by using the chemical cold burn kit provided by the Corinari. Now dressed in typical Earth civilian clothing, she found it much easier to get some distance between her and their landing site.

Jessica scrambled up the last few meters of the hill on the edge of the field and sought cover behind a large outcropping of rock along its crest. She dropped her pack from her shoulders and set it in front of her as she peeked her head up over the rocks to glance back in the direction she had come. It was late at night, and the partial moon

provided only a modest amount of illumination. As best she could tell, there were no signs of movement behind her. She was safe for now. If the Jung had tracked the energy signature from the thermal shielding on Tony's jump rig as she had intended, the shuttles she had spotted on her way down would arrive at their landing site soon enough, and the area would be crawling with Jung troops. They would find Tony and the data pad, and with any luck, they would take the bait.

Jessica pulled out her visual scanner and took another look at the field below. She could see Tony's body, the main chute still gently tugging at the corpse from time to time. She set the scanner down and pulled her laser comm-unit out of her pack and opened it up. The small dish folded open, revealing a stubby laser emitter at its center. The outer edge of the dish folded open further, creating a collector nearly half a meter in diameter. She switched the unit on and waited for it to get its bearings. Then she pulled out a data chip containing the comm-schedule, encryption codes, and coordinates that she was supposed to use to communicate with the Falcon during her time on Earth. She plugged the data chip into the laser comm-unit. A few seconds later, the dish spun around, tilted upward, then flashed *ready* on its display screen. She pulled out the small cable and plugged it into her comm-set, looking around once more to be sure no one was within earshot before tapping her comm-set to key the mic. "Falcon, Nash. Feet dry. Phase one complete, on station. Comm next, one zero four five, zulu. End comm." She tapped her comm-set again to close her mic and watched the laser comm's display screen as it encrypted her transmission and sent it in a digital burst along its invisible laser beam. If the Falcon was on station at the designated waypoint for this

communication appointment, they would receive her transmission and relay it back to the Aurora. The comm waypoints were four light minutes out, and the Falcon would still have to jump back, deliver the message to the Aurora, and jump to the next comm waypoint to transmit the captain's response. She set the unit to repeat her message once every thirty seconds for the next three minutes and activated the auto-repeater. In ten minutes, she would point the dish to the next comm waypoint and await a response. It was not the most convenient method of communication, but compromises had to be made for the security of both the Falcon and herself.

She continued to wait as the laser comm repeated her message, beaming it out along the laser and into space. She pulled out her data pad and activated its navigation software. Seconds later, she was looking at a map of the countryside outside Sydney, Australia. She was several kilometers southwest of the city. According to President Scott, at least a third of the Intrepid's crew was still at large, hiding out in the area after bailing out when their ship went down. At the very least, there had to be some sort of organized resistance in the area, as it was one of the largest cities on the continent.

A tiny tone sounded in her comm-set, indicating the auto-transmission cycle was over. Jessica selected the next comm waypoint coordinates, and the dish rotated forty degrees to the east to line up with the next set of coordinates found on the data chip. She set the unit to receive mode and waited.

Jessica pulled out her water bottle and took a long drink. She looked up at the night sky. She wondered how Synda was going to take the news. Would it interfere with her recovery? Should she even tell her? Would it be better to tell

her later, or just lie completely and tell her that Tony was still alive down on Earth?

Jessica had to fight to shake off the guilt. She had been doing her job, fighting to save the people of Earth from the Jung. Tony had made his choices; he had chosen his fate. Many had died, and many of them had *not* chosen their own fate.

She closed her eyes and waited. Her mind drifted to thoughts of her own family: her brothers, her mother, her father. She had no idea if they had survived the Jung invasion. The story she had originally told that perverted, old man she had encountered on her first sojourn to Earth had been partially based on fact. Her parents had lived near the North American Fleet Academy, and most of her hometown had been destroyed during the invasion. She had even considered attempting to contact them during her first mission to Earth but had chosen against such reckless attempts.

Another tone played in her comm-set, interrupting her chain of thoughts. The receive cycle had ended, and there had been no answer. The Falcon was not at the designated comm waypoint, which meant they were either busy or worse. She only hoped it wasn't the latter.

Jessica thought for a moment, looking at her watch as she made time calculations in her head. She selected a new comm-target. This time, it was not a waypoint. Instead, she set the unit to take aim on Jupiter with a wide dispersion beam. The signal would be weak, but it would be readable. It would take nearly an hour to reach them, but they would at least know she was alive and was attempting to make contact. The display flashed *ready* again, and she tapped her comm-set to begin recording her message. "Aurora Actual, Nash. Feet dry. Phase one complete, on station.

Negative contact with Falcon at one eight four eight sierra tango. Will proceed with mission. Request next comm at two zero one three sierra tango. End comm.” She keyed up the transmit cycle and set the repeat count to three bursts. She pressed the send button, and the laser comm-unit began transmitting the message.

Jessica waited for the device to finish transmitting, then packed up the unit and returned it to her knapsack. She picked up her visual scanner and searched the area below, as well as all the way around her. She was still safe, so she settled in to wait.

## CHAPTER SIX

*"Thanks for coming to our rescue,"* Cameron said over the view screen on Nathan's ready room wall. *"You didn't have to cut it so close, however."*

"I have a flare for the dramatic, don't I?" Nathan said. "How does it feel scoring the Celestia's first kill?"

*"I believe the Celestia's original crew was more excited than I was,"* Cameron told him, *"especially Lieutenant Commander Kovacic. I think he feels guilty that they couldn't do more to get the ship into better shape during the last few months."*

"It's not like he had any resources at his disposal. To be honest, I'm surprised he was able to keep his crew alive and in relatively good spirits, all things considered."

*"That's what I told him,"* Cameron said. *"As for me, I'm still waiting for my heart rate to get back down to normal."*

"I know what you mean."

*"By the way, Doctor Sorenson has finished her analysis of the Celestia's jump drive."*

"What's the verdict?" Nathan asked.

*"I'll let her explain,"* Cameron said. *"She's standing by to report."*

The image on Nathan's view screen spit in two, with Abby's face being added beside Cameron's. Abby was in the starboard jump drive field generator room on the Celestia. "Doctor," Nathan greeted.

*"Captain." Abby took a breath. "As I explained before, the Celestia's jump drive is quite similar in design to our own. The biggest differences are in their choice of composite materials and their methods of power storage and distribution. Our program was apparently more conservative in our approach. The Celestia's development team chose a more aggressive approach."*

*"Is that bad?" Nathan wondered.*

*"My father and I often debated that very topic, Captain. He was quite conservative in his methods, choosing the most reliable methods and materials, thoroughly testing and validating all findings and all components along the way. He preferred to take baby steps toward the development of a giant leap in space travel technology."*

*"I gather you did not agree with him."*

*"Not entirely, no."*

*"Well, what's the bottom line? Can we make it work?"*

*"I believe so, yes," Abby told him. "In fact, it should work even better than the Aurora's jump drive."*

*"Better as in farther?"*

*"If we complete the installation as designed, it should have an effective jump range of twenty light years with a recharge ratio of one to three, or just under seven hours to complete a full recharge. If we incorporate the improved materials and fabrication methods developed by the Corinairans and Takarans, we may be able to achieve a range of thirty light years per jump."*

*"What would you recommend?" Nathan asked.*

*"I believe it would be best to complete her jump drive as designed. We can add a secondary emitter array later using the Corinairan and Takaran improvements."*

*"It would be nice to have the redundancy as well," Cameron added.*

"Good idea," Nathan agreed. "How long will it take to get it working?"

*"I've consulted with the fabrication officer on board the Aurora," Cameron said. "Using the Aurora's fabricators, it will take approximately two weeks to create all the emitters for the primary array."*

"And to install them?"

*"Vlad estimates four weeks," Cameron explained. "However, he can begin as soon as the first few emitters have been fabricated and tested. Total time to a functioning jump drive, assuming there are no problems, should be approximately two months."*

"Doctor, didn't your team install both the emitter array and the field generators on the Aurora in less than a month?" Nathan asked.

*"That was with a full team of expert technicians in a facility designed for building space vessels," Doctor Sorenson stated, "not coasting through space at near relativistic speeds while trying to remain hidden from Jung sensors."*

"Point taken."

*"Installation on the underside of the ship will be a bit trickier," Cameron pointed out. "We'll have to shut down nearly everything, wait for the topside to cool down, then rotate the ship so the underside faces away from Earth while we install those emitters, if we want to remain undetected, that is."*

"We might be able to help you out there," Nathan told her. "It would probably help if we timed our harassment attacks to coincide with your installation schedules."

"Agreed."

*"If there is nothing further, Captain?" Abby asked.*



"Of course, Doctor," Nathan said. "Thank you. I'll see to it our fabricators begin production immediately. I'll send the first batch over via cargo shuttle as soon as they are ready."

Abby nodded as her image disappeared from Nathan's view screen, and the image of Cameron sitting in her ready room expanded to fill the screen once again. "*You really think the Jung are going to leave us alone that long?*" she wondered.

"If they take the bait Jessica planted on Tony's body, we should be able to sucker them out in the opposite direction from your departure course."

Cameron shuddered at the thought of Tony slamming into the Earth's surface at a few hundred kilometers per hour. "*I still don't think we should have done that, Nathan.*"

"These are desperate times, Cam. Tony made his choices, and I made mine. And for the record, it *was* my choice... no one else's."

"*Just don't make your course too opposite,*" Cameron said. "*You don't want to make it obvious.*"

"How about one hundred thirty-seven degrees off your departure course," Nathan suggested, "and twenty-two degrees below the ecliptic?"

"*Jupiter may hide our burn from the Jung sensors on Earth,*" Cameron said, "*but that will not be the case with the ships chasing you. They will be able to see our burn, regardless of what course you take.*"

"That's why you'll be making course changes along the way," Nathan explained, "especially once the ships chasing us have either been destroyed or are sent running back to Earth."

"*They'll keep coming after us; you know that.*"

"And when they do, we'll keep destroying them. Sooner or later, they have got to realize they're better off waiting

for their reinforcements to arrive from Alpha Centauri. Once they get down to only a few ships, they'll stand their ground and hold the Earth until help arrives. That's how we'll buy you the time you need to get your jump drive working."

*"And once we get it working, then what?"*

"Jump your way back to Tanna, top off your tanks, and continue on to the Pentaurus cluster. Even if you had a dozen plasma cannons, until the rest of your ship is fully functional, you wouldn't stand a chance."

*"And what will you be doing in the meantime?"*

"We'll keep harassing them with hit-and-run strikes. Maybe send the Falcon out to recon other Jung-held systems nearby, see what kind of forces they actually have. It shouldn't take more than a few months for you to return, and with two fully loaded, jump-capable warships, we'll have a much better chance at taking down that battleship and liberating the Earth. Besides, by the time the Takarans finish building out your ship, they may even have some help ready to send back with you."

\* \* \*

Jessica sat unmoving behind the outcropping of rocks. Her arms were laid across the rock, holding her visual scanner to her eyes and allowing her to scan the field below without moving her head so much as a centimeter in either direction. Two large branches cut from a nearby tree were laid over her, their foliage covering her head and body in order for her to remain hidden from aerial observers that were soon to come.

It had been over an hour since she had touched down in the field below after having jumped from low Earth orbit. She was surprised that the Jung had not arrived earlier. She

was beginning to wonder if they had even detected the energy shielding used for thermal protection by the Corinairan jump rig Tony had been wearing. Granted, their sensors would have needed to be trained at exactly the right location to notice the moving energy source, but if they had captured members of the Winnipeg resistance cell, they knew she had jumped to Earth from the Aurora the last time it was in orbit. Surely they would be looking for the same trick this time around.

Just as she was starting to seriously doubt their plan, two Jung combat landers came in low from the opposite side of the small valley. They decelerated as they approached Tony's body, landing fifty meters to either side. Jessica increased the magnification on her visual scanner as Jung troops began to disembark from the landers in proper assault fashion. They circled out, creating a secure perimeter, just as EDF spec-ops troops would have done. *Lieutenant Telles was right*, Jessica thought. *These guys are better trained than the Jung troops the Ghatazhak had faced on Tanna.* Jessica checked that her visual scanner was recording the images. The Ghatazhak lieutenant would surely want to analyze the movements of the Jung troops.

She continued watching as the Jung established their perimeter. Two more men, both clad in much heavier outfits than the other troops, began approaching Tony's body in a cautious and steady manner. They held blast shields and some type of handheld scanning device, and they appeared to be wearing full pressure suits under the bulky, protective armor.

Jessica smiled. *They're afraid he's booby-trapped.* "They're not dumb," she whispered to herself.

\* \* \*

Nathan stepped through the hatch from the access corridor and headed around the corner of the self-contained, vault-like complex that enclosed the Aurora's bridge.

"Captain," a voice called out from behind.

Nathan stopped and turned aft, finding Lieutenant Telles walking toward him. "Lieutenant."

"I was hoping to have a word with you, sir," the lieutenant said as he approached. "Do you have some time?"

"Will it take long?" Nathan asked as he turned and continued forward.

"Possibly," the lieutenant admitted as he walked beside the captain. "Shall I make an appointment to speak with you at a later time?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Sir?"

"I was on my way to dinner."

"I do not wish to intrude on your private time."

"Actually, you'd be doing me a favor," Nathan said. "All of my senior staff are either busy or on the Celestia at the moment, and I don't much like dining alone."

"It would be a pleasure, sir," the lieutenant said politely. "Thank you."

"It won't be that much of a pleasure," Nathan warned as he turned the next corner. "Corinairan food can be a bit bland, and my chef hasn't quite mastered any of my native dishes."

"The Ghatazhak are trained to find sustenance from sources most humans would find quite distasteful." Lieutenant Telles smiled. "I expect I will survive."

Nathan paused at the entrance to the captain's mess. His eyebrow went up. "You smiled, Lieutenant. I didn't know the Ghatazhak *could* smile."

"We *are* a rather serious group. However, we do have our moments of joculariry."

"Ghatazhak jokes? I can't wait."

"I'm afraid they would make little sense without understanding more about our culture and lifestyle."

Nathan stepped through the hatch.

"Only one guest this evening, sir?" his chef asked as the lieutenant stepped through the hatch as well.

"Just the two of us tonight, Mister Collins," Nathan confirmed.

The captain's cook looked at the lieutenant. "Any personal preferences, Lieutenant?"

"I'm sorry?" the lieutenant said, appearing somewhat puzzled.

"I think he means, is there anything you prefer *not* to eat."

"I thought I was quite clear in the corridor that the Ghatazhak are not as particular..."

"Whatever you had in mind will suffice," Nathan said to his cook. He turned back to the lieutenant, gesturing toward the table with one hand. "Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Telles moved toward the table, the look of bewilderment still on his face.

"Commander Taylor is a vegetarian," Nathan explained. "She does not eat anything that was once alive and breathing."

"It is my understanding that the Corinairan diet relies quite heavily on such food sources," the lieutenant stated as he took his seat.

"Quite true," Nathan agreed as he sat, "a point that Commander Taylor was quite vocal about the first few times my cook tried to serve her. He has since decided to inquire about such preferences from any new guests."

"I see."

"What is your first name?" Nathan wondered.

"Sir?"

"Your first name. My first name is Nathan. My last name, or family name, is Scott." Nathan got another bewildered look from the lieutenant. "In this room, I prefer to drop the formalities of rank so everyone can speak freely. Using first names helps the process."

"I see. An interesting command style. My first name is Lucius."

Nathan leaned back in his chair. "What was it you wanted to speak to me about, Lucius?"

"With the permission of Lieutenant Commander Nash, I have been examining the intelligence data provided by the Winnipeg resistance cell."

"To what end?" Nathan wondered.

"I assume your eventual goal is the liberation of your homeworld, as well as its continued defense against its enemies."

"And what have you discovered?"

"Many interesting things, in fact. For example, unlike the Ta'Akar, who simply imposed their rules upon the worlds that they annexed, the Jung appear to be attempting to control your world with as little disruption to its productivity as possible."

"Killing tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people, is more than a little disruption," Nathan said.

"Not on a global scale," the lieutenant disagreed. "In fact, from what little information your previous intelligence files provided about the Jung, it appears that the way they are handling the Earth may be an exception."

"How so?"

“My discussions with Garrett of Tanna revealed that the Jung invaded his world with overwhelming force, killing millions of people in mere hours and destroying most of the Tannan civilization. There were just enough survivors to maintain the infrastructures that the Jung had chosen to spare for their own purposes. In short, the Jung used brute force to establish their clear dominance over the people of Tanna. Their conquest of the Alpha Centauri system was done in similar fashion, although fewer were spared.”

“Why is that?” Nathan asked.

“I suspect they chose Alpha Centauri more for its proximity to Sol than for its resources. The populated worlds of the Centauri are not exactly hospitable, and the resources they contain are more easily acquired elsewhere in the core.”

“You think this is the usual method for the Jung, then?”

“Anecdotal evidence provided by the Tannans would indicate as much,” the lieutenant explained. “However, we have very little true intelligence on the many worlds currently held by the Jung. All we know is that they control every inhabited world within the regions known to Terrans as the ‘core’ and the ‘fringe’.”

“I see.”

“What is interesting is that the Jung chose not to use overwhelming force, death, and destruction to subdue your people. Instead, they have been attempting to convince the general population that the political leaders that had been ruling Earth before the Jung’s arrival were using the people to further their own selfish agendas.”

“And what agendas might those be?” Nathan wondered.

“The usual: power, position, wealth.”

“And are their plans working?”

“To some extent, yes. A large part of the Earth’s population believes that life is better under Jung rule. The Jung have taken control of global economics, communications, transportation, and most of all, infrastructure. They have been redistributing wealth down the economic ladder, in essence, buying the loyalty of the working class. It is a classic scenario, one that has played out in similar fashion on many worlds in the Pentaurus sector over past centuries.”

“It has been a common scenario throughout Earth history as well,” Nathan added.

“As you are probably aware, Captain, this may present a problem should you attempt to liberate your world from the hands of the Jung. You may, in fact, find opposition among your own people.”

“Any idea as to the amount of support the Jung have from the people of Earth? Are we talking about a small minority? A vast majority? An even split?”

“It is impossible to tell at this time,” Lieutenant Telles admitted. “Even if it were possible to question every person on Earth, we would likely still not receive an accurate result, as the answers would depend largely on who was asking the questions.”

Nathan leaned forward as the chef placed a salad on the table in front of him. “Thank you, Mister Collins.” Nathan took a bite of his salad as he pondered the lieutenant’s words. “Do you think this will be a problem if we attempt to liberate the Earth?”

“Doubtful,” the lieutenant said as he watched Mister Collins place another dish of greens in front of him. “There is a difference between being willing to accept domination and being willing to sacrifice one’s self to fight such domination. The problem is more likely to present itself in the power



vacuum that will be left by the Jung's defeat. Reestablishing your myriad of national governments may not be possible, let alone the republic that ensured the cooperation of those governments. I'm afraid the result will be chaos."

Nathan took another bite of his salad, trying not to let his concern be too apparent. He had been so busy trying to get the Celestia back on her feet, he had not taken the time to consider such things. Liberation seemed a long ways off, if not impossible. "You said you had discovered many interesting things. What else?"

"My original assessment of the Jung troops in the 72 Herculis system appears to have been correct," the lieutenant said. "The resistance has provided recordings of Jung troops partaking in readiness exercises. The troops that are currently occupying Earth are well trained, well equipped, and well seasoned. There are estimated to be tens of thousands of them stationed on Earth at the moment. More intelligence would be needed to verify that all of those troops are of similar capability. For all we know, what we saw were the elite units, which could, in fact, number very few. However, until proven otherwise, it is best to assume that all the Jung troops currently stationed on Earth possess equal training and resources."

"So you're saying that the Jung forces on Earth are more than we can handle."

"If by we you mean your forces, then the answer is most definitely yes. If you are including your Ghatazhak forces in that statement, then that has yet to be determined. Intelligence also suggests that the troops are heavily supported by ships in orbit—more specifically, the two ships that are joined together in orbit and are currently serving as the Jung's spaceport. Also, although tens of thousands may sound like a very large number, when spread out across an

entire planet, it is actually quite thin. Without air support, most of those elements could be easily overcome by half my unit. The trick is in preventing other units from reinforcing those under fire long enough for the attack to reach its conclusion."

"Are you honestly telling me you believe a hundred Ghatazhak would be able to take down ten thousand Jung troops?" Nathan asked in disbelief. "A bit of an arrogant statement, isn't it?"

"More like twenty thousand," Lieutenant Telles corrected, "and it is not arrogance, Captain. It is knowledge of the capabilities of myself and of my men. Nothing more. And for the record, I did not say that we could defeat the Jung forces on Earth unassisted. In fact, we will need quite a bit of assistance, specifically air support and intelligence... preferably the... How do you say it? 'Boots on the ground' type?"

Nathan pushed his empty salad plate aside as the chef placed his main course in front of him. "How exactly would you go about such a task?"

"The liberation of Earth begins with the destruction of all Jung space forces. Without that, there can be no ground campaign."

"Of course," Nathan agreed.

"The key would be in identifying key military infrastructure, such as surface-to-orbit batteries, global and continental communications networks, and key routes of transportation and supply. All Jung surface elements must be disconnected, both physically and electronically, from one another. This must be done in near simultaneous fashion in order to be effective. That is the difficult part, as we do not have enough surface combatants or air combatants to do so. Even with the Aurora firing from orbit,

we would still have to prioritize our targets and hope the Jung are unable to react quickly enough.”

“It sounds like we are going to need a lot more help,” Nathan said as he took another bite of his main course. “You are aware that we sent word back to the Pentaurus cluster. Perhaps Prince Casimir will see fit to send additional Ghatazhak forces.”

“It is likely, yes, as most of the units have been put into suspended animation until they can be utilized. However, it may be some time before Casimir is able to send the help you seek.”

“Yes, that had occurred to me.”

“There is the other matter, of course... the reinforcements. Assuming the ships you detected leaving the Centauri system were in fact the reinforcements bound for Sol, based on the known intel on Jung FTL speeds, you have four to five months at best. Once those ships arrive, the task becomes significantly more difficult. So the question you must ask yourself, Captain, is, Do you wait for your own reinforcements and hope they are adequate, or do you strike now with inferior numbers before Jung reinforcements arrive? If you choose the latter, every day you delay is a day lost to prepare a defense against the next wave of Jung ships.”

“And the Earth will probably not be in a position to help us prepare,” Nathan said, “if she is in a state of post-liberation chaos, as you expect.”

“Indeed.”

Nathan took another bite of his dinner, chewing it slowly as he pondered the situation. “What would you do?” he finally asked.

“A difficult question to answer, Captain. The situation is fluid. As such, it requires some flexibility. You can commit to

a course of action, but you must not choose a course that would preclude you from changing your plans at the last moment should an opportunity present itself.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Nathan said.

“I believe your plans to escape with the Celestia in order to turn her into a jump-capable warship are sound. Two jump ships, especially if you are able to arm them with Takaran energy weapons and shields, would be quite formidable. It might even be enough to stave off the Earth’s destruction long enough to mount a suitable defense.”

“Destruction?” Nathan wondered. “I thought we were talking about annexation.”

“Intelligence provided by the Tannans indicates that, not only do the Jung refuse to surrender, they also refuse to tolerate revolt. If they are unable to hold your world, they are likely to destroy it.”

Nathan laid his fork down on the table as he leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Just like the Ta’Akar.”

“Worse than the Ta’Akar,” Lieutenant Telles said. “They destroyed civilizations. Tannan intelligence indicates that Jung destroy worlds.”

Nathan stared long and hard at Lieutenant Telles. “So you’re saying...”

“That the end game may be the destruction of the Jung themselves,” the lieutenant finished for him. He noticed the determined look on Nathan’s face. “Captain, there are more than fifty known inhabited worlds within this sector of space. If the Jung, in fact, control all of them, their fleet must number in the hundreds. If you intend to defeat the Jung once and for all, you must do so in swift and sure fashion. Your jump drive is your only hope, as it allows you to move faster than Jung communications can travel. You must destroy the majority of their forces before they even know

they are being targeted. It is not a war you must fight; it is systematic annihilation of all forces. No restraint, no mercy, no surrender. You must fight like a Ghatazhak if you wish to guarantee the safety of your world.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair. “No offense, Lieutenant, but that sounds suspiciously like the old *hammer and nail* approach.”

Lieutenant Telles squinted slightly, his head angling to one side. “Ah,” he said, followed by a phrase in Takaran that Nathan did not understand. “Yes, we have a similar expression. However, in this case, the Jung are nails. Therefore, you must be the hammer. Thus far, your primary strategy has been reactionary, taking advantage of situations and events as they present themselves. That is a sure way to lose a war. You will need to make your own situations and force the events to play out to your advantage. That, Captain, is what being an effective hammer is all about.”

\* \* \*

Jessica held her face tight against the rubber border of her visual scanner as she watched the Jung activity around Tony’s body. At least twenty soldiers stood guard. They were clad in red and black combat armor and wore oversized combat helmets that were fitted with some type of electronic sensor gear. The ring of soldiers formed a perimeter of about fifty meters in all directions while several officers clad in similar color schemes examined Tony’s body as well as the jump rig he was wearing. The two most senior officers were chatting away, pointing at various features of Tony’s gear.

Jessica smiled as one of the junior officers pulled the damaged data pad from Tony's pocket. He looked at it carefully, turning it over again and again, before finally rising to his feet and showing the device to the officer in charge. The officer looked it over, then said something to the junior officer that caused him to run back to one of the nearby shuttles with the data pad in hand and give it to one of the crewmen on board. Shortly afterward, the shuttle lifted off.

"Perfect," Jessica mumbled. She swung her visual scanner back to the officer in charge as another man, clad in the same red and black combat armor, approached him. After a brief exchange, the officer turned slowly to his right toward the hills in which Jessica was hidden and looked directly toward her, his eyes scanning the hillside.

"Uh, oh," she said softly. "Guess it's time to go." She left her visual scanner powered on and lying on the rocks, then slowly lowered herself down behind the rocks, being careful not to disturb the branches that lay over her and obscured direct view of her position from above. She turned and began to crawl away from the rocks, being careful to keep them between her and the Jung officer staring in her direction.

She crested the small rise, slid down the other side, got to her feet, and made her way swiftly through the darkness toward the tree line. As she approached the trees, a high-pitched whine came from behind her. She spun around as a Jung combat shuttle popped up over the top of the hill, its floodlights illuminating the area, Jessica included.

"Stay where you are!" a voice with a strange accent commanded over the shuttle's loudspeakers. The accent was familiar. Jessica instinctively drew her side arm and opened fire, sending a stream of narrow, red energy bolts

toward the hovering combat shuttle. Her first few shots were wide, but her next few struck the underside of the shuttle, destroying one of its floodlights. The shuttle jinked to its left and rotated to port to show its side door. Two Jung soldiers standing in the shuttle doorway opened fire, their streams of energy striking the ground around her.

Jessica headed for the tree line, firing wildly behind her as she ran for cover. Energy weapon shots from the soldiers in the shuttle struck the ground all around her as she dodged from side to side, zigzagging her way to the edge of the small grove of trees. Chunks of earth exploded all around her, sending mounds of dirt and rock into the air. They showered her as they fell back down. She felt a sudden burning sensation on her right shoulder, followed immediately by intense pain. Before she could react, she found herself tumbling to her right, falling between two trees and landing on her injured right side. Pain shot through her shoulder and her torso, pain even more intense than before. She cried out in an unintelligible fashion as she rolled over and slammed her back up against one of the trees. She reached over with her left hand to grab her weapon from her right hand, then quickly raised it and fired again at the still hovering shuttle. Her shots of energy struck the shuttle again, this time blowing apart the right side of the forward windshield. The shuttle heaved to its left and disappeared behind the hill from which it had risen. Jessica waited for several seconds, hoping to hear an explosion, or at least the sound of a crash, but there was none.

Jessica dropped her weapon on the ground next to her and reached over to her wounded right shoulder. She gingerly felt her wound. "Fuck!" she screamed as pain again shot through her shoulder. The wound felt like melted wax. It wasn't a direct heat; rather, it had barely even touched

her. However, the heat of the passing energy bolt had melted her jacket and severely burnt the underlying skin, fusing them together in an unnatural fashion.

She squinted her eyes closed as she tried to convince herself that it was nothing. As the pain washed over her, she quickly assessed her situation. She had severely damaged that shuttle—not enough to destroy it, but enough to send it back to base. It had probably been flying overhead cover and searching the area for someone just like her. Any moment, another combat shuttle—either one that was also flying cover or one that was still sitting at the landing site below—would come looking for her. She had to keep moving. Finally, she forced herself to rise, grimacing in pain as she stumbled off into the night.

\* \* \*

General Bacca walked briskly down the corridor, two of his aides scurrying to keep pace with his long strides. The general stood a good ten centimeters above most of the Jung stationed on Earth thanks to his unusually long legs, a product of genetic engineering introduced into his people more than a millennium ago to improve survivability on their world. Although it gave him a gangly appearance, the additional height only served to reinforce his authoritative presence.

Except for the Jung-appointed governor of Earth, Eli Scott. He, too, was on the tall side, standing eye to eye with the general. In addition, the governor's upbringing had given him an obvious sense of importance, however misplaced it might be... at least in the general's mind.

"Perhaps they did not intend for such devices to leave the ship," his aide suggested as they continued down the



main corridor of the capitol building.

"All of our data storage devices are encrypted," the general said. "Even our personal devices are bio-locked. You do not find it odd that a device containing details of the ship's condition was *not* protected?"

"It was protected by a pass code. We simply broke the code."

"So easily?"

"Our technology is far superior to that of the Earth," the aide said, his tone dripping with arrogance.

"And yet they somehow manage to jump about the system," the general said, waving his hand about to the side of his head, "destroying our *superior technology* at will." The general shot a contemptuous sidelong glance at his aide as they walked. "This could all be another trap, undoubtedly concocted by that withering, old admiral who refuses to break."

"We have reviewed the data from the last two engagements with the Aurora. There were several hits on the Aurora that could substantiate the intelligence found on the device."

"Could," the general said, raising one finger as they turned the corner, "not do."

"General," the other aide began, "this may be our best opportunity... our *only* opportunity."

The general stopped short of the massive doors that led into the anteroom outside the governor's office. He looked at his aide. "It could also be the next step in our complete undoing."

"Success favors the bold," the second aide responded.

The general straightened his uniform. "I've never much cared for that expression," he said as he opened the door and stepped inside, his aides still in tow.

General Bacca strode confidently across the outer office, ignoring the guards and the young woman at the desk as he pulled open the door that led to Governor Scott's office. As usual, the governor was sitting at his desk, trying to look important, as if the affairs of the world over which he governed actually depended on his efforts. The general found Governor Scott's efforts laughable at best, always having believed that worlds, much like ecosystems, ran themselves. Governments simply maintained order and provided some degree of protection against outside influences.

"I do hope you are here with some good news for once," Eli said as he looked up at the approaching General Bacca.

*"Interesting* would be a more accurate description."

Eli set his papers down on the desk in front of him, giving his full attention to General Bacca. "Now you have me intrigued." He leaned back in his chair. "Has this something to do with your flattened spy?"

"It seems the device found on his body revealed some interesting opportunities."

"Do tell," Eli urged.

"The device was a data pad used by the ship's personnel. This particular device was used by one of the senior engineering technicians on board the Aurora."

"And how did your operative come to have possession of it?"

"We suspect the owner was injured and was in the medical department at the same time as our operative. He may have stolen it then."

"And what did this data pad reveal?"

"That the Aurora's jump drive is damaged... specifically, its ability to recharge. If this is true, she may only have a few short-range jumps left in her."

"How short?"

"In total, maybe a few light minutes at the most."

"Then I assume you plan to press your advantage," Eli said, "before they are able to make repairs."

"I have considered that option. However, I have my doubts as to the validity of the intelligence."

"The basis of those doubts being?"

"Intelligence easily obtained should always be suspect," the general stated.

"A hunch," Eli responded.

"A lack of trust, both in the operative as well as the manner in which the intelligence was delivered. In addition, another individual was detected in the area of the body, nearly two kilometers away, possibly there to monitor the activity around the impact site."

"Did you apprehend this person?" Eli wondered.

"The subject has thus far eluded us. But our efforts continue."

"How is it that a single person managed to escape your forces, General?" Eli prodded.

"The subject inflicted damage to the combat shuttle that was about to drop troops onto the target's position."

"How is that possible?" Eli wondered. "I thought our projectile weapons were no match for your combat shuttles."

"This individual used an energy weapon."

"I thought you could track your weapons."

"The weapon used was not of Jung design."

"Interesting. Obviously more than a curious local."

"Indeed."

"Were you able to identify this person?" Eli asked.

"Doubtful," the general said. "The damage was not significant, but it was enough to force the shuttle to

withdraw. Its imaging systems were damaged in the engagement, however, it was able to return safely to base. We should have images of the subject within the hour.”

“General, this mystery man aside, we must commit all forces to the destruction of the Aurora. If she manages to escape...”

“I am well aware of the threat that the Aurora represents to the empire, Governor,” the general said, interrupting Eli. “I am also aware of the psychological and strategic importance the Earth represents. The entire core is centered on this system, while the Jung homeworld lies on its edge. If we are to rule the galaxy, we must first rule the core, completely and with uniformity. This can only be accomplished from a central location... this location. My orders are to hold this world until reinforcements arrive to secure it once and for all.” The general paused and looked at Eli with an accusatory look. “Do not think for a moment, Governor, that I have not taken notice that you have, at every opportunity, attempted to convince me to divert my forces from their primary mission in order to pursue the destruction of the Aurora and her sister ship. For what reason, I have yet to determine.”

“That sounds like a threat, General,” Eli replied calmly.

The general looked at him. He found the governor difficult to read, and he had to remind himself that, although Eli Scott had never been elected to public office on his world, he had spent his entire life among politicians. “No threat intended, Governor. It was merely an observation I thought I should share with you.”

“Thank you, General, but I assure you my concerns lie first with the safety of the empire as a whole and with the world of my birth, second. Surely you must agree that the Aurora *is* a threat to the empire.”

"Of course."

"Then you do intend to send ships after her?"

"I will send some, but not all, of our forces. I will hold one cruiser and our main battleship in reserve. The cruiser was damaged in the last engagement with the Aurora and would be of little use. Of course, our battleship is far more powerful than both the Aurora and her sister ship combined. Therefore, she shall remain in orbit in order to hold the planet. However, I must warn you, Governor; if my ships are unsuccessful and the Aurora should escape destruction yet again, more drastic measures may become necessary... measures that you may not care for."

"Now that *does* sound like a threat, General," Eli said, trying his best to appear unconcerned.

"It is merely a warning, Governor, of things that may yet come to be."

\* \* \*

Josh scanned his console as the Falcon rode the elevator platform up the Aurora's starboard main transfer tube. He glanced out his port side as the door to the missile deck descended from above, then passed below them. He looked up and saw the inner airlock doors part and slide into the sides of the tube. As soon as they passed them, the doors would quickly close, and the air would be rapidly sucked out of the airlock before the outer doors opened to space above them.

"How are we looking, Loki?" he asked.

*"All systems are online and ready for launch,"* Loki reported from behind Josh. *"Jump drive is at full power, and our first jump is already programmed."*

Josh squinted as the outer doors descending toward them from above also parted, allowing the light of Jupiter to flood the cockpit with an eerie, orange glow. "Man, I hate launching on the lit side of that thing," he declared as he dropped his visor to combat the glaring light.

*"Just don't look at it,"* Loki suggested. *"Launch position in five seconds."*

"How can I *not* look at it?" Josh said. "I mean, it's right there."

*"Falcon, flight,"* the flight controller's voice called over the comms. *"Pad is locked. You're clear for liftoff."*

*"Flight, Falcon. Lifting off,"* Loki answered. *"You heard the lady,"* he said to Josh.

Josh fired a small blast from the lift thrusters to push the Falcon off the elevator pad, its weak gravity offering almost no resistance to their ascent. "Thrusting forward," Josh announced as he added forward thrust. "Bringing in the mains." Josh brought the Falcon's main throttles slowly forward, and the interceptor began to accelerate. The Aurora's forward section passed under them quickly, and in seconds, the Aurora was behind them.

"Pitching up five degrees," Josh announced as he pulled his control stick back slightly.

*"Come to one nine seven and accelerate out,"* Loki instructed.

*"Coming to one nine seven and accelerating."*

*"Ten seconds to first jump point,"* Loki announced.

"I hope she has her ears on this time," Josh said.

*"Me, too,"* Loki agreed as the Falcon was enveloped by a wash of blue-white light emanating from the Falcon's jump field emitters.

\* \* \*

Jessica sat in the bushes off the side of the road, watching the headlights in the distance as they grew closer. She had been running for more than an hour. She was dirty and sweaty. Her clothing was torn, and her shoulder was bleeding and hurt like hell. She had managed to evade the Jung shuttles that had been searching for her, but she needed a way to clear the area quickly. She needed a ride.

She crouched low as the vehicle coasted up to a stop at the intersection. Quickly and quietly, she came out from behind the bushes and moved to the side of the vehicle. She popped up, her gun raised. "Open the fucking door, now!" she ordered.

The woman in the passenger seat screamed, as did the young boy in the back seat.

"What the..." the man in the driver's seat exclaimed.

Jessica pulled the side door open and pulled the woman out of the car. "Everyone out! I need this vehicle!"

"Don't shoot us!" the man cried out.

"Then get the hell out of the vehicle!"

"I can't," the man insisted. "I mean, I can. I can get out of the vehicle, but that won't do you any good. The vehicle is keyed to both my body and my wife's body. It won't run without one of us in the car."

"What?" Jessica wondered in frustration.

"Mama!" the little boy cried out.

"What do you want with us?" the woman cried.

"Fuck," Jessica exclaimed. "Why couldn't you be driving an old piece of crap like everyone else?" She looked at the woman. "Get in the back, lady."

"What do you want..."

"I said get in the back seat!" Jessica exclaimed. "And quiet your kid down while you're back there, will you?" Jessica pushed the woman into the back seat and slammed

the door, keeping her gun pointed at the driver the entire time. She sat in the front passenger seat and closed the door. "Drive," she ordered.

"Where?" the man asked.

"Anywhere," Jessica told him, pointing her gun at him again. "Anywhere but here, that is."

"All right!" the man said, Jessica's gun making him nervous. He pressed the accelerator and the car rolled quietly away from the intersection, continuing on down the dark road.

"Is this one of those electric jobs?" Jessica wondered.

"Yes," the man answered nervously.

"Who are you?" the woman asked from the back seat.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Jessica answered.

"Where were you headed?" she asked the driver.

"Home."

"Where's home?"

"Don't tell her," the woman said.

"She's got a gun, honey," the man contested.

"He's right," Jessica agreed. "I've got a gun, remember?"

"What kind of gun is that?" the woman challenged. "I've never seen anything like it."

"What, you're a gun expert now?"

"I think it's a Jung weapon, honey," the driver said.

"Are you a Jung?" the little boy asked, having finally stopped crying.

"No, I'm not a Jung," Jessica said. "In fact, I'm trying to get away from the Jung."

"Are you a member of the resistance?" the driver asked.

"You know something about the resistance?" Jessica asked, suspicious of the man's inquiry.

"Not really, just what you hear around."

"What do you hear around?"



"They say a lot of the Intrepid's crew came down around these parts," the man explained, "that they formed a resistance cell or something."

"So are they blowing stuff up or something?" Jessica asked in jest.

"Not that I know of," the man said. "I did hear that they ambushed a group of Jung soldiers on patrol outside of Sydney though."

"That was just a rumor," the woman said.

"So, are you?" the man asked.

"Not exactly," Jessica said. She touched her shoulder again, checking to see if it was still bleeding. She winced in pain.

"Are you injured?" the woman asked with more hope than sympathy.

"Don't get any ideas," Jessica warned her. "Even without this gun, I can still kick all your asses." She looked at the kid in the back seat. "Except maybe for the little dude."

"What are you going to do with us?" the man asked.

"Nothing as long as you don't give me any problems. I just need to get some distance between me and those Jung search parties back there. As soon as I do, I'll leave you alone, and you'll never see me again." She looked at the driver. "Unless, of course, you tell the Jung about me, in which case, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

The group in the car became silent as they continued down the dark country road. Jessica looked out at the city lights ahead in the distance. "Is that Sydney?" she asked.

"That's Sutherland," the man said, surprise in his voice. "Sydney's still another twenty kilometers or so and on the other side of the bay." He looked at her. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"What gave me away, my lack of an accent?"

“Actually, you do have an accent,” the man said. “At least, to us you do.”

“Why are you talking to her?” the woman asked from the back seat.

“He probably read somewhere that the more you talk to your captors, the less likely they are to kill you,” Jessica told her. Again, there was silence. She looked at the driver. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Something like that, yes.” After another moment of silence, the man asked, “Is it true?”

“Supposedly. They taught us the same thing in boot.”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” the man realized. “From the Intrepid.”

“That old bucket? Not hardly.”

“But you’re fleet, right?”

“Yeah, something like that. Technically, I think I’m alliance now.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jessica said. “Just drive.”

They continued along for several minutes in silence. Jessica tried not to think about the pain in her shoulder. She wanted to tell the driver to stop, to pull over for a moment so she could treat her wound. She wanted to smear some topical pain med on it, but she couldn’t risk the delay. Every minute they rolled down the road was another kilometer between herself and her pursuers.

“There’s something going on up ahead,” the man said as he took his foot off the accelerator. “It looks like a traffic jam or something.”

Jessica looked ahead. A long line of red taillights was less than half a kilometer ahead of them. “Do you usually have traffic jams out here?”

“Never.”

"Fuck," she exclaimed. "It has to be a road block."

"Should I stop?" the man asked.

"No, just slow down, but don't put your foot on the brakes," Jessica told him. "Damn it." She turned and looked at the man. "Just slow down a bit more. I'm jumping out."

"What? You're injured."

"If you stop, they might notice." Jessica turned around toward the back seat. "Look, I'm sorry I scared you. I promise I'm one of the good guys. In fact, there are a lot of us up there still fighting for all of you down here, all right? Just remember that." Jessica opened the car door, then turned back to him. "Please, don't tell them anything." She turned and jumped, landing hard on her side and rolling over several times.

"Jesus!" the driver exclaimed. He looked back over his shoulder. "Did she make it?"

The little boy stood on the seat, looking out the back window. "She got up! She got up!"

"My God," the man exclaimed. He noticed his wife pulling out her phone. "What are you doing?"

"I'm calling the authorities," she exclaimed.

"What? Are you crazy? You heard what she said..."

"She pointed a gun at us!" the woman argued.

"She was desperate."

"I don't care what she was. I'm not getting executed over..."

"Put the phone away," the man said sternly. The woman looked at him, defiance in her eyes. "I'm not kidding."

The woman put the phone down in her lap. "I suppose you're planning on lying to the Jung when we get to the road block."

"Damned right I am," the man exclaimed, "and so are you."

\* \* \*

"Time's up," Loki announced, "and still no contact."

*"Captain is not going to be happy,"* Josh said.

"Something must have happened to her," Loki said. "She wouldn't miss her comm appointments." Loki called up the next jump point on their flight plan and transferred it into the flight computer. "New course," he told Josh.

*"Where to?"*

"Back to the ship," Loki answered.

*"They're just gonna turn us around and send us back out here to keep trying."*

"We still have to check in," Loki reminded him. "New course: one two four, plus twelve ecliptic."

Josh sighed in frustration over the comms. *"Coming to port and pitching up twelve,"* he answered as he moved his flight control stick to the left and pulled back slightly.

*"Accelerate to four zero five."*

Josh pushed the throttle forward slightly, watching as the Falcon's speed increased. *"On course one two four, plus twelve, at four zero five,"* he reported.

*"Jumping in five.....four..."*

*"You think flight will let us land and pee before we have to jump back?"* Josh wondered.

*"...one.....jumping."* Loki's visor suddenly went dark as the blue-white jump flash filled the Falcon's cockpit. "Jump complete," he announced as his visor became clear again. He looked down at his navigation and sensor displays. "You should have gone before we left."

*"I did,"* Josh answered. *"I think those nanites are working on my bladder or something. Even after I go, I still feel like I need to go, you know?"*

"No, I don't. Aurora is at our ten o'clock low," Loki reported.

*"Yeah, I see her."*

"Maybe you should tell the doc."

*"So she can stick me back in that scanner for a few hours? No, thanks. I'll just keep peeing."*

"Aurora, Falcon," Loki called over the Falcon's comms.

*"Falcon, go for Aurora,"* Naralena answered.

"Aurora, Falcon. Negative contact. Request instructions."

*"Falcon, Aurora. We received a blind transmission a few minutes ago. The lieutenant commander transmitted it nearly an hour earlier. She is boots on the ground. Actual requests you return to station and make contact at next comm waypoint at two zero one three sierra tango."*

"Aurora, Falcon copies. Will proceed to next comm waypoint and attempt contact at two zero one three sierra tango. Falcon out."

*"See? I told you,"* Josh said as he began a wide turn to come about.

"Just go in your suit," Loki told him. "It's designed to absorb it." Loki called up the next waypoint on the comm-schedule and entered the coordinates into the jump computer. Surprised that Josh had not responded to his last comment, Loki looked over the console at the back of Josh's helmet. "Did you hear me? I said just go in your suit."

Josh let out a long sigh of relief over the comms. *"I just did."*

\* \* \*

Cameron stood in the middle of the Celestia's bridge, looking at Nathan's face on the main view screen. "If we don't leave now, we'll have to wait another seven hours,"

she reminded him. "The Jung have come looking for us twice in the last ten hours, and it's been over two hours since their last attack. I'm not sure it's worth the risk just to get a little more propellant. Even if we could get up to max sub-light speed, it would still take us over a year to get out of the system."

*"I'm not worried about your speed," Nathan said. "I'm worried about your ability to change course. You're going to need it if we're going to keep the Jung from plotting your escape course."*

"We've got more than enough propellant to reach ten percent light and make at least four course changes along the way, especially if we save our full-power burn for last."

Nathan sighed. *"Very well, Commander. We'll disconnect and move so you can lift off and get underway."*

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered, trying to hide the enthusiasm in her voice.

*"Safe flight, Cam," Nathan added. "Aurora Actual out."*

Cameron took a deep breath as she looked around the bridge. From every working station, the faces of the few crewmen the Aurora could spare looked at her in earnest. Her entire reason for joining the Earth Defense Force was to become the first female ship's captain in EDF history, and now, she was standing on the bridge of her first command, about to get under way for the first time. She exhaled slowly as she tapped her handset. "You heard the man. All stations, prepare to get under way."

Nathan turned away from the view screen, looking aft toward the comm-center at the back of the bridge. "Discontinue propellant transfer and retract the transfer boom."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"How's the threat board?" Nathan asked his tactical officer.

"Board is clear, Captain. All sensor feeds from the Talons on lookout also show clear."

"Propellant transfer boom is disconnected and is being retracted," the systems officer reported.

"Very well." Nathan turned forward again. "Move us up and away, then aft, of the Celestia, Mister Chiles."

"Aye, sir. Thrusting up and away."

Nathan watched the main view screen as the image of the Celestia, which had filled the entire screen for the last hour, began to fall away from them.

"Fifty meters," the navigator reported.

"Propellant boom is secure," the systems officer reported.

"Very well," Nathan answered.

"Seventy-five meters."

"Let's move aft of her," Nathan ordered.

"Thrusting forward," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

The image of the Celestia on the main view screen began to slide over them as the Aurora moved aft of her.

"Ten meters per second relative," Mister Chiles reported.

"One hundred meters above the Celestia and rising," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan continued to watch as they passed over the top of the Celestia. A minute later, they had cleared the aft end of their sister ship, and the surface of Metis was sliding over them instead.

"Altitude now one-fifty and rising."

"Yaw to port and rotate us one-eighty, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered. "Then hold our distance from the Celestia."

"Yawing one-eighty to port and holding distance, aye," Mister Chiles answered.

"Focus our forward cameras on the Celestia after we come around, Mister Navashee. I don't want to miss this."

"Engineering, Captain. How are we doing down there?"

*"We're as ready as we're going to get,"* Vladimir answered over the comm-set, *"but I cannot guarantee all bottom-side thrusters will work properly... or at all."*

"Understood," Cameron answered. She turned to face aft. "Threat board?" she asked Luis at the tactical station.

"The board is clear," Luis reported.

Cameron turned forward once more. "Helm, all systems ready for lift off?"

"Reactors one and two are running at fifty percent. Three and four are idling at one percent. All thrusters show ready, except for those along the lower starboard side just aft of the forward section."

"Compensate by taking the same thrusters on the port side offline," Cameron ordered. "That should keep us from rolling to starboard as we thrust upward."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman answered.

"All right, Mister Donahue, take us up," Cameron said as she sat down in the command chair.

"Lifting off, aye," the helmsman answered.

"There's a phrase I never thought I'd hear on the bridge of a starship," Luis mumbled.

Cameron smiled, saying nothing.

A circular wave of dust shot silently outward from all around the sides of the Celestia except her midship section.



With no atmosphere to offer resistance, the dust continued outward, some of it falling back to Metis hundreds of meters away, while the rest of it continued upward and outward into space. As the dust continued to be blasted away from the surface, the massive vessel slowly rose off of Metis. Within seconds, the Celestia had broken free of the small moon's weak gravity.

Nathan watched in awe as the Celestia rose majestically off the surface of Metis, a wave of dust spreading out in all directions. "There's something we'll probably never see again." He turned to his sensor operator and smiled. "I hope you're recording this."

"We're up," Mister Donahue reported from the helm. "Five meters and rising quickly."

"Thrust forward," Cameron ordered. "Smooth and easy. I want to be well clear of Metis before we start climbing to a departure orbit."

"Thrusting forward, aye."

"How are our inertial dampeners looking?" Cameron asked Ensign Schenker, who was serving double duty as both sensor operator and systems officer.

"Inertial dampeners are online, running at forty-seven percent. We'll feel the mains, but not too badly as long as we throttle up gradually."

"The Cheng will be working on them during departure," Cameron said. "With any luck, he'll get them in better calibration by the time we do our full-power burn. For now, forty-seven percent should be enough."

"Range from Metis is one kilometer and increasing," the navigator reported.

"As soon as we reach ten kilometers, you can start climbing to a higher orbital altitude for departure," Cameron said. "Keep an eye on our orbital position, Mister Jakoby. Remember: our departure course has to keep Jupiter between us and Earth."

"Yes, sir," the navigator acknowledged.

"Thrust forward," Nathan ordered. "Let's keep pace with her until she pitches up for departure."

"Thrusting forward to follow," Mister Chiles answered.

"How long until we reach the line-of-sight horizon with Earth again?" Nathan asked.

"At current speed, two hours, forty-two minutes, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Once the Celestia starts her departure burn, we'll start our slingshot burn."

"Aye, sir."

"Remember: only one engine," Nathan reminded him. "We have to look lame."

"Yes, sir."

"Passing ten kilometers," Mister Jakoby announced.

"Very well," Cameron said. "You may start your climb, Mister Donahue."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman answered. "Bringing the mains online and accelerating to higher orbit for departure. Starting the burn at zero point zero five percent."

Cameron felt a small surge of forward momentum as the Celestia's main engines came to life for the first time since

the ship had landed on Metis only days ago. "I guess they still work," she mumbled as she felt herself sink back into her command chair slightly.

"She may be mostly hollow, but she can fly," Luis said with obvious pride.

"Increasing power to zero point one," Mister Donahue announced.

Cameron again felt the slight force of the increased thrust. Even at such a fraction of their overall potential, the Celestia's main propulsion was amazingly powerful. She, like the Aurora, was designed to move out quickly, and without their inertial dampeners working at full efficiency, they would likely feel every tenth of a degree of change in their power.

"The Celestia is starting her climb," Mister Navashee reported.

"Climb with her until we reach the optimum orbital altitude for our slingshot maneuver," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles acknowledged. "Climbing with her."

Nathan watched the magnified image of the Celestia on his main view screen as her two inboard engines glowed faintly. He did not feel the force of their acceleration, as the Aurora's inertial dampeners were not only functioning perfectly but had been somewhat enhanced by the Takarans during their month-long stay in the Pallax shipyards in the Takaran system. He sighed as he watched the Celestia climb away from Jupiter, and for the first time since they had first realized that the Jung had already captured Earth, Nathan felt like they had hope. With two ships, possibly even two

jump-enabled ships, they not only had hope; they had a chance.

“I’m still not fully versed in the policies and protocols of your service,” Lieutenant Telles said, “but in ours, you’d be considered a commodore now.”

Nathan turned and looked at the lieutenant standing to his right as he, too, stared at the image of the Celestia on the main view screen. “I never thought of that.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Jump complete," Loki announced as the Falcon's jump flash subsided. "We're on the next comm waypoint, coming up on twenty thirteen, ship time."

*"Think she'll answer this time?"* Josh wondered.

"I hope so. Even I'm starting to get bored."

Josh turned partway around in his seat, trying his best to look over his right shoulder at Loki in the back seat of the Falcon's cockpit. *"You see? I told you this was mind-numbingly boring!"*

"Yeah, well, it still beats flying through waterfalls," Loki mumbled.

*"Actually, I might be inclined to agree with you on that one,"* Josh admitted as he turned back around to face forward.

Loki smiled. "Deploying laser comm-array."

Josh looked at his console, leaning forward and squinting in disbelief. *"Uh, aren't we a little close?"*

"These are the coordinates flight transmitted just before we left," Loki said.

*"Why?"* Josh wondered. *"Why would they put us so close? We were, like, five minutes out at all the other comm waypoints."*

"They probably want us to make real-time contact with her," Loki surmised.

*"Maybe, but come on; we're only four light seconds out. You're aware of that, right? Four light seconds!"*

"I'm aware of it."

*"Okay, just making sure,"* Josh said. *"So how long are we supposed to sit here this time?"*

"Ten minutes, just like before."

Josh turned around to face aft again. *"Ten minutes, four light seconds away from Earth—Earth, where there are, like, a half dozen Jung ships and a few hundred fighters."*

"That would be the place," Loki answered. "You said you were bored, didn't you? Well, this hardly qualifies as boring."

*"No, this is still boring, but it does have potential,"* Josh declared.

"Comm-array is deployed in standby mode, waiting for her signal." Loki looked at the time display on his console. "Comm window in thirty seconds."

*"Don't watch the clock. Watch the sensors,"* Josh advised. *"If they spot us, we're going to have to jump out in a hurry."*

"I've got an escape jump loaded and ready," Loki told him. "We can jump away within five seconds."

*"You do realize we're headed directly toward the Earth, right?"* Josh asked.

"I know, but we're barely moving."

*"Still, we are getting closer. I mean, I haven't done the math or anything, but I'm betting we're going to be a good deal closer than four light seconds out ten minutes from now."*

"Not really."

*"Are you sure about that?"*

"I did the math."

*"I should have known,"* Josh said, rolling his eyes.

Loki looked over his console at the back of Josh's flight seat. "Since when did you get so nervous about flying into danger?" Loki asked. "I thought you loved that stuff."

*"I do when the odds are in our favor," Josh replied, "which they currently are not."*

"And you thought they were when you decided to attack a Jung frigate?"

*"Actually, yes."*

"You do realize that was a mistake, right?" Loki asked.

*"I do now, sure."*

"Just checking."

*"Time?"* Josh wondered.

"Twenty eighteen." Loki sighed.

*"You think she's in trouble?"* Josh wondered, genuine concern in his voice.

"She's probably just scrambling to get to a secure location from which to transmit before..." Loki stopped talking and focused his attention on his console.

*"Before what?"* Josh asked.

"Laser comm-array just lit up," Loki announced. "It's going through the handshake..."

*"I thought that happened instantly."*

"It does from close range. We're four seconds out, remember?"

*"Almost four seconds out,"* Josh said. *"Probably closer to three by now."*

*"Falcon, Nash. Do you copy?"* Jessica's voice called over the laser comm. Her voice was tinny and distant, and the decryption algorithms were chopping bits and pieces of her words. Nevertheless, the stress in her tone was obvious.

"Nash, Falcon copies. Sit-rep?"

*"She doesn't sound too good,"* Josh said.

"Yeah, I noticed."

*"Falcon, Nash. Mission aborted. Injured, being hunted. Request immediate extraction from mission sector one one four. Range one click max. Over."*

*"I told you..."*

Loki waved his hand for Josh to be quiet even though Josh couldn't see him from his position at the front of the cockpit. "Nash, Falcon copies. Will recontact at two zero three zero sierra tango with details. Can you hold position for next contact?"

*"Do you have her position?"* Josh asked.

*"I've got her. I've got her,"* Loki assured him.

*"Falcon, Nash. Affirmative... Make it quick, boys. Nash out."*

*"Give me a heading,"* Josh declared as he turned forward and prepared to maneuver.

*"Already on it,"* Loki assured him. *"Eleven to port and down eight. Throttles to twenty-five percent. I'll jump us as soon as we hit our target speed."*

*"Eleven to port and down eight. Throttles coming up."*

*"Jumping in twelve seconds,"* Loki announced.

\* \* \*

Eli stepped out of the elevator and followed the two escorts into the Jung military command center in the lower levels of the capitol building. The room was not as big as he had expected, with no more than a dozen officers, technicians, and guards occupying the relatively modest space. As he approached the center of the room, it occurred to him that his own office on the top floor of the building above them had far more space.

"What was so important that you had to drag me down here?" Eli wondered aloud.

"Apologies, Governor," General Bacca stated with forced politeness, "but we are about to launch our attack on the Aurora, and I did not wish to leave the command center."



"Isn't Jupiter more than an hour away?" Eli said.

"Near real-time battle communications are maintained via FTL comm-drones," the general explained. "I believe your EDF used a manned variety they referred to as comm-runners."

"I see. So you wanted me to witness the battle?"

"Actually, I wanted to show you the subject that attacked our combat shuttle near our operative's impact site." General Bacca gestured to a technician to put the footage up on one of the nearest view screens.

Eli watched the images from the shuttle's nose camera, flinching as the narrow, red bolts of energy leapt toward the camera from the person running away on the surface.

"Freeze, magnify, and enhance," the general instructed the technician.

The image stopped and zoomed in on the face of the shooter on the ground. The face was blurry, but after several enhancement passes, it became clear.

"A woman?" Eli said, surprised.

"Indeed."

Eli cocked his head to one side as he examined the woman's face on the view screen. "She looks familiar."

"She's the same woman that was extracted by one of the Aurora STS shuttles outside of Winnipeg not even a day ago."

"No, that's not it," Eli mumbled. He turned to the general. "I mean, I'm sure you're right, General. However, I'm sure I've seen her someplace else."

"She is undoubtedly an operative from the Aurora," the general insisted.

"Again, I'm sure you're correct, General. I'm a bit confused, however. If she was just extracted a day ago, why did she return?"

"Perhaps to make contact with the resistance once again," the general suggested. "We did take down the cell that she had made contact with outside of Winnipeg, after all."

"But why Australia?"

"There are still more than one hundred of the Intrepid's surviving crew who have not been apprehended. They are undoubtedly on that continent, quite probably in the general area of Sydney."

"You think the Aurora needs crewmen?" Eli asked, surprised at the general's implication.

"It is possible," the general said. "The Aurora was not fully crewed at the time of her departure. However, it seems unlikely that they would take such a risk at this particular time."

"Unless they really do need crewmen," Eli said.

"Yes," General Bacca mumbled, staring at Jessica's face on the view screen. "Most curious." The general turned back to Eli. "However, it is just as likely that she came down with our operative."

"To what end?"

"I am unsure at the moment," General Bacca admitted. "However, it is even more reason to consider the intel gathered from that device suspect."

"It seems a lot of effort to plant a bit of false information, does it not?"

"Perhaps," the general agreed.

"Either way, that woman should be apprehended and interrogated," Eli insisted. "If she is from the Aurora, she will undoubtedly have valuable intelligence."

"Possibly," the general said, tapping his chin with his forefinger. "Or she could be part of an even more elaborate ruse." He looked at Eli. "Either way, I agree she should be

interrogated. I have ordered reinforcements into the area as well as aerial sensor platforms to search for the energy signature of her weapon. Within the hour, the area shall have four times its current assets. We shall find her."

\* \* \*

"Slingshot maneuver complete," Mister Riley reported from the Aurora's navigation console. "Breaking orbit onto departure course."

"Maintain full power and continue to accelerate," Nathan ordered.

"Maintaining full power, aye," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee announced from the sensor station. "Three of them, just appeared astern."

"General quarters," Nathan ordered.

"General quarters, aye," Naralena answered from the comm station. The lighting on the Aurora's bridge suddenly took on a red hue as the ship prepared for battle.

"Contact one is a Jung cruiser. Contacts two and three are frigates," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. "They must have just come out of FTL, sir."

"What are they doing, Mister Randeem?" Nathan asked impatiently.

"The frigates are turning toward Metis," Mister Randeem said. "The cruiser is turning toward us."

"Range?"

"Cruiser is two thousand kilometers and closing slowly."

"What about the frigates?" Nathan asked.

"I'm pretty sure they're looking for the Celestia, Captain." Mister Randeem looked at his console again. "The

cruiser is accelerating,” Mister Randeem announced. “She’s giving chase.”

“Deploy missile launcher and all mini-rail guns except for turrets three, four, and five,” Nathan ordered. “That’s where we took that last hull damage. Maybe they’ll believe those guns are down.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Also deploy two quads each, top and bottom.”

“Aye, sir.”

“All compartments report general quarters manned and ready,” Naralena reported. “Chief of the boat is in damage control. Mister Willard is in combat. Flight reports ready for action.”

“Lock all four missiles on contact one and fire when ready, Mister Randeem,” Nathan ordered.

“Locking missiles on the first contact, aye,” the tactical officer acknowledged as he tapped commands onto his console. “Target locked. Firing four.”

“Aft view,” Nathan ordered.

The main image on the main view screen switched to the view aft as four missiles streaked away toward the pursuing Jung cruiser.

“Missiles running at full power. Time on target: ninety-seven seconds.”

“Contacts!” Mister Navashee announced. “Four missiles inbound!”

“Impact in one minute! Engaging point-defenses,” Mister Randeem announced.

The Aurora’s mini-rail guns along her back side rotated toward the pursuing Jung cruiser to her stern and opened fire, quickly destroying the four incoming missiles.

“Negative impact! All of our missiles were intercepted, sir,” Mister Navashee reported.

“All incoming Jung missiles have also been destroyed,” Mister Randeem added.

“Contact!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Another missile launch?” Nathan wondered.

“No, sir! Jump flash! It’s the Falcon!”

“Incoming transmission,” Naralena reported.

“Fire another round of missiles, Mister Randeem.”

“Firing another round, aye.”

“Falcon reports Lieutenant Commander Nash is aborting her mission and requesting immediate extraction,” Naralena announced as she listened to the Falcon’s incoming transmission on her comm-set.

“Now?” Nathan said.

“Falcon, Aurora copies. Stand by one,” Naralena said over her comm-set. She looked at the captain. “She’s injured and on the run, sir.”

“Firing missiles.”

“Send Major Waddell and a squad in the jump shuttle to pick her up,” Nathan ordered. “Tell them to coordinate with the Falcon. He can use them to fly cover as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Cruiser is still gaining on us,” Mister Randeem reported. “Eighteen hundred meters and closing.”

“Contacts!” Mister Navashee reported. “Four more missiles inbound. Impact in fifty seconds.”

“Engaging with point-defenses,” Mister Randeem announced.

“Stand by to jump. Thirty light seconds straight ahead, Mister Riley.”

"Thirty light seconds, aye."

"Tell the Falcon to jump with us," Nathan added.

"Aye, sir," Naralena acknowledged.

"At this range, our point-defenses may not be able to..."

"That's the idea, Mister Randeem," Nathan interrupted.

"Twenty seconds to impact," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"Jump plotted," Mister Riley announced.

"One missile destroyed," Mister Randeem announced, tension in his voice.

"Wait for my order," Nathan instructed.

"Two down..."

"Ten seconds..."

"Missiles have breached our point-defenses!" Mister Randeem cried out.

"Five seconds!"

"Jump!"

The bridge instantly flooded with the blue-white jump flash.

"Jump complete!"

"Full magnification," Nathan ordered. "Show me those missiles."

The image on the main view screen surrounding the forward portion of the bridge shuddered momentarily as it magnified, peeking back in time at their old light from thirty seconds ago. Nathan watched in fascination as he saw two Jung missiles explode as they were ripped apart by the Aurora's point-defenses. Ten seconds later, the Aurora's previous jump flash appeared on the view screen.

"I'm never going to get used to this," Nathan mumbled. He turned around to face Mister Randeem at the tactical station directly behind him. "Any chance those missiles will catch us?"

"No, sir. They're nearly nine hundred thousand kilometers behind us."

"The Falcon?"

"She jumped with us," Mister Navashee reported. "She's off our starboard side."

"What about those frigates, Captain?" Mister Randeem wondered. "When they see that the Celestia is no longer on Metis, won't they go looking for her?"

"Possibly," Nathan admitted, "but they don't know she's got a partially completed jump drive. They'll think she's making a run for open space, just like us. If I were them, I'd go after the sure threat first, and that's us. However, better we play it safe. Comms, make contact with the Celestia via laser comm. Tell them to go cold until they hear from us again."

"What about that cruiser?" Mister Randeem asked. "Surely they aren't going to just give up."

"No, they surely won't," Nathan agreed. "That's why we're still at general quarters."

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Loki reported as the Falcon's jump flash subsided. "We're on the next comm waypoint, four light seconds out." Loki glanced up over the console toward Josh. "Still bored?"

*"No, not really."*

"Laser comm-array deployed and locked on coordinates," Loki announced. "Transmitting comm link request." Loki waited, silently counting off fifteen seconds. "Nothing yet."

*"Maybe she had to move,"* Josh said. *"Maybe we should go to receive only."*

"Protocol says we auto-hail for one minute, waiting for a linkup. Then we go to receive only and wait for her to initiate."

*"This is the part I hate,"* Josh mumbled, *"the waiting."*

"I've got a return," Loki said. "Handshake has initiated." Another twenty seconds passed before Loki began to call. "Nash, Falcon. Do you copy?" He paused again, waiting another fifteen seconds. "Nash, Falcon. Do you copy?"

The laser comm beeped, and the usual hollow, tinny background noise that indicated a solid comm link began. *"Falcon, go for Nash."*

"Nash, Falcon. Say your status."

*"Status unchanged. Stationary for now at good extraction point. LZ is secure. Pick up on current coordinates,"* she said over the laser comm. *"The sooner the better... Over."*

"Nash, Falcon copies. Extract from current coordinates in ten."

*"Looking forward to it,"* she responded. *"Nash out."*

"Falcon out."

*"Coming about,"* Josh announced as he pushed the Falcon's nose to port and initiated a one hundred eighty degree turn.

"Plotting return jump," Loki said.

*"On return course and speed."*

"Jump locked," Loki announced. "Jumping in three..... two.....one.....jump." Loki's visor went opaque as the Falcon's cockpit filled with the blue-white jump flash. A split second later, his visor cleared up. "Jump complete. Jump shuttle dead ahead."

*"I see them,"* Josh responded. *"Coming alongside."*

"Jumper One, Falcon."



*"Go for Jumper One,"* the jump shuttle's copilot responded.

"Positive contact with Nash. Pickup in nine mikes. It'll take two jumps to get into proper position. I'm calculating them now. I'll transmit in a moment."

*"Jumper One copies. Standing by."*

*"Falcon, Waddell,"* the major called from the back of the jump shuttle.

"Go ahead, sir," Loki answered as he calculated the upcoming jump sequence.

*"Did Nash give you any details about her condition?"*

"No, sir, none. She did seem anxious though."

*"You think she can't move or something, sir?"* Josh asked over the comms.

*"Doubtful,"* the major answered. *"She would have said something if that were the case. How soon do we go?"*

Loki glanced at the digital mission clock on his console. "I'm finishing up the jump plots now, sir. We need to be on the extraction point in just under seven minutes. With turns between jumps, we should depart in two."

*"Understood,"* Major Waddell answered. *"You'll jump in first, a little high and to the side. We'll jump in ten seconds after you."*

"Understood," Loki said.

*"Be sure to stay out of our flight path after you jump in. If the LZ is hot, we may have to jump right back out, and we don't want to jump through you."*

"Understood," Loki responded.

*"Yeah, that would suck,"* Josh added.

"Jumper One, Falcon. Transmitting jump plots now. First jump in ninety seconds."

\* \* \*

Eli pretended not to be interested as General Bacca's aide spoke to the general in their native language. Despite its similarities to the Romansh language used in the Alps, the people of Earth had never quite figured it out, and the Jung had yet to demonstrate a desire to teach them.

General Bacca turned toward Eli just as the icons updated on the system map displayed on the control room's main view screen. Eli immediately noticed that the icon representing the Aurora had suddenly moved away from the cruiser that had been attacking it and that the icon representing the Celestia on the surface of Metis had disappeared altogether.

"Am I to assume that the Celestia has been destroyed, General?" Eli asked.

"Unfortunately, it does not appear so," the general answered. "Our frigates report that the Celestia is no longer on Metis."

"Where is she then?"

"We do not know. We can only assume she departed while the moon was on the far side of Jupiter, no doubt maintaining a trajectory that has kept her hidden on her way out."

"And the Aurora?"

"She was engaged by our cruiser. They were able to get several missiles past the Aurora's defenses. It appears that some of her weapons were damaged during recent engagements, reducing her ability to defend herself. She was forced to jump away at the last moment to avoid being severely damaged."

"Then her jump drive is still working," Eli commented.

"Apparently so," the general said. "However, they only jumped a very short distance—a mere thirty light seconds,

to be exact. This is not in line with her previous jump tactics.”

“How so?” Eli asked.

“In past encounters, the Aurora has jumped distances that allowed her to reposition herself, most likely through a series of small jumps, and return for another strike before we were able to ascertain her new position and therefore calculate her next attack. It has been quite effective.”

“And thirty seconds is not far enough?”

“The higher her speed, the longer it takes for the Aurora to complete a turn. At her current speed, it would take her nearly a minute to run a mere forty-five degrees.”

“Has she turned?”

“No more than ten to fifteen degrees,” the general explained. “She is attempting to zigzag, as you call it, in order to keep our ships from coming out of their FTL hops at such close range as to be able to target her. However, she continues to accelerate at sub-light speeds.” General Bacca stood staring at the system map on the main view screen at the front of the command center.

“Then you believe the Aurora’s jump drive *is* damaged, just as the intelligence indicates,” Eli said.

“I am not yet convinced this is the case,” the general said. “Captain Roberts is no fool. He is playing his role quite carefully. He is either legitimately trying to escape our pursuit, reserving what little jump energy remains in the process, or he is attempting to lead us away from the Celestia.”

“What about the Celestia, then?” Eli wondered. “Maybe you should send your frigates after her.”

“The Celestia is of little concern. Her need to remain undetected will keep her in a narrow departure corridor for

some time. Once we have dealt with the Aurora, finding the Celestia should not prove difficult."

"Then what are your plans, General?"

"We have positioned tactical craft on the far side of Jupiter to watch for the Celestia should she attempt to change course to elude later detection. Meanwhile, we will continue to play this cat-and-mouse game a bit longer, at least until our ships begin to reach the limit from which they could quickly return to Earth."

"You still think the Aurora is laying a trap?" Eli asked.

"All things are possible, Governor," the general said. "The wise leader is prepared for all possibilities."

One of the junior officers in the command center called to the general from the center of the room, pointing to one of the side display screens as he spoke in Jung. Eli noticed the officer's urgent tone and looked at the view screen that was now showing a map of the area south of Sydney, Australia. There was a small, pulsing, red dot along a country road, only a kilometer or two off the main highway. As the officer spoke, the image on the next view screen over changed to show near-Earth orbit. Another red symbol appeared with some Jung lettering and numbers next to it.

The general turned back toward Eli. Eli smiled. "Another *possibility*, General?"

"It seems Mister Guerrero was not as inept as we feared."

"Who?" Eli asked.

"One of the many Terrans we reprogrammed to act as infiltrators into the resistance. One of our combat shuttles participating in the search has detected a short-range tracking signal, the type used by our covert operatives to tag a target. Apparently, Mister Guerrero used one of the devices."

"Are you sure about this?" Eli asked. "I was under the impression that she was farther south."

The general turned toward the view screen showing the map of the area south of Sydney. "The signal was first detected here," the general said, pointing at the pulsing, red dot, "on a hillside a few kilometers from Mister Guerrero's impact sight."

"How is it she was able to get so far north without being tracked?"

"The devices are very small and have limited range, a few kilometers at best. We lost the track when the damaged shuttle was forced to return to base. By the time additional assets reached the search area, the signal was gone. Somehow, she had managed to leave the area rather quickly. We only reacquired the signal a few minutes ago. It does not appear to be moving at the moment."

"Are you sure it's even the same person?" Eli wondered. "Perhaps she discovered the device and is using it as a ruse."

"Anything is possible," the general insisted. "However, we have also detected an anomalous energy signature in the same area. The signal was only active for a few minutes, but it coincided with the presence of one of the Aurora's small jump-capable spacecraft, the same one that we have seen on numerous occasions over the last few hours. I suspect the anomalous energy signature is this woman using some type of communication device, and that spacecraft is relaying those communications back to the Aurora as we speak."

"Do you have any confirmation of that?" Eli wondered.

"Not at the moment, but we shall soon enough. I have ordered all units involved in the search to immediately converge on the location of the energy signature." General

Bacca smiled. "If the young woman is there and she *is* from the Aurora, perhaps we can determine their true plan through her immediate interrogation."

\* \* \*

"Maintain course and continue full burn, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Maintaining course, aye," the helmsman answered. "Continuing mains at full power."

"How long are we going to run, sir?" the Aurora's tactical officer wondered.

"As long as they're willing to chase us, Mister Randeen," Nathan answered. "The longer they chase us, the farther away the Celestia gets, and the more difficult she becomes to find."

"We can't keep doing this forever," Mister Randeen said. "Sooner or later, they'll try to..."

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee called from the sensor station. "Two ships! Dead ahead!"

"They're the frigates!" Mister Randeen reported with excitement. "Ten thousand kilometers and closing fast!"

The bridge shook as rail gun rounds slammed into the Aurora's outer hull.

"We're taking rail gun fire on our bow!" the systems officer reported.

"Prepare to fire plasma torpedoes!" Nathan ordered.

"Charging torpedoes..."

"Helm! Put our nose on the closest target!" Nathan ordered as the bridge continued to shake from the bombardment of Jung rail gun rounds. He tapped his comm-set. "Combat! Captain! Stand by to fire the lower quads as we turn! Your choice of targets!"

“On collision course with the starboard target,” Mister Chiles reported.

“Plasma torpedoes are charged!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Lock torpedoes on the starboard contact and fire!”

“Multiple contacts!” Mister Navashee announced. “Both contacts are firing missiles! Impact in twenty seconds!”

“Torpedoes away!” Mister Randeem reported. “Spinning up point-defenses!”

“Two of eight destroyed!” Mister Navashee reported. “Fifteen seconds!”

“Helm, hard to starboard! Tactical! Pound contact two with our lower quads as we pass!” Nathan felt the adrenaline surge through his veins as the ship rolled to starboard and started her turn. “New jump! Fifteen light seconds! Any course!”

“Missiles are turning with us! Four down, four still coming!” Mister Navashee announced. “Ten seconds!”

“They’ve breached our defense perimeter!”

“Escape jump plotted!” the helmsman announced.

“Five seconds to impact!”

“Jump!” Nathan ordered without hesitation.

The bridge filled with the blue-white jump flash as the Aurora slipped away from the incoming Jung missiles. The barrage of enemy rail gun fire had disappeared as well. Nathan slumped back in his seat. “Damn, that was too close. Helm, reverse your turn and pitch up five degrees relative to the ecliptic. I want us on a heading at least thirty degrees to port of our current one.”

“Reversing my turn, five degrees up relative, aye,” Mister Chiles answered.

Nathan leaned on his right arm, tapping his lips with his index finger. “They’re using their FTL drives to make short,

faster-than-light jumps of their own. They're trying to cut us off."

Mister Riley turned from the navigator's station to face the captain. "They must have really good FTL systems, sir. An FTL hop that short is extremely difficult to do safely."

"They can't out jump us," Mister Randeem said.

"At such short ranges, they can jump just as effectively as we can," Nathan said. "It may take them a few seconds longer to cover the same distance, but the tactical effectiveness is the same." Nathan sighed. "They're not stupid. They're using our own tactics to fight us."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

Nathan sighed. "At least we know they took the bait." Nathan turned toward the sensor station to his left. "Did we do any damage?"

"Their light is just catching up to us now." Mister Navashee smiled. "I have to tell you, sir; being able to watch our engagement again half a minute later is great. It looks like the second contact lost its forward shields on the port side. It also took a few rail gun rounds on that side. Their forward missile turret may be damaged, but she's still maneuvering."

"Keep your eye on them, Mister Navashee," Nathan said. "I want to know the moment one of them goes to FTL again."

"Yes, sir."

"They're going to keep cutting us off and forcing us to engage them on their terms. They're trying to get us to use up what they *think* is the last of our jump charge." Nathan smiled as he tapped his comm-set. "Damage report."

*"Outer hull damage all across our forward section,"* Master Chief Montrose answered over the comm-set. *"The inner hull is still intact. We also lost two forward rail guns."*



"They're trying to whittle down our point-defenses," Mister Randeem surmised.

"How about our jump drive, Master Chief?" Nathan asked.

*"All emitters are good. Jump drive is still online."*

"Casualties?"

*"None yet. Bumps and bruises mostly."*

"Very well," Nathan said, tapping his comm-set again.

"Captain, I can't find the cruiser," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "He may have gone to FTL."

"What's our current speed?" Nathan wondered.

"Just passing fifteen thousand kilometers per second," Mister Riley reported.

"Continue full burn," Nathan ordered. "We need them to keep believing that we're making a sub-light run for it."

"Captain, soon we'll be moving faster than what we believe to be the top speed of the Jung's ship-to-ship missiles. At that point, they'll have no choice but to engage us head on."

"It might sell it a bit more if we keep zigzagging intermittently," the navigator said.

"Good thinking, Mister Riley," Nathan said. "The harder it is for them to cut us off, the more it looks like we're actually trying to escape and not just trying to lead them away from the Celestia. Good thinking indeed. Feel free to alter course at will, including our relative angle. Just keep us in the same general direction. If nothing else, it will keep them from coming out of FTL directly in our path like the last time."

\* \* \*

Josh was instantly thrown forward, his restraints digging into his shoulders as the Falcon's jump flash subsided and the interceptor found itself in atmospheric flight.

*"Jump complete!"* Loki called from the back seat of the Falcon's cockpit.

"No shit!" Josh declared as he struggled to gain control of the interceptor.

*"Three hundred meters and falling fast!"* Loki reported. *"Forward velocity: fifty meters per second!"*

Josh slammed the lift thrust throttles all the way forward, and the Falcon's four lift turbines screamed to life. The ship's rapid descent stopped abruptly, pushing them both down in their seats with great force. "Lift turbines at max power!" Josh grabbed the main atmospheric propulsion turbine throttles and started easing them forward. "Come, baby. Time to fly like a birdie."

*"Multiple contacts!"* Loki announced.

"That was my next question."

*"All around us! Closest contacts are two minutes out and closing."*

"Interceptors?" Josh asked.

*"Not fast enough. Probably shuttles. Maybe combat landers or troop carriers."* Loki expanded his scan range, then refocused on another group of contacts farther out. *"Fast movers are coming as well. Seven minutes out."*

Josh felt his flight controls becoming easier to move as more air began to flow over the Falcon's lifting body and partial wings. He continued to add forward power as he pitched their nose up and start a wide right turn. "Pitching up and coming to starboard." Josh looked outside. "It's pitch black out there. I can't see shit."

*"We're pointed toward the ocean and turning south,"* Loki explained. *"The city lights are to port and behind us"*

*right now."*

The Falcon's cockpit suddenly lit up with a blue-white flash.

*"Jumper One! Feet dry!"* the voice announced over their helmet comms.

*"Jumper One, Falcon! Inbound contacts! Minute thirty out! Probably troop shuttles! More contacts, fast movers, maybe six and a half out!"*

Josh continued pulling the Falcon through a wide, climbing turn to starboard while the interceptor buffeted in the turbulent offshore winds as they turned into them.

*"Damn!"* Loki swore. *"Jumper One! Ground activity near the LZ! Probable ground forces moving into the area from the southwest along the road. We'll try to slow them down."*

*"Jumper One copies,"* the shuttle's copilot answered. *"We'll get in and out quickly. Just keep them off our backs for five."*

"Which ones you wanna deal with first?" Josh asked as he continued making tiny adjustments to maintain their turn. "The ground units or the shuttles?"

*"Tighten your turn and come about hard,"* Loki said. *"We can strafe the ground units first, then climb up and right to intercept the shuttles."*

"Got it," Josh answered. He reduced the Falcon's main propulsion and rolled the interceptor onto its right side, pulling back hard on the control stick to pull the ship into an even tighter turn to starboard. Josh could feel himself being pushed down in his seat as the ship pulled more than twenty times normal gravity. Without the Falcon's inertial dampeners, he knew they never would have survived the turn.

*"We're going to lose altitude turning this tight, Josh!"* Loki warned.

"I'm on it," Josh assured him as he added thrust out of the right sides of the interceptor to compensate for the loss of lift now that they were on their side.

*"God, I hate these turns!"* Loki complained. *"Why can't we dial up the dampeners to full power?"*

"I've gotta feel the flight," Josh insisted. "It ain't flyin' if all you do is look at your console!"

*"I much prefer spaceflight,"* Loki grumbled as the turn finished and the ship rolled quickly back to level flight.

"Droppin' to the deck!" Josh announced. Josh could feel himself become lighter as he pushed the Falcon's nose down.

*"Ground targets dead ahead,"* Loki reported. *"Bringing the nose turret in."*

"I'll put them on our left so we're not going nose to nose with Jumper One," Josh said.

*"Good idea,"* Loki agreed. *"Gun range in five seconds."*

"Light 'em up," Josh said as he reduced forward power and increased his lift thrust to maintain his altitude just above the treetops.

A stream of brilliant, red-orange balls of plasma energy streaked out of the Falcon's twin-barreled nose turret as it slowly rotated to the left. The streams of energy tore into the three vehicles as they traveled down the country road at top speed. The last vehicle in the convoy blew apart and flipped over, spreading Jung soldiers and burning debris all over the road and its shoulders. The next vehicle swerved to try to avoid the incoming fire, only to lose control and roll over onto its side. It, too, exploded as the Falcon's energy weapon found its target. Finally, the last vehicle, the lead in the doomed convoy, slammed on its brakes and swerved to

its left, away from the attacking interceptor, as its deadly blasts of plasma energy slammed into the road to its right, sending chunks of asphalt flying in all directions.

*"Damn it!"* Loki swore again.

*"I thought you had him!"* Josh added.

*"Jumper One, Falcon! One truck got through!"* Loki announced over the comms as the Falcon began to accelerate and climb. *"He'll be at the LZ in one minute! We have to deal with the inbound shuttles first or you'll never get out of there in time!"*

*"Jumper One copies,"* Jumper One's copilot answered over the comms. *"We'll deal with them. Hurry back."*

Major Waddell looked out the shuttle's starboard window as they skimmed the treetops. The trees and brush suddenly gave way to a manmade clearing, in the middle of which was a large warehouse along with several smaller outbuildings. The clearing was poorly lit with floodlights mounted on the sides of the main building. Several large tractors and a few large trucks were parked off to the sides, and the clearing was surrounded by woods with dirt roads at either end of the compound. "Looks like some type of a maintenance yard or farming station," the major said to his sergeant as they passed overhead.

"Looks like everyone has gone home for the night," the sergeant answered.

"Fine by me."

*"Forty seconds,"* the copilot's voice announced over Major Waddell's comm-set. *"Coming about for touchdown. LZ is hot."*

“Understood,” the major answered. He stood in front of the hatch that led from the cargo area to the cockpit of Jumper One. “Thirty seconds!” he yelled at the ten Corinari troops standing along either side of the shuttle. “We’ve got company coming! Drop the door and get ready to welcome them!”

The shuttle crew chief in the jump seat to the major’s right pressed the door control panel. The lights inside the shuttle turned a dim red, and the rear cargo door began to open, its top edge pulling away from the top of the cargo bay as it lowered downward and away from the shuttle. The sound of rushing air was heard as wind blew into the cargo area of the shuttle from outside. Ten seconds later, the door was level with the cargo bay deck, forming a platform that extended three meters beyond the back of the shuttle. The two soldiers closest to the exit stepped onto the ramp as the shuttle finished its turn and leveled off only ten meters off the ground. The two Corinari soldiers on the ramp raised their energy rifles, took aim on the approaching truck, and opened fire. Their barrels flashed in rapid succession as they sent a stream of energy bolts toward the approaching vehicle. The truck stopped suddenly as it took several blasts to its nose, blowing its engine apart. Jung troops began jumping and falling out of the back and sides of the vehicle, quickly running into the scattered woods on either side of the road. The soldiers on the ramp continued to shoot, spraying the area on either side and behind the truck as their energy rifles continued to rain fire down upon the scrambling enemy soldiers. A few shots were returned by the Jung troops as they scrambled for cover but were all wide of their marks.

“Five seconds!” Major Waddell called to his troops.

*"Jumper One, Falcon,"* Loki's voice called over the major's comm-set. *"Incoming shuttles destroyed. Returning to provide cover."*

Jessica watched from the partially open doorway of the main warehouse as the jump shuttle settled down onto the packed dirt. Just before the shuttle's gear touched the ground, two Corinari jumped from the rear cargo ramp, immediately moving off to either side as they continued to fire toward the burning vehicle at the mouth of the far entrance. In pairs, the rest of the Corinari troopers jumped out of the shuttle, also fanning out as they sprayed both the truck and the surrounding woods with energy rifle fire. The entire scene was bathed in a combination of amber light from the warehouse floodlights, bright white from the shuttle's landing lights, and the incessant flashes of red-orange from the Corinari energy rifles as they hammered the Jung soldiers in the distance.

She waited until the last two men to exit the shuttle turned and headed toward her position in a crouched run. She grabbed her backpack and pushed the door open, stepping out into the clearing so they could see her and know that she was a friendly. In an instant, she knew that it wasn't necessary, as she recognized the man coming to get her.

"Nice to see you, Lieutenant Commander!" Major Waddell yelled as he approached.

"Goddamned nice to see you as well, Major!" she answered. "What took you so long?"

"You know how it is with pilots," the major answered with a grin. "They always need to double-check their math." He looked at her shoulder wound. "Can you make it?"

“Hell yes!” she answered, handing her backpack over to the sergeant next to Major Waddell.

“We’d better move out,” the major said. “We don’t want to miss our flight!”

Jessica smiled as she crouched down and jogged toward the waiting shuttle, holding her left arm up to shield her face from the shuttle’s engine wash as it kept its lift turbines running just under the level needed to lift off. She followed the major around to the back of the shuttle and up the ramp as weapons fire continued to be exchanged between the Corinari spread out around the back end of the shuttle and the few surviving Jung troops still hunkering down in the woods at the edge of the compound.

Once inside, Major Waddell led her to the starboard jump seat and buckled her in. He then stood up and tapped his comm-set as he turned around and headed back to the open aft end of the shuttle. “Package secure! Orderly withdrawal! Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Jessica cringed as the sergeant cut away the fabric around her shoulder wound. “Damn!” she cried out as he sprayed the wound with a temporary antiseptic sealer.

“That’ll help ease the pain and keep it from getting infected!” the sergeant explained over the sound of the shuttle’s turbines and the weapons fire outside.

“A little late for that, isn’t it?” Jessica mused. She looked aft, trying not to pay attention to the sergeant’s medical aid and watching as Major Waddell stood fearlessly in the middle of the ramp. He laid down cover fire as his men climbed aboard the shuttle from either side in orderly fashion. Each man called off the next number in succession as he boarded, and when the last man called the number ten, the shuttle began to rise off the ground with surprising speed. Major Waddell continued firing into the trees below



for several seconds as the ramp began to rise beneath his feet, forcing him to step backward into the shuttle. No longer with a firing line to the surface, the major discontinued his barrage, raised his weapon, then turned and headed forward as the cargo ramp continued to rise behind him.

The shuttle rose, gaining forward speed as it ascended. The deadly rain of energy weapons fire now over, the few surviving Jung soldiers rose from their positions and ran toward their disabled vehicle, its front still burning. The most senior of the men barked orders in Jung to the others as they scrambled to pull a large weapon out of the back of the damaged truck. Two Jung soldiers quickly carried the large weapon past the burning front end of the truck into the edge of the clearing, then stopped and deployed its tripod base. As one soldier steadied the base, the other soldier swung the weapon around to point it at the climbing shuttle. The senior officer continued to urge them on, hurrying them to fire the weapon before it was too late. As the weapon began to charge, a faint, blue-white light began to quickly spill over the departing shuttle's hull, pouring out from small emitters. In the same second as the blue-white flash was about to reach its peak, the Jung soldiers fired their weapon. A ball of yellow light streaked away from the weapon, striking the shuttle in its port aft turbine. The shuttle rolled onto its left side as its back end kicked out to the right. The blue-white light instantly disappeared, and the shuttle's nose went down. Seconds later, it disappeared behind the trees, followed by a crash, a massive cloud of smoke and dust, and the bright, orange flash of an explosion.

\* \* \*

"Captain, both frigates have gone to FTL," Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora's sensor station.

"Last range?" Nathan wondered.

"Ninety light seconds."

"One or all of them are going to come out of FTL in front of us," Nathan said. "Let's make another course change, Mister Chiles. Twenty degrees up relative to the ecliptic."

"Twenty degrees up relative, aye," the helmsman answered. "Mains are still running at full power. Current speed is fifty thousand kilometers per second and increasing."

"Damage control reports power restored to forward rail guns, sir," Naralena reported.

"Very well." Nathan looked about the bridge as he waited for the Jung to execute their next move. Either his enemy believed the false intelligence Jessica had planted on Tony's body and were trying to get them to use up the last of the jump energy, or they were testing that intelligence before committing to a full-on battle. Either way, his plan was working. They were keeping the Jung ships away from the Celestia, buying her time to disappear into the cold darkness of space.

Nathan rotated aft in his command chair. "Did we receive an updated status report on the Jung ships still in orbit over Earth the last time the Falcon was near?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered. "The battleship and the cruiser we damaged during the previous engagement were still in orbit."

"That was, what, fifteen minutes ago?"

"Twenty minutes, forty seconds," Mister Randeem corrected.

“Contact!” Mister Navashee reported. “Off our starboard beam, well below!”

“It’s the cruiser, sir,” Mister Randeem added. “She’s matching our old course and speed.” Mister Randeem smiled as he looked at the captain. “They thought they would come out right next to us.”

Nathan smiled back.

“Contact is turning with us and accelerating,” Mister Navashee announced.

“They’re trying to move closer,” Mister Randeem surmised.

“Multiple contacts!” Mister Navashee reported. “Four missiles inbound! Impact in eighty seconds!”

“Point-defenses,” Nathan ordered.

“Already firing,” Mister Randeem answered.

“Helm, thirty degrees to port and continue pitching up,” Nathan ordered. “Try to keep them from getting alongside us.”

“One missile down,” Mister Randeem announced.

“Lock four missiles on the cruiser and fire when ready,” Nathan ordered.

“Locking missiles on target,” Mister Randeem answered as his fingers entered the commands. “Firing four! Time to target: one minute...”

“Contact!” Mister Navashee interrupted. “Frigate!”

“Two missiles destroyed!”

“We’re turning right into the frigate, Captain!”

“Helm, reverse your turn and pull up hard!” Nathan ordered.

“Reversing my turn! Pulling up hard, aye,” Mister Chiles answered.

“Three down!” Mister Randeem announced.

"Third contact!" Mister Navashee reported. "The other frigate!"

"Where is she?" Nathan demanded.

"High and to starboard!"

"Fourth inbound missile destroyed," Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan glanced up at the tactical display on the side of the main view screen as the last of the Aurora's missiles were destroyed by the Jung cruiser's point-defenses. "Helm, turn into the third contact. Tactical, stand by snapshot on tubes two and four with nukes."

"Turning into the third target," Mister Chiles answered.

"Loading two and four with nukes."

"How long until our nose is on target?" Nathan asked his helmsman.

"Ten seconds."

Nathan turned and looked at Mister Randeem.

"No problem, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

"Multiple contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Four missiles inbound from contact two! Impact in eighty seconds!"

"Turn complete!" the helmsman reported.

"Two and four, snapshot!" Mister Randeem announced. "Torpedoes away! Time to target: forty seconds!"

"Pitch down ten and roll us to port!" Nathan ordered. "Tactical, all point-defenses on the inbounds. Pound both frigates with our top and bottom quads as we pass between them."

"Aye, sir!" Mister Randeem reported. "Quads firing!"

Nathan felt vibrations in the deck.

"Taking heavy rail gun fire from the cruiser," Mister Randeem reported. "Aft port side!"

The bridge began to shake violently.

“Rail gun fire across our belly from the nearest frigate!”

Nathan glanced at the tactical display again, noticing that only one of the missiles fired by the first frigate had been destroyed by the Aurora’s point-defenses.

“Two detonations!” Mister Randeen reported.

“What about those missiles?” Nathan demanded.

“Two down. Two to go!” Mister Navashee reported.  
“Impact in fifteen seconds!”

“Escape jump! Two light seconds!”

“Two light seconds, aye,” Mister Riley answered from the navigator’s chair.

“Contact! It’s the Falcon!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Jump plotted and locked!” Mister Riley announced.

“Comms!”

Naralena didn’t waste time answering the captain.  
“Falcon, Aurora! Jumping ahead two light seconds!”

“Three seconds!”

“Jump!”

The bridge filled with the blue-white jump flash. The shaking stopped as the flash cleared, then there was a dull thud.

Nathan looked around. “What the...”

“One of the missiles came through the jump with us!” Mister Randeen reported. “The energy of the jump must have caused it to detonate just before impact.”

“Damage?”

“Nothing yet, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Where’s the Falcon?”

“They just jumped in off our starboard side,” Mister Navashee answered.

“Flash traffic from the Falcon,” Naralena reported.

Nathan pointed to his comm-set.

"Patching them in," Naralena said, noticing the captain's gesture.

*"Aurora, Falcon! Jumper One is down! Jumper One is down southwest of the extraction point!"*

"Falcon, Aurora Actual," Nathan said into his comm-set. "Any survivors?"

*"Unknown, sir,"* Loki answered over the comms. *"The shuttle is badly damaged, but the hull was basically intact. No one was answering my hails."*

"Hostiles?"

*"Fast movers maybe three minutes out, and more combat landers about five out."*

Nathan closed his eyes and clenched his jaw as a wave of despair swept over him. He had no options. "Falcon, Aurora Actual. Destroy Jumper One."

*"Sir, there may be survivors inside. Maybe we can hold them off long enough to..."*

"Negative," Nathan interrupted in a stern tone. "Too risky. We cannot afford to lose the Falcon, and we cannot afford to let the jump drive technology fall into Jung hands. I'm ordering you to destroy Jumper One, maximum force. Is that understood?"

There was a brief pause. *"Understood, sir,"* Loki answered. *"Falcon out."*

The bridge seemed unusually quiet.

"Mister Navashee," Nathan began calmly, "I want damage assessments and position updates on all three targets ASAP."

"Aye, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Helm, hard to port, five degrees up relative to the ecliptic. Maintain full power."

"Hard to port, five degrees up relative, full power," Mister Chiles answered. "Aye, sir."

“Load nukes in two, four, five, and six. All full yield, all set for snapshot, Mister Randeen.”

“Yes, sir.”

\* \* \*

Jessica slowly opened her eyes. They immediately burned from the smoke in the back of the shuttle. She coughed. Her shoulder still hurt. She could hear moans from others inside the shuttle. She squinted as she coughed, trying to see through the smoke that was lit only by the jump shuttle’s emergency lighting.

The shuttle was on its left side at about a forty-five degree angle. Jessica realized she was still in her jump seat on the right side of the shuttle. The seat was rocking, dangling in the air from its only remaining intact mount. She reached up to her harness release and disengaged the buckles. She fell unceremoniously from the dangling jump seat, landing next to the shuttle’s crew chief located on the port side bulkhead. She groaned on impact, her shoulder sending waves of pain through her entire right side. She turned and looked at the crew chief on her left. His helmet was cracked. His face was covered with blood, and his eyes were wide open with a fixed gaze. His shoulder appeared to have been torn from his body, caught on his broken restraint harness that had still been tethered to the overhead runner track at the moment of impact. “Jesus,” she mumbled, averting her gaze. She closed her eyes as she fought back the pain in her shoulder. “Anyone alive?” she yelled.

“I’m good!” a voice called.

“Who’s that?” Jessica asked.

“Letvil, sir.”

“You injured?”

"I don't think so."

"I'm alive, too," another voice called out. "Tonkton, Sergeant. Count off!" the sergeant ordered. "I'm one!"

"Two," Letvil followed.

"Three," another voice announced. "Nutara."

"Four, Mechky."

There was a long pause. "Five, Nash," Jessica finally added. "I guess that's it. Someone blow the back hatch so we can get some fresh air in here," she ordered.

"Blowing the hatch!" Sergeant Tonkton announced. A loud bang was heard as the explosive bolts on the rear cargo hatch detonated, blowing it clear of the shuttle.

Jessica stretched her jaw. "Damn!" she complained, her ears ringing from the explosion.

"Sorry, sir," the sergeant said as he climbed out the back of the shuttle and looked around.

"Six," a voice called almost too weak to hear. "Waddell."

Jessica turned around, looking to her left toward the sound of the major's voice as the lingering smoke was drawn slowly out the back hatch. "Major! Is that you?"

"Letvil! Check on the major!" Sergeant Tonkton yelled from outside. "Nutara! Mechky! Grab your weapons and get out here! We've got movement in the trees!"

Jessica pulled herself over the crew chief's dead body toward the hatch that led to the shuttle's cockpit, propping herself up on her left elbow as she pushed with her legs. She got to her feet and stood against the port bulkhead, one foot on either side of the crew chief's body. She looked into the passageway. Major Waddell was lying against the left side of the passageway, his lower half in the cockpit. A large tree branch had come through the forward windscreen on the starboard side, crushing most of the cockpit and killing the flight crew. "Fuck." Jessica looked at him. His helmet had



been knocked off his head. His face was pale. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know," he said. "How do I look?"

"Like shit."

"Thanks." He raised his head and tried to look down at his legs, which were pinned under the massive tree branch. "I can't feel my legs," he said, letting his head fall back down, "but I'm pretty sure I'm stuck."

Jessica could hear the desperation in the major's voice. It was something she had never heard from him. Weapons fire sounded from outside the shuttle, causing Jessica to instinctively look aft.

"What's going on out there?" Major Waddell asked.

"Movement in trees," Jessica told him. "Tonkton is on it." Jessica looked at Letvil as he climbed over his dead comrades to reach her.

"How's he doing?"

"He's trapped," Jessica told him.

Letvil looked through the passageway. "Hey, Major," he said as he surveyed the cockpit as best he could. "I might be able to get in there from outside," he told Jessica, "maybe bust out the rest of the windshield. I'm going to need help though. How much time do we have?"

"I don't know," Jessica admitted. "Just see what you can do."

"Yes, sir," Letvil answered. "Hang in there, sir," he called back to the major. "We'll get you out."

"Get a sit-rep from outside," Major Waddell insisted.

Jessica tapped her comm-set. "Tonkton, Nash. Sit-rep."

"Five or six Jung in the tree line, sir!" the sergeant answered over the comm-set. "Probably the bastards that shot us down. They're trying to circle around us, but we're keeping them down for now."

*"Nash, Falcon! Do you copy?"*

"Falcon, Tonkton! Bad guys in the tree line! Firing target designator now! Take them out!"

*"Tonkton, Falcon copies. Thirty seconds."*

"Falcon, Nash. Threat board?"

*"Fast movers one minute out. Combat landers three out."*

"Falcon, Nash. Hit the tree line, then fire on the fast movers! Then you can deal with the landers!"

*"Orders are to immediately destroy Jumper One, maximum force, no exceptions. We can hit the tree line on our approach, but you have to get the hell out of there, sir! We can't engage six fighters! Captain's orders!"*

"Major Waddell is pinned down! We need a few minutes to..."

"He's right!" Major Waddell interrupted, raising his head. "The captain's right! He can't risk the Falcon in a dogfight!" Major Waddell's head fell back down, unable to find the strength to stay up. "Especially now that it's our last jump ship." All hope suddenly left the major's voice. "You've got to leave, now."

"Bullshit!" Jessica yelled.

*"Heads down,"* Loki's voice called over the comm-set. *"Firing on the tree line!"*

Jessica positioned herself with her torso covering the major's face to protect him from flying debris as the Falcon tore apart the tree line with her plasma cannon turret. She heard its engines scream as it pulled up into a climb.

*"Target destroyed,"* Loki announced. *"Fast movers are thirty seconds out. We're looping over. Get out now!"*

Jessica sat up. She looked at the major, who was holding his sidearm, aiming it at Jessica.

"Get out! That's an order!"

“What are you going to do, shoot me?” Jessica challenged.

“Just promise me you’ll have the guts to do the same thing when the time comes,” he told her as he placed the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The energy pistol fired, blowing out the back of the major’s head and spraying blood, bone, and cerebral matter all over the bulkhead.

Jessica gasped. Blood was everywhere: on the walls, on the major, and on her face. Her arms were raised even though her right shoulder was still causing her great pain. “You fucking bastard!” she screamed. “You fucking bastard!”

“Jesus!” Letvil exclaimed from outside the shuttle’s cockpit as he looked in and saw the carnage. He looked up as the Falcon pitched over and started its dive.

*“Fifteen seconds, Jess!”* Loki announced, his voice pleading. *“Get out now, damn it!”*

“We’ve got to go, sir!” Letvil yelled.

“Nash! Come on!” Sergeant Tonkton yelled as he made his way through the back of the shuttle. He grabbed her by her collar and dragged her out of the passageway. Jessica barely managed to get to her feet, stumbling over the bodies littering the inside of the sideways shuttle.

Josh looked out his forward canopy at the shuttle lying in the woods directly below as the Falcon dove toward the ground. “This fucking sucks!” he yelled. “Are they out?”

*“I don’t know,”* Loki said quietly.

“Loki, I’ve gotta pull up in five seconds. You’ve gotta launch now!”

Loki took a deep breath and pressed the launch button. Two missiles dropped out of the underside of the Falcon, their engines igniting. *“Missiles away,”* he stated.

Josh pulled the Falcon's nose up and rolled into a tight left turn. He looked out the left side of the canopy just as the missiles detonated. He held his turn, waiting for the fireball to rise and clear. Ten seconds later, it did. There was nothing left of Jumper One.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Targets are maintaining course and speed, sir," Mister Randeem reported from the Aurora's tactical station. "Range to the frigates is five hundred twenty thousand kilometers and closing. The cruiser isn't as fast. They're at two six zero and closing, albeit more slowly. The frigates will have weapons range on us in approximately four minutes."

"Shall I execute another random course change, sir?" Mister Chiles asked from the helm.

"Negative," Nathan answered. "I suspect they're too close to use their FTL drives to overtake us at this point. Otherwise, they would have already done so. Hold your course and maintain full burn."

"Holding course and burn, aye."

"If they believe we're no longer able to jump, they'll begin lobbing missiles at us once they reach weapons range."

"Wouldn't they want to get close-in first?" Mister Randeem asked. "Surely they know our point-defenses will shoot their missiles down from that distance."

"They're counting on that," Nathan answered. "They'll want us to use up our point-defense rounds. They undoubtedly have a greater number of missiles at their disposal than we do. They could even break off and return to Earth to reload if need be. Hell, they could chase us forever, wearing us down little by little."

"We run and try to outlast them, or turn and fight before we run out of resources," Mister Randeem surmised. "Makes sense."

"Indeed it does," Nathan agreed.

"I'm assuming you have a plan, sir," Mister Randeem said.

"Actually, this time I do." Nathan turned to the systems officer sitting at the starboard auxiliary station. "Reroute all nonessential power. Funnel it into main propulsion," he ordered. "And let's push the reactors to one hundred ten percent."

"Yes, sir," the systems officer answered.

"We're going to make them earn every kilometer."

\* \* \*

Jessica fell against the base of the tree, knocked off her feet by the secondary explosion of the jump shuttle's main propellant tanks. Her head was spinning, her ears were ringing, and her shoulder was searing with radiating pain from her wound. Bits of burning debris fell about her. She rolled onto her back. Her eyes squinted shut as she tried to regain control of her senses. She heard a loud cracking sound, and her eyes snapped open. A nearby tree came crashing down not two meters away from her, its branches swatting at the ground around her as she rolled away. She felt something pull at her jacket collar. Someone was dragging her away from the falling tree. A large branch hit her legs as the tree came to rest on its side. The person dragging her stopped, and she heard him fall to the ground. "Sarge!" she cried out. "Is that you?"

"Yeah!" Sergeant Tonkton replied between gasps for air. Dust swirled around them, and smoke wafted in all

directions as if they were in the middle of a hurricane.

Jessica could feel the heat of the burning wreckage that was once the jump shuttle. She raised her head and looked at the crash site. There was nothing but pieces of the main airframe: no walls, no engines, no cockpit—more importantly, no jump drive.

“Count off!” Sergeant Tonkton ordered. “One! Tonkton!”

“Two! Nash!” Jessica added.

“Three! Nutara!” a voice called from nearby.

“Four! Mechky!” another voice came from even farther.

Sergeant Tonkton got to his knees, looking about as he waited for the fifth man to report. “Letvil!” he called. “You out there? Sound off!” Still nothing. “Nutara! Mechky! Search the perimeter! Find him!”

“I’ll go right!” Nutara yelled.

“I’m going left!” Mechky added.

The sergeant got to his feet and looked around, checking for any signs of enemy troops. Finally, he turned and looked at the burning wreckage behind them. “Damn.” He turned to Jessica. “Are you okay, sir? How’s the shoulder?”

“Fucking hurts; that’s how it is,” Jessica moaned.

“Can you travel?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really, sir,” the sergeant said as he checked his weapon. “The sooner we clear the area, the better.”

“Agreed,” Jessica said, wincing in pain. “Just give me a minute.”

“Letvil’s dead, sir,” Mechky reported as he approached. “The explosion must have caught him. His legs were ripped from his torso.”

“Did you get his gear?” the sergeant asked.

“Nutara has it. He’s cold burning the rest now.”

"Take a breath, and keep your eyes moving," the sergeant said. "We move out in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," Mechky answered as he got down on one knee and started scanning the surrounding forest.

"What the hell was Letvil doing?" the sergeant asked Jessica.

"He was trying to find a way into the cockpit to free the major," Jessica answered.

"What happened to the major?" the sergeant asked, remembering the amount of blood on the passageway inside the shuttle.

"Ate his gun," Jessica mumbled.

"What?"

Jessica turned and looked at the sergeant. "He didn't want us hanging around trying to rescue his sorry ass, so he blew his fucking brains out right in front of me."

"Damn," the sergeant mumbled. "We all knew he was on the edge, but... damn."

"Being on the edge had nothing to do with it," Jessica told the sergeant. "He knew what was at stake."

"So now what?" the sergeant asked. "Escape and evade?"

"Got a better idea?" Jessica asked.

"Isn't there a beach nearby?" the sergeant asked. "I've always wanted to see the ocean."

Jessica laughed, causing her to wince in pain again.

Nutara approached, carrying Letvil's weapon, utility belt, and body armor. "Thought you could use these, sir," he said to Jessica, holding them out.

"Thanks," she answered as she got to her feet. "Let's move out, Sergeant."

"Which way?"



"Inland," she answered pointing to the west. "There's a river about ten clicks away. If we can get there, we can ride the current and get some distance between us and the search parties. The water will help mask our thermal signatures from their scanners as well."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant answered as he rose. "Mechky, you've got the lead."

\* \* \*

"Frigates now have weapons range on us," Mister Randeem reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Four tracks coming from contact two."

"First frigate has launched four missiles," Mister Randeem added. "Impact in ninety seconds. Activating point..."

"More contacts," Mister Navashee interrupted. "Four more from contact three."

"More missiles," Mister Randeem answered calmly. "Total of eight inbound."

Nathan listened and watched as his crew performed their duties. His eyes kept darting back to the tactical display on the side of the main spherical view screen. He watched as the first two inbound tracks vanished, having been intercepted and destroyed by the field of shrapnel being created by the ship's mini-rail guns.

"Three down," Mister Randeem reported.

"Escape jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's chair.

"Four down. Impact from second wave in forty seconds."

"Helm, stand by to translate down relative and get us a clear jump line."

"Yes, sir."

"Five down," Mister Randeem reported.

"Contacts," Mister Navashee announced. "Four more from target two."

"Six down," Mister Randeem reported. "Eighty seconds to third wave."

"The cruiser will have weapons range in one minute," Mister Navashee warned.

"Seven down..... Eight down. Four still inbound. Sixty seconds."

"Contacts. Four more inbound from contact three," Mister Navashee reported.

"They are not going to let up," Nathan mumbled.

"Captain, the closer they get to us, the greater the difference in their relative bearings," Mister Randeem warned. "In two minutes, it's going to become impossible to defend against missile attacks from both sides, especially at close range. Missiles will start getting through."

"We won't be here in two minutes," Nathan mumbled.

"Nine down."

"Stand by to fire plasma torpedoes at contact three," Nathan ordered.

"Sir?" Mister Randeem responded. "Ten down! Two still coming!"

"Helm, translate down now," Nathan ordered.

"Translating down!" Mister Chiles answered. "Hard and fast!"

Nathan watched the navigational track on the display that sat between his navigator and helmsman, located directly in front of him.

"One hundred meters!" Mister Chiles called out.

"Eleven down!"

"Two hundred meters!"

"Contacts two and three are both firing another spread of missiles!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Three hundred meters!"

"Sixteen missiles inbound! Forty seconds to impact!"

"Four hundred meters!"

"Helm, stop translation! Kill the mains!" Nathan ordered. "Yaw ten degrees to starboard as you pitch over one-eighty!"

"Zero thrust! Pitching and yawing!" the helmsman answered.

"I want our nose to track along the starboard frigate," Nathan added. "Tactical! As our tubes come to bear, fire on the frigate!"

"Aye, sir!" Mister Randeem answered.

"Their missiles are having a hard time making the turn!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Nose on target in five seconds!" Mister Chiles called out.

"Ready to fire!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Two.....one....."

"Firing!"

Two brilliant bolts of plasma energy streaked over their heads on the spherical view screen.

"Stand by to snapshot on two and four. Full yield nukes," Nathan ordered. "Target the cruiser."

"Readying snapshot, full yields, two and four, aye!"

"Impact!" Mister Navashee reported. "One hit on contact three!"

"Pitch complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Full burn, Mister Chiles!" Nathan ordered. "Slow us down fast!"

"Full burn, aye!"

“Recharge tubes one and three and stand by to fire!” Nathan ordered.

“Recharging one and three, aye,” Mister Randeem answered. “Thirty seconds to full charge!”

“Our speed is falling!” Mister Chiles reported.

“Incoming missiles cannot make the turn in time!” Mister Navashee reported excitedly. “They’re going to overshoot!”

“Range on the cruiser is decreasing fast!” Mister Randeem announced. “Three hundred and closing!”

“Contact three has lost shields, lower port bow,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Lock topside quads on contact three and open fire!” Nathan ordered. “Focus on the underside of her port bow!”

“All contacts are attempting to decelerate!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Firing topside quads!” Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. “Frigates are returning fire!”

“The cruiser is translating down relative!” Mister Navashee reported. “I think she means to block our maneuver, sir!”

“Helm! Resume downward translation!” Nathan ordered.

The bridge shook as rail gun rounds from the Jung frigates pounded the Aurora’s thick, armored hull.

“Frigates are passing overhead now!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Range to cruiser is two hundred kilometers and closing,” Mister Navashee announced. “She’s firing missiles! Four inbound!”

“Firing point-defenses!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Lock a full spread of missiles on the cruiser and fire!” Nathan ordered.

“Locking missiles on target!” Mister Randeem announced. “One of the four incoming intercepted. Firing missiles on the

cruiser!”

Nathan glanced up at the view screen as the four missiles streaked overhead on their way toward the cruiser.

“Cruiser is firing point-defenses!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Two down!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Range to cruiser is one-ninety!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Any way she can block us from passing underneath?” Nathan asked.

“No way, sir!” Mister Riley reported from the helm. “Not unless we reverse our translation!”

“Three down!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Cruiser at one-seventy and closing!” Mister Navashee said.

“Mister Chiles, decrease your downward translation rate to match that of the cruiser, and stand by to put our tubes on her.”

“Matching the cruiser’s translation rate and standing by to put our tubes on her,” the helmsman acknowledged.

“Four down!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Range to cruiser is one-fifty and closing,” Mister Navashee reported. “Range to frigates is fifty kilometers and increasing!” he added happily.

“Looks like they weren’t expecting us to slam on the brakes,” Nathan said.

“One-thirty!”

“All our missiles were intercepted,” Mister Randeem reported.

“One hundred!” Mister Navashee reported. “Aspect change! The cruiser is pitching up and firing her mains again!”

"She's trying to put some distance between us," Nathan realized. "Helm! Kill your translation! Keep our nose on the cruiser as she climbs!" Nathan turned to look over his shoulder at his tactical officer. "How are we doing on the recharge, Mister Randeem?"

"Ten seconds," his tactical officer replied.

"Nose is on target," the helmsman reported.

"Give me some lead," Mister Randeem told the helmsman.

"You've got it," Mister Chiles answered. "Three seconds."

Nathan watched the navigational display between his helmsman and navigator, waiting until their angle was just right. "Snapshot tubes two and four!"

"Snapshot two and four!" Mister Randeem answered. "Torpedoes away! Impact in twenty seconds!"

The bridge continued to shake as the two Jung frigates, both now passing ahead of them, continued to pound the Aurora with their rail guns.

"One and three at full charge. Ready to fire!"

Nathan glanced at the tracks of the two conventional torpedoes they had just fired. "Decrease your lead, but keep our nose on them, Mister Chiles," Nathan said calmly.

"Decreasing lead, aye."

"Lock another spread of missiles on the underside of the cruiser and stand by," Nathan ordered his tactical officers.

"Locking missiles," Mister Randeem answered.

"Range to cruiser passing fifty!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Stand by to fire plasma torpedoes on the cruiser."

"Standing by."

"Five seconds to torpedo impacts," Mister Navashee reported.

"Fire plasma torpedoes," Nathan ordered.

Two red bolts of energy shot out of the Aurora's port and starboard upper torpedo tubes, racing at incredible speed toward the Jung cruiser as she attempted to climb away from the Aurora. The bolts of plasma streaked past the conventional torpedoes fired seconds earlier and slammed into the cruiser's underside, causing her shields to glow as they attempted to dissipate the massive amounts of energy that had just been dumped into them. A second later, as the cruiser's shields continued to struggle with the massive strain, the nuclear warheads on the two conventional torpedoes detonated in a blinding, white flash.

"Direct hit!" Mister Navashee reported with glee. "All four! Her lower shields are gone!" he added.

"Fire missiles!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing missiles!" Mister Randeem answered. "Ten seconds to impact."

"Show me the target, full magnification," Nathan ordered.

The main view screen shimmered momentarily, resolving into a magnified view of the underside of the Jung cruiser that nearly filled the screen. Nathan watched as all four missiles slammed into the cruiser and exploded, tearing gaping holes in her side.

"Reload two and four, full yields. Lock on those holes and fire when ready," he instructed calmly.

"Reloading. Stand by."

The vibrations from the frigate's rail gun attacks on the Aurora suddenly ceased. Nathan looked at his sensor operator to his left.

“Contact three has disengaged its rail gun attack. Contacts two and three are turning away from each other.”

“They’re going to try to come about and get on either side of us,” Nathan surmised, “and we can’t defend against both of their missile attacks.”

“Two and four reloaded and locked onto the cruiser.”

“Lead reestablished,” Mister Chiles reported from the helm, having already anticipated the need.

“Excellent. Fire two and four,” Nathan ordered.

“Torpedoes away,” Mister Randeem reported. “Fifteen seconds.”

“Cruiser is trying to roll,” Mister Navashee warned.

“She’s trying to take her damaged sections out of our line of fire,” Nathan realized. “Is she going to make it?”

Mister Navashee studied his displays for a moment, then turned back to the captain. “No, sir,” he answered, shaking his head. “She’s lost too many of her starboard thrusters. She’s rolling too slowly.”

“Five seconds,” Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan looked up at the image of the damaged cruiser on the main view screen just as the torpedoes reached their target and detonated in another blinding, white flash. When the flash cleared, the cruiser had broken in half, and secondary explosions were in the process of tearing her apart even further.

“Direct hits!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Multiple secondary explosions!” Mister Navashee added. “She’s done for!”

Nathan continued to watch with surprising satisfaction as the secondary explosions blew holes in the massive cruiser from the inside out. Within seconds, she showed no signs of life, drifting harmlessly in space and surrounded by chunks of debris both great and small. They spread out in multiple



directions as they continued to carry the same forward momentum they once had shared as a single ship. An odd thought suddenly entered Nathan's mind, as he wondered how far the debris of the cruiser would spread and how long it would continue to pollute their system. More importantly, was there anything on board the now dead ship that might be of use to them later?

"Any chance she can become a threat again?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "Main propulsion, maneuvering, life support, power plants: all are not only offline; they're destroyed. A good eighty percent of her decks no longer hold pressure. She's dead, sir."

"Note her location, course, and speed."

"Aye, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Contact one is destroyed," Mister Randeem reported, his own satisfaction evident in his voice.

"What about the frigates?" Nathan asked.

"Both frigates are still coming about," Mister Navashee reported. "Wait... They're firing! Holy... They must be firing all batteries, sir! I show thirty-two missiles inbound! Time to impact is eighty-seven seconds!"

"Captain," Mister Randeem began, "we can't defend against that many missiles! Especially since they're coming in from nearly opposite vectors!"

"I guess the charade is over," Nathan said. "Mister Riley, plot an escape jump. Five light minutes ahead on our present course."

"Five light minutes, aye," the navigator answered.

"Helm, prepare to come about as soon as we make the jump."

"Yes, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"One minute to impact!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley announced.

"Jump."

The bridge filled momentarily with the blue-white jump flash, translated at subdued levels through the main view screen.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Coming about," Mister Chiles followed.

"Reload two and four with nukes again, and recharge one and three," Nathan instructed.

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

"Plot a return jump," Nathan ordered. "Put us ten light seconds aft of contact three's expected position based on last course and speed. Be ready to jump forward along our course to within twenty kilometers of the target once we get an updated position fix."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Time to turn completion?" Nathan inquired.

"Seventy seconds," Mister Riley replied. "We had already decelerated quite a bit before the jump."

"Very well." Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Damage control, Captain. How are we looking, Master Chief?"

*"Several breaches in the outer hull, and we took some hits in the forward propellant tank, port side. We lost nearly half its contents before the tank resealed."*

"How are we on propellant?" Nathan asked his navigator.

"Down to one-third capacity," Mister Riley answered. "We should be fine, sir, as long as we don't lose another tank."

"Anything else, Master Chief?" Nathan asked over the comm-set.

*"Nothing major, sir. However, you can stop pretending to have a few rail guns down, because now we actually do. Five, six, seven, and eleven are offline until we can get them retracted and get repair teams into their bays."*

"Understood," Nathan responded, switching off his comm-set.

"Turn will be complete in twenty seconds," the helmsman announced.

"Return jump is plotted and ready, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Tubes two and four are loaded with nukes and ready to fire," Mister Randeem added. "One and three are fully charged.

"We'll do this by the numbers," Nathan said. "We jump, get a fix, then close in behind the first target. Nukes, then missiles, then plasma torpedoes. If there's anything left, hit them with the quads as we pass under. Then we jump away again, turn, jump back, and hit the other target in the same way."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Jump when ready, Mister Riley."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

The jump flash washed over the bridge again. Nathan looked at the tactical map on the lower right side of the bridge's spherical view screen. A look of surprise came over him. "Where are they?"

"Threat board is clear," Mister Randeem reported.

"Where did they go?" Nathan wondered out loud. "Back to Earth?"

"I'm picking up a debris trail," Mister Navashee reported. "It may be from contact three, the frigate we damaged."

"Are you sure it's not from the cruiser?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir. The cruiser's debris is still spreading out along its flight path at the time of destruction, which was opposite the last known course of the frigate. It has to be the frigate's debris."

"But they were still traveling along the same course as the cruiser when we damaged them," Mister Randeem argued.

"They're venting gases, leaking radiation; they're even leaking human waste products," Mister Navashee added.

"Are you telling me you're tracking their sewage, Mister Navashee?" Nathan asked.

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Can you determine their course?"

"Scanning ahead and extrapolating," Mister Navashee said. "Their trail ends about seven hundred kilometers ahead, sir. Flight path of the sewage indicates a direct course back to Earth, just like you thought."

"How long ago did they go to FTL?" Nathan asked.

"I estimate three minutes, sir," Mister Navashee answered, "just after we jumped away."

"How long does it take them to get back to Earth?"

"From this distance at known top FTL speeds, maybe eighteen minutes," Mister Randeem said.

"Then they're still at least thirteen to fourteen minutes from Earth," Nathan realized. "Extrapolate their course and show me their estimated position, assuming they went to FTL the moment we jumped away."

The tactical map on the main view screen changed, showing the return course of the frigate as well as the Earth's orbital track.

Nathan stared at the map for several seconds, thinking. "Mister Riley, can you put us about a minute ahead of that frigate, slightly off her flight path and flying in the same direction and at relatively the same speed?"

"It will take two jumps to get around the target," Mister Riley warned, "and I'll have to guess on the speed."

"Very well," Nathan said. "The sooner the better." Nathan sat back down in his command chair. "Oh, and try to keep us beyond the reach of the battleship orbiting Earth."

"Yes, sir." Mister Riley looked at his console, entering several commands. "Alter course two degrees to port," he instructed the helmsman.

"Two degrees to port, aye," Mister Chiles answered.

"Move the lower quads topside, Mister Randeen," Nathan ordered. "We'll position ourselves nose toward the target, pitched down just enough that we can get a good firing angle with all four quads as well as the minis."

"Yes, sir."

"First jump is plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Execute."

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Loki announced. His voice was flat, lacking emotion. "Passive sensors are operating. Looking for the Aurora."

*"Shouldn't she be right in front of us?"* Josh wondered. *"Just look for the big ship with several bigger ships shooting at it."*

"I'm not seeing her," Loki said, his tone becoming concerned.

*"What?"*

"I'm not seeing anyone here. I'm going active," Loki said.

*"You checked our position, right?"* Josh wondered. *"Did we jump to the right place?"*

"Yeah, we're right where we're supposed to be. The Aurora should be within a few light seconds of this position, but she's not. No one is."

*"What the...?"*

"Wait," Loki interrupted, "I'm picking up a lot of debris on active." Loki studied the sensors. "Man, something really big was destroyed here."

*"Do you think it was the Aurora?"* Josh asked, his tone showing concern as well.

"I don't know," Loki answered. "I'm increasing my scan range and turning on the data recorders."

*"I don't like this,"* Josh said.

"I'm picking up something near Jupiter," Loki said, "something small, a fighter maybe, or a probe."

*"Maybe you're picking up one of the Talons from before."*

"We're not far enough out," Loki corrected. "The light from Jupiter is from after the Celestia departed, well after."

*"What about those jump buoys?"* Josh said.

"I almost forgot," Loki said. "Transmitting a hailing pulse now." Loki watched his display for several seconds. "I've got it!"

Josh sighed with relief.

"Querying the buoy."

*"Where'd they go?"*

"You're not going to believe this," Loki said. "They've jumped back to Earth. We must've jumped past them in the opposite direction on the way here."

*"Well, that doesn't sound too safe,"* Josh mumbled as he started to turn the Falcon around. *"What the hell are they doing jumping back to Earth anyway? That wasn't in the plan, was it?"*

"Not that I know of," Loki said as he began plotting their return jump.

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced as the jump flash subsided. "We are one thousand kilometers off contact three's estimated course. If the target is traveling at their maximum FTL speed, they should be passing our position within the next few minutes."

"What's our current distance from Earth?" Nathan asked.

"Twenty-eight point four light minutes, sir," Mister Riley replied.

"Very well," Nathan answered as he turned to his left. "Keep an eye out for them as they pass, Mister Navashee. If we're going to make this work, we'll need to know their exact course and speed."

"Understood, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Captain," Mister Randeem began, "no disrespect intended, sir, but is it wise to attempt to chase down those frigates? They are headed back to Earth and not after the Celestia, after all."

"For now, yes, but for how long?" Nathan responded. "The Jung didn't send their battleship or their last cruiser, probably because they don't want to leave the Earth and their spaceport undefended. That means those two frigates are probably the only ships they can send searching for the Celestia. We get rid of them and the Celestia's chances of escape are greatly improved."

"But we're not even sure we can force them out of FTL. Perhaps it would be better to ambush them when they come out of FTL near Earth."

"Then the odds would be four to one," Nathan said, "and one of the four is a battleship." Nathan shook his head. "No, better to engage them farther out, beyond the protection of that battleship."

"Yes, sir."

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported.

Nathan turned his head, expecting his sensor officer to report the passing frigates.

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee added. "It's the Falcon."

"Message from the Falcon, sir," Naralena reported. "Jumper One has been destroyed." Naralena's eyes came up to meet the captain's. "Unknown survivors."

Nathan felt a cold wave flow over him.

"They're low on fuel and requesting to land."

Nathan sighed. "Very well," Nathan said. "Tell them to get on deck quickly. We could be jumping out at any moment."

"Yes, sir."

"And call Lieutenant Telles to the bridge," Nathan added.

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered, turning to one of her comm operators to carry out the captain's request.

Nathan rotated slowly to port in his command chair. "Anything yet?" he asked his sensor operator.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "They must not be traveling at top speed."

"Because of damage?" Nathan wondered.

"Possibly. It could also be that they don't use top speed when performing FTL hops within a system. The timings of their last few hops would indicate an FTL speed closer to five times light, instead of ten."

"Any chance they already passed us by?"

"No chance, sir. We jumped well ahead of them, unless they can go faster than we originally thought."

"Very well," Nathan said.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Lieutenant Telles said as he approached.

Nathan rose from his seat and stepped up onto the raised section of the back half of the bridge to meet the lieutenant. "Yes, Lieutenant." Nathan escorted the



lieutenant into the small alcove that led to his ready room. "I was hoping you might have some ideas on how to rescue our people from the surface."

"I can analyze the situation and possibly make some recommendations. However, it was my understanding that there may not be anyone to rescue."

Nathan stared at the lieutenant, a look of confusion on his face.

"I was in combat control when the Falcon reported in, sir. I will need more information about the tactical situation."

"The Falcon should be setting down to recycle at any moment," Nathan told him. "Perhaps they can provide the information you need."

"I shall speak to them and report back to you, sir," the lieutenant promised.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Telles nodded politely, then turned and headed for the port exit.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Energy signatures, visual images, electromagnetic radiation..." Mister Navashee turned and smiled, "and sewage. All extremely redshifted. It's them. Give me a moment to calculate their course and speed."

"Feed the data to navigation as soon as you finish," Nathan ordered. "Mister Riley, I want to be one minute ahead of them, no more than ten kilometers off their flight path."

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered, looking at his partner at the helm to his right as he grimaced.

"Mister Randeem, make sure all tubes are loaded and ready to fire," Nathan ordered. "We'll put as much firepower into their flight path as possible. If we're lucky, either the

nukes, the plasma torpedoes, or the rail gun fire will knock them out of FTL," Nathan said.

"Contact three's course and speed plotted and transferred to navigation," Mister Navashee reported.

"Calculating jump," Mister Riley announced.

"Flight ops reports the Falcon is on deck," Naralena added.

"Helm, pitch us over so we're flying stern first."

"Pitching over, aye," Mister Chiles answered.

"Tubes two and four are loaded with nukes set for timed detonation. Plasma cannons in tubes one and three are fully charged and ready to fire. Missile launcher is also loaded and ready with high-speed, short-range missiles. All quads are topside and ready to fire. All operational mini-rail guns are set for point-defense mode and are ready to lay down a fragment field across the frigate's flight path."

"Very well."

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Jump when ready," Nathan ordered.

"Five seconds to jump," Mister Riley announced.

Nathan took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Two.....one.....jump."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge, disappearing a split second later.

"Jump complete."

"Position verified," Mister Navashee announced. "Fifty seconds to intercept."

"Fire tubes two and four," Nathan ordered. "Start building your point-defense wall."

"Firing two and four," Mister Randeen announced. "Activating point-defenses. Torpedoes away. Thirty seconds to detonation."

"Forty seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

Nathan watched the time tick away on the tactical display on the lower right side of the Aurora's spherical view screen.

"Thirty seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"Twenty seconds to detonation," Mister Randeem added.

Nathan continued watching the time, saying nothing.

"Twenty seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"Stand by to fire tubes one and three," Nathan ordered calmly.

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem acknowledged. "Five seconds to detonation."

Nathan looked at the main view screen, looking for the frigates speeding toward them even though he knew that, while traveling at faster than light, they could not be seen.

"Two.....one....."

A small, white flash appeared in the center of the view screen. The flash was only slightly larger than the stars in the distance and might have gone unnoticed had he not been watching for it.

"Fire one and three," Nathan ordered.

"Firing one and three," Mister Randeem answered.

Two red bolts of plasma energy streaked over their heads on the view screen, disappearing quickly toward the same center point.

"Pitch down ten degrees," Nathan said. "Be ready to fire quads and missiles."

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee shouted. "Just came out of FTL! She has considerable damage across her forward sections!"

"FIRE!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing quads! Locking missiles on target and firing!" Mister Randeem announced.

Four missiles streaked over their heads on the main view screen. Nathan looked at the center of the screen. A small, almost imperceptible, gray and red dot began to grow rapidly in size as the Jung frigate gained on them.

"One down!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Another contact!" Mister Navashee reported with excitement.

"Where?" Nathan wondered.

"Two down!"

"Behind us," Mister Navashee replied, "or past us, I should say. It's the other frigate! They must have dropped out of FTL as soon as they realized the other frigate had reverted to sub-light! They overshot us!"

"Direct hits!" Mister Randeem reported. "Two detonations!"

"Contact three has lost all forward shields!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Flip us over and bring our stern tubes onto contact three!" Nathan ordered.

"Pitching back over!" Mister Chiles acknowledged as his fingers input the attitude change.

"Reload two and four. Recharge one and three, and prepare to fire on the other contact!" Nathan ordered.

"Reload the missile launcher as well, and prepare to put another volley into contact three!"

"Aye, sir!" Mister Randeem answered.

"Contact two firing her deceleration engines, Captain!" Mister Navashee reported. "She's trying to slow down!"

"Pitch over complete!" Mister Chiles reported.

"New jump!" Nathan ordered. "Put us ten kilometers aft of contact two!"

"Plotting," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"I have a firing solution on contact three," Mister Randeem reported.

"Fire tubes five and six!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing five and six!" the tactical officer answered.  
"Torpedoes away!"

"Full power, Mister Chiles!" Nathan ordered. "Recalculate your jump, Mister Riley!"

"Full power, aye!"

"Recalculating!"

"Ten seconds to torpedo impact," Mister Randeem reported. "Missiles will be reloaded and ready to fire in twenty seconds."

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Torpedo impact! Two detonations!"

"How much charge on one and three?" Nathan asked.

"Eighty percent!"

"Stand by on one and three!" Nathan ordered. "Jump, Mister Chiles! Jump!"

"Jumping!"

The blue-white jump flash came and went.

"Jump complete!"

"Contact two, dead ahead! Eight kilometers and closing!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Charge?"

"Ninety!"

"Seven kilometers!"

"Damn!" Nathan swore as he waited for his plasma torpedo cannons to reach their full charge.

"Ninety-five!"

"Six! Aspect change! Target is trying to gain altitude relative to us!"

"Kill our mains and pitch up to keep our nose on them!"

"Five kilometers!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Mains to zero! Pitching up!" Mister Chiles answered.

"Full charge!" Mister Randeem reported. "Locking on target! Keep us pitching up, Mister Chiles!"

"Three!"

"Fire when ready!" Nathan ordered.

Mister Randeem watched his console as the Aurora's helmsman continued pitching upward to keep the ship's two plasma cannons pointed at the climbing target. "A little more... and... FIRING!"

Two bolts of energy streaked over their heads on the main view screen, the red light flashing across the bridge.

"Two!"

"Pitch down!" Nathan ordered! "Full power! Pass under them!"

"Direct hits!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Pitching down! Going to full power!"

"Hit them with all four quads as we pass under them!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing quads!"

"Topside cameras!"

The image on the main view screen switched to the Aurora's top-facing cameras and zoomed in on the fleeing frigate as she suddenly streaked away.

"What the hell?" Nathan exclaimed.

"She went to FTL!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Kill the mains! Flip us back over and bring our tubes back on contact three," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir!" Mister Chiles answered.

"Disengaging quads," Mister Randeem replied.

"Jesus, I can't believe they just abandoned the other frigate," Nathan said in disbelief. He turned to his left. "Damage assessment on contact three?"

"One moment," Mister Navashee said as he examined his displays. "Contact three has sustained major damage," he began. "No shields, plenty of hull and structural damage, and her lower missile launchers are gone. She's also missing several of her point-defense turrets."

"Does she still have main power and maneuvering?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "Two missile launchers as well. She's definitely able to fight, sir."

"Not for long," Nathan said.

"Missile launcher reloaded and ready," Mister Randeem reported. "Tubes two and four reloaded with nukes. One and three at forty percent and rising."

"Pitch over complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "We're flying stern first, nose toward the target, sir."

"Very well. Slow us down and move us in closer, Mister Chiles," Nathan said. "It's time to finish her off."

"Yes, sir," Mister Chiles acknowledged. "Bringing the mains back up."

"Keep an escape jump plotted, just in case she has a trick up her sleeve," Nathan told his navigator.

"Always, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"Range to target is five thousand kilometers and closing," Mister Navashee reported.

"Another round of missiles her way, Mister Randeem. Full acceleration. Let's see how her point-defenses are holding up."

"Locking missiles on the frigate," Mister Randeem answered. "Firing four."

Nathan watched the tactical display on the lower right side of the main spherical view screen as the missiles advanced toward their target.

"Twenty seconds to impact."

"Flight operations reports the Falcon will be ready to launch again in fifteen minutes," Naralena reported.

"Very well, have them return to Earth and attempt to make contact with survivors," Nathan said.

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Ten seconds."

Nathan looked at the tactical display again. One of the icons representing the Aurora's missiles disappeared.

"One missile intercepted," Mister Randeem reported.  
"Two missiles intercepted."

The remaining two icons converged on the red triangle representing the Jung frigate.

"Two detonations," Mister Randeem reported.

"Damage assessment?"

"One moment," Mister Navashee answered. "Target has lost all forward maneuvering. She has a major hull breach on her starboard side and is venting atmosphere. She's also venting propellant, sir, a lot of it."

"Does she still have propulsion and power?"

"Power, yes. Unknown on main propulsion. However, she isn't running any engines at the moment. Wait... she's firing... Eight missiles inbound. Twenty seconds out."

"She's fighting to her last breath," Nathan mumbled.  
"Tactical, lock plasma torpedoes and fire both tubes."

"Locking on target," Mister Randeem answered.

"Fifteen seconds," Mister Navashee updated.

"Firing one and three," Mister Randeem announced as he pressed the firing button on the tactical console.

Nathan let out a long breath as the red light of the departing plasma bolts washed over the bridge.

"Direct hits," Mister Randeem reported a moment later.

Nathan looked at Mister Navashee on his left.



"Target destroyed, sir. Her missiles are still inbound. Ten seconds to impact."

"Escape jump, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered calmly. "Take us beyond the range of the incoming missiles."

"Jumping."

"What about the other frigate?" Mister Randeem asked as the jump flashed washed over the bridge.

"What's our range to Earth?" Nathan asked.

"About five light minutes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"They're almost there," Nathan said. "We'd have to engage them too close to that battleship. Better we go cold and make repairs while we wait to see what their next move is." Nathan stood. "Change course and put us into a solar orbit, Mister Riley. Maintain our distance and position relative to Earth for now, and keep our cold side to them."

"Aye, sir."

Nathan turned and headed toward the back of the bridge. "Maintain general quarters and passive threat detection," he ordered as he walked toward his ready room. "Zero emissions. They'll be less likely to venture out again if they don't know where we are."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem acknowledged.

"You have the conn," Nathan told his tactical officer as he disappeared into his ready room.

\* \* \*

General Bacca's expression soured greatly as his aide spoke to him. He looked at the various status displays about the command center and grimaced. Finally, he turned toward Eli, his expression still dour.

Despite the fact that Eli took pleasure in General Bacca's failures, his better judgment prevented him from

commenting on the general's expression. "You do not look happy, General," he said, attempting to sound as sympathetic as possible.

"It appears my suspicions were correct after all," the general explained. "The Aurora's jump drive is fully operational." The general sighed forcefully, after which a single eyebrow shot up. "Unfortunately, it cost us two more ships to determine this."

"I blame myself, General," Eli said, trying to be gracious. "Had it not been for my consistent urging to attack, you might have exercised greater caution."

The general cast an eye at the governor. "Perhaps," he mumbled. He turned to face Eli. "However, my decisions are my own, as are the consequences of those decisions."

"What do we do now?" Eli wondered. "I don't suppose we can just sit and wait for reinforcements to arrive."

"For once, we agree, Governor." The general took a breath and straightened up. "The Aurora will continue her hit-and-run tactics until we have nothing left but a single battleship with which to hold the Earth."

"Perhaps, but surely the Aurora is no match for your battleship, General."

"No, she is not," the general agreed, "but if given enough time, they may be able to turn the Celestia into an effective weapon as well. Then they might indeed be a match. I cannot allow that to happen."

"What do you propose?" Eli asked, fearing the answer.

"If the Aurora has allied herself with an advanced spacefaring civilization, one that is willing to provide advanced weaponry, then the threat to the empire is far more serious than a single jump-capable warship. The empire needs the jump drive technology. We must force the

captain of the Aurora to willingly surrender his ship. We can deal with the Celestia at our leisure."

"Seriously?" Eli asked. "The man has already destroyed more than half our fleet. How could you possibly convince him to surrender?"

"By leaving him no reasonable alternative," the general answered, a wry smile on his face.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Telles entered the pilot's gear room, finding Josh and Loki sitting on a bench and talking with Major Prechitt. They were still wearing their flight pressure suits, but their helmets were off and nowhere in sight.

"You have to put it behind you," Major Prechitt told them. "You were following orders. You both know what would happen if the Jung got their hands on a jump drive."

"That doesn't help much," Loki mumbled.

"It should," Lieutenant Telles said, joining the discussion. "If the Jung obtain jump drive technology, they will use it to expand their empire exponentially—not just to the core or the fringe, but to the entire galaxy. Corinair, Takara, Haven, Palee, Doonkurnten: every human civilization will eventually fall."

"Don't you think you're exaggerating a bit?" Josh said.

"Not at all," the lieutenant argued. "I have seen them in action. I have studied what little intelligence the Terrans have on the Jung Empire. They may not be as technologically advanced as we are, but they do not need to be. They have numbers, and with each new world they conquer, their numbers grow and their power increases. With a jump drive, they would become unstoppable."

Josh looked away from the lieutenant in disdain.

"Do not look away from me!" the lieutenant barked, causing Josh to snap his gaze back in the lieutenant's direction. "Do you think for a moment any of the men on the surface would have hesitated to kill either of you were they in your place? Do not dishonor them by thinking only of yourselves! You are men of war, whether you like it or not. Be such men."

"All right, we got it," Josh insisted. "Relax."

"The captain wants you to return to Earth, to try to make contact with any survivors," Major Prechitt told them. "Are you up for it, or do you want me to assign another flight team?"

"We can handle it, sir," Loki said.

"Good," the major said, "because I cannot spare any pilots at the moment."

"The captain has asked me to determine a way to retrieve our people from the surface of Earth," Lieutenant Telles announced. "To do so, I will need information. Recount for me every detail of your last flight. Leave nothing out."

\* \* \*

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena called over the intercom in the captain's ready room.

Nathan reached over and pressed the button. "Go ahead."

"*Incoming message, sir.*"

"From whom?"

"*The message is from a General Bacca. He claims to be the Jung military commander on Earth.*"

"I'll be right there," Nathan stated. He turned off the intercom and stood, making his way to the exit.

Nathan stepped through the hatch onto the bridge, crossing in front of Naralena at the comm station. "What does the general have to say?"

"He is demanding our surrender."

"What?"

"Message reads, 'You are in direct violation of the surrender agreed upon by the Earth Defense Force under the authority of the United Earth Republic dated ninety-seven Earth days ago. Continued hostilities shall constitute an act of war and shall result in the immediate nuclear bombardment of the Earth's major population centers. Rest assured such action shall be swift and severe. You have one Earth hour to comply.' End of message." Naralena looked into her captain's eyes. She had seen those eyes in times of both triumph and despair, and even in times of confusion and uncertainty. Now, she saw what she could only define as panic. He stared right at her, unwilling to turn away, unwilling to look the rest of his crew in their eyes, for fear they might see the same panic that his communications officer now beheld. "Sir?" she asked softly. "What are we going to do?"

Nathan swallowed hard as he attempted to regain his composure. He sighed, then looked Naralena in the eyes and spoke. "One thing's for damned sure; we're not surrendering."

For a brief moment, Naralena thought she saw a smile on the corner of her captain's mouth.

Nathan turned and faced forward. "Respond as follows," he said as he moved forward to his command chair. He stopped next to his chair and looked back at Naralena. "Look the part, and they will feel the conviction of your words."

"Sir?" Mister Randeem asked, a confused look on his face.

“Something my father always said,” Nathan explained as he took his seat in the command chair. “Video message,” he ordered.

“Ready to transmit,” Naralena reported.

“This is Captain Nathan Scott of the United Earth Ship Aurora. You have committed unwarranted acts of aggression against the people of the United Earth Republic, a body that we have sworn to protect, and protect them we shall. You are to immediately begin a peaceful and orderly withdrawal of all Jung forces from the Earth and the entire Sol system. Failure to do so will result in a state of war between our peoples, forcing us to engage in the immediate and systematic destruction of all Jung forces on Earth, within the Sol system, and anywhere else they may be encountered.” Nathan leaned forward slightly as if to emphasize a point. “Do not test me, General. You have yet to witness this ship’s full destructive potential. *You* have one Earth hour.” Nathan held up his hand to signal Naralena.

“Transmission sent.”

Nathan leaned back in his command chair. “Comms, contact flight ops. I have a message for the Falcon to deliver to the Celestia.”

\* \* \*

“They’re putting troops on the ground,” Sergeant Tonkton said as he watched through his handheld visual scanner.

“How many?” Jessica wondered as she checked her shoulder wound.

“At least six from each,” he answered.

“How many shuttles?”

“I’ve counted four so far. North, south, east, and west.”

"So they're trying to surround us."

"Sure looks that way. The shuttles aren't staying to fly cover either."

"Which means they're going back for another load of ground troops, doesn't it?"

"Safe enough bet," the sergeant agreed. "Besides, they have fighters buzzing around a few thousand meters up already."

"I guess they don't want anyone jumping in and rescuing us," Jessica said. She winced in pain. "Joke's on them, huh? We don't have any more jump shuttles."

"Maybe they can send down some Talons to take out the air cover, then send in a combat shuttle to pick us up."

"No way," Jessica said. "The captain can't risk the losses. Not for the four of us. I'm afraid we're on our own."

"Against twenty-four Jung and air cover?" The sergeant returned his visual scanner to his vest pocket. "That won't take long." The sergeant tapped his comm-set. "Nutara, Mechky, fall back to me."

"You got a plan, Sarge?" Jessica asked.

"I don't know that I'd call it a plan," the sergeant admitted as his men approached from opposite directions. "Take a knee," he told his men. The three of them put a knee to the ground, all gathered around Jessica who was resting against a tree. Nutara and Mechky continued to scan the woods around them as the sergeant spoke.

"They've only given us one break in our favor," he explained. "They put their troops down too far apart, leaving gaps in their perimeter. I don't know why they didn't put them in closer, as it would have solved the gap problem. Maybe they're not sure about our numbers or the range or strength of our weapons... Don't know. Don't care. Our best chance right now is to split up into two, try to penetrate

their lines, and maybe pull them in different directions before reinforcements arrive.”

“How long?” Mechky asked.

“I figure ten minutes, tops,” the sergeant said. “If you make it through, head to the river and ride it to the bay. If you can find a place in the city to hide, you might have a chance.”

“And if they never come back for us?” Nutara wondered.

“Pretend to be a local, find yourself a pretty young lady, and start a family,” the sergeant joked.

“Works for me,” Nutara answered.

“Low-band, encrypted, short transmissions. Keep in touch until you can’t.” The sergeant reached out and shook Nutara’s hand. “Good luck to you, Landon.”

“You, too, Sarge.”

“Ossie,” the sergeant said as he shook Mechky’s hand as well.

The two men moved away quietly, disappearing into the moonlit woods. The sergeant turned to Jessica. “Lieutenant Commander?”

“Call me Jess,” she told him. “What’s your name?”

The sergeant paused, then said, “Just call me Sarge.”

“Come on; I can make it an order, you know.”

The sergeant rolled his eyes. “Tunni, all right? My first name is Tunni.”

“Tunni Tonkton?” Jessica giggled. “Seriously?”

“Yes, I know. Little Tunni Tonkton, pretty as can be,” the sergeant sang. “I’ve heard it all before.”

“What are you talking about?” she said, suppressing another giggle.

“It’s a Corinairan children’s song,” the sergeant explained. “It was the scourge of my childhood.” He looked around quickly. “Are you ready?”



"Sure, Tunni," she said with a grin, "lead the way."

\* \* \*

"Contact on passive!" Ensign Schenker announced from the Celestia's sensor station. "Jump flash!"

"Is it the Aurora?" Cameron asked.

"No, sir, too small."

"Incoming transmission," Ensign Souza reported. "It's the Falcon, sir."

"Put them on," Cameron ordered.

*"Celestia, Falcon. Do you copy?"*

"Falcon, Celestia Actual. Go ahead Mister Sheehan."

*"Sir, Captain Scott wanted us to bring you a copy of the Aurora's event logs and update you on the situation. I'm transmitting the logs now."*

"I'm receiving them, sir," Ensign Souza acknowledged.

"Go ahead, Loki," Cameron told him over the comms.

*"Jumper One was lost trying to extract Lieutenant Commander Nash. We're about to jump back to Earth to try to make contact, see if anyone survived. The Aurora took out another cruiser and frigate. Now the Jung are threatening to attack cities if the captain doesn't surrender both the Aurora and the Celestia in one hour. Well, more like thirty minutes now."*

"Understood," Cameron answered. "Any orders for us?"

*"No, sir. Captain says to stick with the plan, and you're cleared to make your turn now that there are no Jung ships this side of Jupiter."*

"Any idea what the captain plans to do?" Cameron asked.

*"He ordered the Jung to withdraw, or else."*

"Of course he did," Cameron said to herself. "Very well," she told Loki. "Good luck. Actual out."

*"Falcon out."*

Cameron sighed. She could feel the eyes of almost everyone on the bridge as they looked at her.

"Falcon has jumped away," Ensign Schenker reported.

Luis looked at Cameron, then at Lieutenant Commander Kovacic. "What do you think he's going to do, sir?"

"There's no way he's going to surrender," Cameron said. "If Captain Scott thinks the Jung aren't bluffing, he will attack."

"Against a battleship?" Luis wondered. "Does he even stand a chance?"

"Not really, no," Cameron admitted, "which means we'll be the last hope for Earth."

Something in Cameron's stomach suddenly knotted up.

\* \* \*

*"Do not test me, General. You have yet to witness this ship's full destructive potential. You have one Earth hour."*

Eli stood staring at the view screen, his mouth agape in total shock.

"Any relation?" General Bacca asked. His voice drizzled with sarcastic undertones.

Eli turned toward the general. "I cannot believe this."

"I take it you were not aware that your brother was in command of the Aurora."

"Of course not," Eli protested.

For once, General Bacca believed the governor to be in earnest. "You *were* aware that he was a member of her crew, were you not?"

"Of course I was, as were you. We thought he had died when your ships first ambushed the Aurora months ago. I mean, when the Aurora turned up again, it did occur to me

that he might still be alive, but captain? He was thirty-second in his graduating class at the academy. He didn't even make the top one percent. He had been assigned to the Reliant as a third shift pilot in training."

"Yet he somehow ended up on the newest ship in the fleet," the general added. "Curious, don't you think?"

"My father requested he be transferred to a safer assignment. I put the call in myself. Believe me; we were all surprised when he ended up on the Aurora. But captain?" Eli laughed.

"I fail to see the humor in this," the general commented.

"General, don't you see? This is great news! Nathan's been a screw up his entire life! He's been luckier than hell—that's true—but he has no sense of responsibility, no sense of duty or honor. He's a spoiled, selfish little boy that was babied by his mother and sisters..."

"Odd statement coming from one who betrayed his own people," the general said, one eyebrow raised.

"I only betrayed a corrupt world government that was using the knowledge in the Ark to increase the wealth of its corporate supporters. *My people are better off without them.*"

"I still fail to see how this works to our advantage."

"He's a little boy playing at being captain," Eli insisted. "He has no idea what he's doing."

"I beg to differ. He appears to have done quite well thus far."

"He's destroyed a handful of ships using hit-and-run tactics and deception. If he didn't have that jump drive, he would have been destroyed long ago. He's bluffing, General. I'd bet my life on it."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Quite sure."

General Bacca sighed. His lips pressed tightly together. "Unfortunately, those stakes will not be high enough." The general looked at Eli. "Quite an interesting game, your poker." He looked back at the still image of Captain Scott that remained on the view screen. "We shall put our cards on the table, and we shall call your brother's bluff. Then we shall see what young Captain Scott is truly made of."

"What do you intend to do?" Eli asked.

"Choose a city," the general stated calmly.

"Pardon me?"

The general looked at Eli once more. "A city, Governor. If we are to call his bluff, we must offer a demonstration of our resolve."

Eli fought to control his demeanor as a wave of fear washed over him. "What do you intend to do, General?"

"I intend to destroy a city of your choosing, Governor."

"General, I hardly think that is necessary..."

"On the contrary, I believe it is absolutely necessary."

"General, the Jung have gone to great lengths to win the hearts and minds of the people of Earth. We were just starting to make some headway. What you are proposing will undermine all those efforts. It will turn the people of Earth against the Jung. You can't possibly expect to rule this world without..."

"The Jung shall rule this world with or without its population, by subterfuge or brute force. Either way is acceptable." General Bacca stepped closer to Eli, looking him directly in the eyes. "Choose."

Eli stood fast, staring back at the general, weighing his options, and realizing he had none. The general's eyebrow shot up again as if he were challenging Eli. "Perth."

"I'm sorry?" the general said.

Eli cleared his throat and spoke up. "Perth."

The general nodded, both eyebrows raised. He tilted his head to one side. "A logical choice. Remote enough to lessen the global impact, yet populated enough to have meaning." The general signaled to his aide as he spoke. "I would have preferred something a little more centrally located—bigger impact and all that—but I suppose it will have to do." General Bacca issued orders in Jung to his aide, who immediately began barking instructions to subordinates. "To be honest, Governor, I didn't think you had it in you. However, do not think for a moment that I'll allow you to continue to sacrifice your less prominent cities first."

"There are to be more?" Eli asked, shock and fear in his eyes.

"Of course," the general answered. "Isn't that how this game is played? One keeps raising the bet until the other one folds? Your next choice shall need to be considerably more significant in the eyes of your world if you wish to remain in power."

Eli felt a wave of panic come over him. He had heard stories about how the Jung had destroyed entire civilizations, wiping out everything and rebuilding from the ground up. Those rumors were what had driven the rapid buildup of the Earth Defense Force, despite the overwhelming odds against their success. Eli himself had seen the futility of military resistance long ago and had done what he had felt was necessary to secure his position as Governor of Earth in order to protect his people from such destruction. Despite the sacrifices he had made over the last year, his people now saw him as a traitor. His children feared him. His wife barely spoke to him. And now, it seemed it was all for nothing.

“Wait!” Eli said. “That woman! Show me her image again!”

“Governor...” the general started.

“Do it!”

The general conceded, signaling to his aide to honor the governor’s request. Moments later, the computer-enhanced image of Jessica taken from the combat shuttle appeared on the screen. Alongside it was her picture from her EDF service file.

“It’s her! From the party! I knew I’d seen her face before!” Eli turned to the general. “She and my brother have an intimate relationship. At least, they did a few months ago at the Founder’s Day celebration at my father’s estate...”

“I fail to see the significance of...”

“You can use her as leverage! Don’t you see?” Eli pleaded. “If you capture her, torture her...”

“That was our intent...” the general interrupted.

“If Nathan knows we’re holding her prisoner, he will try to free her... He may even put his ship at risk to do so.”

“That’s absurd,” the general said. “No good commander would do...”

“Exactly! That’s what I’m saying; Nathan is not that pragmatic. He thinks with his heart, not his head... does what feels is right at the moment, never thinking about the consequences. He’s been that way his entire life. Use her against him.”

General Bacca stared at Eli for several seconds. “Perhaps. Perhaps. I will consider this strategy. Since I have already committed considerable forces to the capture of Ensign Nash, I need do nothing more in order to play that card.”

“Thank you,” Eli said, obvious relief in his voice.

"However, Perth's fate has already been decided," the general added, nodding at his aide.

"What?"

"The bet has already been made, Governor," the general explained. "To back down now would appear weak and would embolden your brother. I cannot allow that. Besides, if your brother truly cared for this woman, he would not have put her into danger in the first place. No, we shall make good our threat. We shall show your brother that resistance will only lead to greater death and destruction."

"But, General," Eli argued, "we're talking about millions of lives!"

"Yes, and I suspect that number will grow considerably before the Aurora is finally destroyed." General Bacca turned back toward Eli, a determined look on his face. "No one challenges the Jung and survives... no one."

\* \* \*

"Still nothing," Loki said.

*"That's four comm waypoints without contact,"* Josh noted from the front seat of the Falcon's cockpit.

"I know."

*"Maybe they don't have their laser comm-unit. Or maybe they're not in a location where they can transmit."*

"Maybe."

*"Maybe we should be closer."*

"We're only four light seconds out, Josh."

*"That's, what, over a million kilometers?"*

"About one point two million."

*"That seems awfully far away to me."*

"Actually, it's pretty close."

*"By whose standards is four light seconds considered close?"*

"By how quickly a Jung interceptor can FTL it out and take a shot at us," Loki reminded him. "That's the only standard I care about."

*"Yeah, well, there is that."*

"Time's up," Loki said. "Plotting the jump to the next comm window."

Josh sighed. *"How long do you think the captain is going to want us to keep trying?"*

"I don't know, but we're running out of comm waypoints." Loki looked at his jump computer display. "Come twenty-five degrees to port, eighteen down relative, and maintain speed."

*"I thought the waypoints were based on some kind of algorithm or something,"* Josh said as he started his course change.

"Nope, completely random, more or less. Jessica insisted. We expected to have the ability to transmit extensions to the list along the way."

*"Well, that was a bad idea, wasn't it?"* Josh said.

"We've got four comm windows left. If we don't establish contact by then, we probably never will."

*"Can't she just radio for help?"*

"Their ground radios aren't that strong," Loki explained.

*"How strong do they have to be? We're only four light seconds out! Hell, a Corinairan comm-unit could reach that far, and everyone on the planet had one of those."*

"It's not the same thing, Josh. The ground radios are low-powered, designed for close-range communications. They're made that way on purpose so that they aren't easy to detect. We'd have to be within twenty kilometers to be able to pick them up."



*"Then let's jump to within twenty kilometers,"* Josh suggested.

"We don't even know if they're still alive, let alone where they are," Loki reminded him.

*"So we start with the crash site and work our way out."*

"Our orders are..."

*"...to attempt to make contact with any survivors,"* Josh finished for him. *"They never specified how."*

"The how was implied."

*"You'd think they would know better than to imply something to me,"* Josh chuckled.

"Maybe so, but they did tell us to avoid getting shot down," Loki argued. "I distinctly remember that part, the 'don't get shot down' part."

*"No problem! We jump in, do a single, quick pass, and jump out. Then we do it again from a different direction. If anyone is alive down there, they'll hear us. We make a hell of a noise when we jump into the atmosphere, remember?"*

"Yeah, I remember."

*"Besides,"* Josh continued, *"Lieutenant Telles wanted details about the tactical environment, right? What better way to collect that information than to do a few flyovers?"* Josh waited several seconds but got no response from his partner. *"Come on, Loki. We're talking about Jessica."*

"I know. I know." Loki sat for another few seconds, thinking. "Fuck it," Loki finally said. "Let's do it." Loki sat up straighter in his seat as if preparing himself. "But I'm keeping my finger on the jump button the entire time. If we take so much as a bug on the windshield, I'm jumping us clear!"

*"Deal!"*

"New course," Loki said as he started a new plot. "Eighty-seven degrees to port, forty-two down relative.

Reduce speed to eight hundred."

*"Eighty-seven to port,"* Josh acknowledged with excitement as he continued their course change. *"Forty-two down. Reducing speed to eight hundred."*

"You *are* going to get us both killed one of these days, you know that?" Loki said.

*"Remember what the lieutenant said. 'We are men of war! Be such men!'"* Josh laughed. *"I'm just being such a man."*

"I'm pretty sure the lieutenant's programming has a bug or two," Loki mumbled.

*"On course and speed,"* Josh reported.

*"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."*

Loki's visor instantly turned opaque as the blue-white jump flash washed over them. The Falcon suddenly decelerated sharply as it came out of the jump and slammed into the thick, night atmosphere of Earth.

Loki was thrown forward, his restraints digging into his shoulders. "Jump complete!" he groaned as the air was forcefully expelled from his lungs.

*"No shit!"* Josh also groaned as his visor cleared. He glanced out the front of the canopy at the moonlit landscape below. *"I don't see any Jung fighters down there."*

"That's because they're all above us!" Loki shouted. "I've got contacts all over the place! Eight, nine... at least a dozen! All fast movers!"

*"Do they see us?"*

"Bright-ass flash and thunderous noise, remember? Yeah, I'm pretty damned sure they... Shit! Four of them are changing course! They're turning toward us! They'll be in weapons range in thirty seconds!"

*"We're coming up on the crash site now!"* Josh said. *"Skimming the treetops, baby!"*

*"Falcon, Nash! Do you copy?!"* Jessica's voice called over the comms.

"Holy shit! It's her!" Loki cried out.

*"I told you it would work!"* Josh declared in delight.

"Nash, Falcon! We copy! Are you all right? How many of you survived? Did the major get out?"

*"Shut up!"* Jessica hollered over the comms. *"No LCU! Local low band only! Delta ground! Two bravos opposed! In motion! Will monitor rotating comm frequencies! Algo one Charlie! Encrypt! Say back!"*

"Uh," Loki quickly recalled what she had just told him, then keyed his mic. "Local low band, delta ground, two bravos opposed, in motion, rotating comm frequencies, algo one Charlie, encrypt." Loki unkeyed his mic. "I think."

*"Say-back good!"* Jessica confirmed. *"Area hot! Bug out until next comm! Nash out!"*

"Falcon out!" Loki glanced at the threat display. "Fuck! Two slipping in behind us! They've got a lock!"

*"Hang on!"* Josh yelled as he slammed the throttles forward and pulled the Falcon's nose up hard. The ship screamed as it began to climb. Josh yanked the control stick to the side, and the Falcon snap rolled to port, coming out on its side.

"They're firing!" Loki yelled.

Josh slid the base of the control stick to the right and twisted it, causing the back end of the interceptor to suddenly kick out to the right. Two missiles streaked past them, missing the Falcon's tail by only a few meters.

*"I'm putting our nose on them!"* Josh yelled. *"Shoot something!"*

"Firing nose turret!" Loki said as he grabbed the manual control stick for the turret and squeezed the trigger.

Bolts of plasma energy sprayed from side to side ahead of the Falcon as it dove toward its onrushing attackers. A split second later, the Falcon passed between the two Jung fighters as it continued to dive toward the surface.

*"It might help if you actually hit something, Loki!"* Josh yelled as he pulled back on the control stick to level off.

"There are two more headed straight for us!" Loki said.

*"Coming right!"* Josh announced as he pulled the Falcon into a tight, right turn.

"They'll have weapons on us in fifteen seconds!"

*"And the two you just missed will be on our ass in five seconds!"* Josh reminded him. *"Get us out of here!"*

"Put some sky in front of us so I can jump us out of here!" Loki insisted.

*"Pitching up!"*

Josh grunted as the sudden change in pitch pushed him down hard into his flight seat. *"Get us out of here now!"* he insisted.

"Plotting escape jump!" Something flashed on Loki's sensor display. "What the hell?"

*"What?"*

"I just got a huge energy spike on the horizon to the west!"

*"Who cares!"* Josh yelled. *"Get us out of here!"*

"Three seconds!" Loki told him.

*"We don't have three seconds!"*

"Jumping!"

## CHAPTER NINE

"How the hell did they find us so fast?" Jessica whispered as she ducked down behind an old, fallen tree.

"I don't know," the sergeant answered. "I haven't seen any shuttles since the first group." He tapped his comm-set. "Mechky, Nutara, you copy?" There was no response. "Damn it. They haven't answered the last four hails. I don't think they made it." The sergeant peered out over the rock he was hiding behind, quickly searching the moonlit trees for signs of movement. He ducked back down slowly, then looked at Jessica. "Two pair, left and right. You good to shoot?"

Jessica nodded, turning her body carefully so as to not cause any more pain in her right shoulder than necessary. "Why couldn't I have been shot in the left shoulder?" she mumbled to herself as she raised her weapon and prepared to fire. "You're a go, Sarge," she whispered once she was ready. She looked carefully into the forest in the distance, barely making out the two Jung soldiers advancing slowly on the right side. One of them was holding a device in his hand, looking down at it periodically.

"They have some kind of scanning device," she whispered.

The sergeant looked at Jessica's targets as they suddenly stopped. The soldier holding the device said something, and he and his cohort started moving more to their right. The sergeant looked back at his own two targets, both of whom

had changed direction and were angling left instead of advancing straight ahead as they had been. "They're going to try to flank us," he warned as he raised his weapon and opened fire.

Jessica also opened up, each discharge of her Corinari energy weapon sending waves of pain through her shoulder as it kicked back directly into her wound.

The soldiers dropped, one on his belly and the other ducking behind a tree as they returned fire. Jessica ducked as several needle-like beams of energy struck the rock she was hiding behind, blowing the top of it into dust and pebbles that flew in all directions.

Jessica shook the debris off her head, squinting as the dust settled, then popped back up and continued shooting. There were no more energy beams coming from beside her. She looked to the left and saw a Jung soldier scurrying to his right. She took aim, led him slightly, and fired a single shot as he passed behind a large tree and came out on the other side. The soldier took the shot in his left side, causing him to spin to his right and fall. She watched for several seconds, but he did not get up. "I think we got them," she said as she settled back down behind her rock. She turned to her left, but the sergeant wasn't there. She looked farther back and saw his boots sticking out from behind a bush. "Fuck."

Jessica duck-walked over to the sergeant. He was still alive. His eyes were open, and he was breathing rapidly. Most of his left shoulder was burnt, along with the left side of his neck and face. His helmet had partially melted to the left side of his head. She could see that he was in terrible pain. She squatted down next to him as she pulled out the med-kit from the combat armor Mechky had given her after taking it from Letvil. "Which one of these is for pain?" she asked as she fumbled through the contents.

"Red.....for pain," the sergeant gasped.

Jessica took the small, red cylinder out and stuffed the med-kit back in her vest pocket. Then she pulled the tip cover off the cylinder and jammed the tip into the sergeant's uninjured arm. Within moments, his breathing had begun to slow, although he was still breathing faster than normal. He was also still in considerable pain.

"Guess.....I should.....have ducked," he said in between breaths.

"Yeah, didn't they teach you anything in sergeants school?" Jessica said. "Are you still in the fight, Sarge?"

"No, sir..... Can't see.....straight. Slow.....you down."

"Fuck, Sarge."

"Call me.....Tunni." The sergeant tried to smile, lopsided as it was. "Prop.....me.....up."

Jessica moved to the sergeant's uninjured side and put her left arm under his right arm. She lifted up and pulled him back one meter. The sergeant winced in pain, trying his best not to cry out as she leaned him against the tree. After nearly a minute of panting and concentration, the sergeant spoke again. "My.....gun.....sir." He held out his right hand.

Jessica picked the sergeant's energy rifle up and handed it to him, making sure it was ready to fire.

"Grenade.....put it.....behind my.....back."

Jessica looked at the sergeant. "You planning on being a hero, Tunni?"

"I was a hero.....the day I joined.....the Corinari."

"Damn right," she agreed. She pulled two of the sergeant's four grenades, placing them in her own pockets. Then she pulled the last two from his combat vest, flipped up the safeties with her thumbs, and carefully wedged them under the sergeant's butt. "Don't move too much," she warned him.

The sergeant winced in pain again. "I'll try," he responded, a slight smile showing through his pain. "You had better.....get moving.....Jess."

Jessica looked in the sergeant's uninjured eye. "I'll stand up for you on the walk of heroes, Tunni."

The sergeant's good eye began to well up. He tried not to break down at the thought of his own demise. Finally, he proudly uttered a single word. "Corinari."

She put her hand on the sergeant's cheek, holding it there for several seconds and finally whispering, "Hup, hup, hup."

Jessica looked around, stood up in a low crouch, and ran off into the woods. She moved along as quickly as she could, not looking back, staying low, and moving from tree to tree, cover to cover, as much as possible. For several minutes, she continued to run, pain shooting through her shoulder with every footfall. She thought about the sergeant. She thought about Mechky and Nutara. She thought about Major Waddell. She wondered how far away the other Jung squads were. Surely they had heard the weapons fire. Surely the men they had killed had reported contact before they had died. How long would it take for the other squads to reach them?

A few minutes later, she had her answer. She dropped to the ground at the sound of distant energy weapons fire coming from behind her. She spun around on one knee, bringing her weapon up and ready. The weapons fire continued, the piercing sounds of the Jung needle-beam weapons and the sharp crack of the more powerful Corinari energy rifle. Suddenly, the weapons fire stopped. A minute later, she heard two more shots, both from Jung weapons, and her heart sank.



Her head fell as her eyes welled up. She reached up and wiped them with her left hand as she stood and continued on her way, running low through the forest toward the distant river as she heard two more explosions from behind her.

\* \* \*

"Contact!" Mister Navashee announced. "Jump flash."

Nathan turned aft to look at his comm officer.

"Incoming transmission from the Falcon," Naralena announced. "Mister Sheehan is asking to speak with you, sir."

"Put him on," Nathan ordered as he tapped his comm-set. "Falcon, Aurora Actual. Go ahead."

*"Sir, she's alive. Jess is alive. I spoke with her myself,"* Loki said over the comms.

"How many survivors are there?" Nathan asked.

*"I don't know. She was very brief. She said something in code. She said, 'Local low band, delta ground, two bravos opposed, in motion, rotating comm frequencies, algo one Charlie, encrypt.' I have no idea what it means, sir."*

"Neither do I," Nathan admitted.

"I think I do, sir," Sergeant Weatherly said from his customary position at the entrance to the captain's ready room. "It's spec-ops lingo. Enrique taught it to me. There are four survivors. They split into two pairs and are on the move in opposite directions. She wants us to use the comm-sets to contact her and rotate the frequencies using algorithm Charlie one. She also wants us to encrypt all comms."

"Comm-sets only have about a twenty-kilometer range," Nathan said as he moved toward the back of the bridge,

closer to the sergeant. "Falcon, Actual. How did you make contact?"

*"Uh..."* There was a pause. *"We jumped down and overflowed the crash site, sir. Sorry."*

"How was the area?"

*"Hot, sir. At least a dozen fighters in the area."*

"What about troops on the ground?"

*"I don't know, sir. I didn't get a chance to look at the scans. We got jumped as soon as we arrived. We barely got out alive. I recorded all sensor data however. Lieutenant Telles will want to take a look at it."*

Nathan looked at Naralena.

"I'll transfer a copy directly to the lieutenant, sir," she told Nathan.

*"There's one other thing, Captain,"* Loki said. *"Just before we jumped out, I picked up a huge energy spike on the horizon, due west. I'm pretty sure it was a nuclear detonation. A big one."*

"Where? Did you get a location fix?"

*"No, sir. It was below the horizon. We just picked up the thermal and radiation signatures as they rose."*

Nathan sighed. A cold chill washed over him. "Falcon, Actual. Do you think you can make contact with Lieutenant Commander Nash again?"

*"We can do it,"* Josh chimed in before Loki could say otherwise. *"I have an idea."*

"Are you sure?" Nathan asked. "We can't afford to lose the Falcon; you both know that."

*"Josh is sure,"* Loki said. *"Me, not so much. But we'd like to try, sir. What's the message?"*

Nathan looked at Sergeant Weatherly. "I need her to find a place to hide and wait until we can figure out how to extract her. She needs to keep her comm-set on but not

transmit unless she has no other choice, just in case the Jung can track her transmissions. She needs to disappear.”

Sergeant Weatherly nodded. “Deep down, eyes shut, ears up, saw wood.”

“Seriously?” Nathan asked.

“Hide, disappear, listen but don’t transmit, wait for now,” the sergeant explained.

“Very well,” Nathan said as he keyed his comm-set. “Message reads, ‘Deep down, eyes shut, ears up, saw wood.’ Understood?”

*“Got it, sir.”*

“Remember: do not engage. Someone gets weapons on you, you jump. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Loki answered.

“Good luck, gentlemen. Actual out.”

*“Falcon out.”*

“Mister Navashee, take a look at their sensor logs, specifically that energy spike at the end,” Nathan ordered. “Tell me what you think.”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Navashee answered.

Nathan tapped his comm-set again. “Telles, Captain.”

*“This is Telles. Go ahead, Captain,”* the lieutenant answered over Nathan’s comm-set.

“There are four survivors on the surface. They are currently split up into two pairs, traveling in opposite directions.”

*“Undoubtedly in the hopes of pulling limited enemy forces in opposite directions. It is often easier to evade or overpower a smaller force, even if the odds are unchanged.”*

“Any chance we can get them out of there?”

*“I am examining the data collected by the Falcon. There appear to be twenty-four enemy soldiers on the ground. They have split into six teams of four. One of them is*

*tracking what appear to be two of our people. I cannot tell which ones. However, I do not see the other two of our people. They may have already been killed or captured."*

Nathan hung his head down. Not knowing who had died was worse than not knowing if anyone had survived in the first place.

*"At present, while the Jung ground forces are not significant, their air cover presents a problem. Without a jump shuttle, we would need a fighter escort, and I am not sure you have the fighters to spare at the moment. In addition, we do not know how many more fighters could be called into the area, nor how quickly they could arrive. I'm sorry, Captain, but the situation does not look promising at the moment. If the Falcon returns and makes contact once again, they should urge our people to seek shelter, to hide until the situation improves or until we have a more complete understanding of the tactical requirements for extraction."*

"Understood," Nathan answered, tapping his comm-set again to disconnect the call.

"Captain, Loki was correct; it's a nuclear detonation," Mister Navashee said.

"Any idea where?" Nathan asked.

"That would be difficult to say without knowing the yield of the weapon. Based on what we've seen the Jung use thus far, it could be as close as Madagascar, or it could be as far away as the east coast of South America. All I *can* tell you is that it appears to be along the same general latitude as the crash site."

"Incoming message," Naralena reported.

Nathan turned around, putting his hands on the edge of the main comm station. "From whom?"

"It's from Jung command, General Bacca. Text only. Message reads, '*Perth no longer exists. Your move, Captain.*'" Naralena looked up from her console at the captain, realizing the impact of the words she had just spoken.

Nathan looked pale. "How many people lived in Perth?" he wondered.

Mister Navashee turned to his console and entered a command. A moment later, he turned back toward the captain. "One point five million," he reported solemnly.

The bridge became silent. Nathan's eyes went from crewman to crewman as if looking for answers, but there were none. He walked slowly forward, past the tactical station. He paused for a moment, turning toward his tactical officer. "Load all tubes with nukes, full yields rigged for snapshot," he said as he continued forward. "Make ready on tubes one and three. Make ready all rail guns and the missile launcher."

"Loading all tubes, full yields, snapshot. Readyng plasma torpedoes and all rail guns. Missile launcher is already loaded and ready, sir."

"Very well," Nathan said, still walking and talking as if in a trance. "Mister Riley, new jump, high Earth orbit."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered.

Nathan moved next to his command chair. "Maintain constant readiness for quick micro-jumps along our flight path at my command."

"Understood, sir."

Nathan sat down. "Comms, ship-wide."

"Ship-wide open," Naralena answered.

Nathan thought for a moment. "Attention all hands. This is your captain. The Jung have called for our surrender, threatening the destruction of major population centers on

Earth if we do not comply. I have just received word that they have nuked the city of Perth, killing over a million innocent people. They will continue to punish the innocent until we give in to their demands. This we cannot do. If the Jung are allowed to possess the jump drive technology, they will become unstoppable. Today it will be Earth, tomorrow the Pentaurus cluster.” Nathan paused, looking at his helmsman who sat in the very same chair Nathan had sat in when the Aurora had first left port. “No, we shall not surrender. We shall fight. We shall drive the Jung from the Earth, or we shall die trying. That is all.”

“Ship-wide closed,” Naralena reported.

“Jump plotted and ready, sir,” Mister Riley reported from the navigator’s station.

“Jump.”

“Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump.”

Nathan closed his eyes as the blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge. He was taking his ship, his crew, into what could very well be their final battle, and he knew it.

“Jump complete. We’re in high Earth orbit. Altitude of three hundred thousand kilometers.”

“Comms, message to Jung command. Message reads, ‘Time’s up. My turn.’”

“Find me a target, Mister Randeem,” Nathan stated calmly.

“Nearest target is a frigate, designated as contact one. She’s coming around the near side, counter orbit. Range: three hundred thirty-eight thousand and closing.”

“Message sent,” Naralena reported.

“Any response?”

“Were you expecting one?”

Nathan smiled. It wasn't often that his comm officer displayed her sarcastic nature, and he knew she was doing so for his benefit.

"We've been swept," Mister Navashee reported. "She sees us. Contact one is breaking her orbit and turning toward us."

"Helm, come to port one hundred twenty degrees and maintain current speed."

"Turning one-twenty to port and maintaining speed," Mister Riley acknowledged as he started his turn.

"New jump. Put us abeam of that frigate, two light minutes out so she doesn't have time to see where we're coming from."

"Aye, sir," the navigator responded.

"We'll be firing a full spread, Mister Randeem," Nathan explained. "Missiles, then nukes, then plasma. Pound them with the quads as we pass under her, then hit them with the stern tubes from the other side just before we jump."

"Isn't that overkill for a frigate, sir?" Mister Randeem questioned.

"Let's just say I'm sending another message to General Bacca."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered, his own smile forming.

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Jump."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

Nathan closed his eyes again, opening them after the jump flash had subsided.

"Hard to starboard, Mister Chiles,"

"Hard to starboard, aye."

"Plotting attack jump," Mister Riley announced.

"I'll need at least fifty kilometers at our current speed," Mister Randeem told the Aurora's navigator.

"You got it," Mister Riley answered.

"Turn complete," the helmsman answered.

"Jump plotted and ready."

"Jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

This time, Nathan's eyes remained open, his gaze fixed on the view screen ahead of him and his concentration steadfast, the same as his resolve. The jump flash came and went, and he did not so much as blink.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Contact one! Dead ahead! Fifty meters and closing!"

"Fire." Nathan's voice was calm, his emotions cold and even.

"Missiles away!" Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan looked up without tilting his head as the missiles streaked away across the top of the view screen, headed toward the distant target that they could not yet see.

"Firing tubes two and four!" Mister Randeem added. "Torpedoes away. Time on target is ten seconds."

Nathan held up his right hand, telling his tactical officer to wait a moment.

"She's firing point-defenses," Mister Randeem reported as he waited for his captain's order to fire.

Nathan watched the forward view screen for several seconds. Then he saw it, a small dot in the center, barely visible.

"One missile down," Mister Randeem reported.

The dot grew rapidly in size until it took on an oblong shape and began to show wide, red stripes that wrapped around its long, dark-gray hull. What was only a small dot a



moment ago now filled half the forward view screen and was getting larger.

"Two missiles down," Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan extended one finger on his right hand and pointed forward.

"Firing plasma torpedoes," Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan kept his eyes straight ahead as the two red bolts of plasma energy traversed the diminishing distance between the two ships in the blink of an eye. The bolts of energy struck the frigate's starboard shields, causing them to glow an intense reddish orange.

"Direct hits," Mister Randeem reported.

"Her shields are buckling," Mister Navashee added.

Two blinding flashes of white light engulfed the frigate, blocking their view and flooding the bridge with brilliance. The frigate was now too big to fit in the view screen and was about to move over them.

"Her shields are gone!" Mister Navashee reported with controlled exuberance.

Two more yellow-orange explosions erupted against the frigate's starboard side as the Aurora dove under her.

"Direct hits!" Mister Navashee reported, this time unable to control his excitement. "Multiple secondaries!"

"She's firing her rail guns," Mister Randeem reported.

The bridge began to shake. The frigate's rail guns pounded at the Aurora's topside as she passed under the target.

"Stand by to fire tubes five and six," Nathan ordered.

"Five and six are ready," Mister Randeem acknowledged.

"She's breaking in two!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Captain, shall we cancel the..."

"Fire five and six," Nathan interrupted.

"Firing five and six," his tactical officer answered. "Five and six away. Five seconds."

"Helm, hard to starboard, forty-five degrees. Pitch down ten."

"Direct hits," Mister Randeem announced.

"New jump, three light minutes, as soon as we finish our turn."

"Target destroyed," Mister Randeem reported.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported. "It's the battleship, sir! She's coming over the horizon counter orbit at full power. She's locking her forward missile launchers on us."

"Time to turn?" Nathan asked.

"Ten seconds," Mister Chiles answered.

"More contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Eight inbound missiles! Impact in thirty seconds."

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Message from Jung command, General Bacca," Naralena announced. "Message reads, '*Poor choice, Captain. My turn.*'"

"The battleship is firing again."

Nathan looked at his sensor operator out of the corner of his eye, barely turning his head. "At us?"

"No, sir! At the surface!"

"Target?"

"Two targets:" Mister Navashee reported, "mid-African continent and the east coast of South America!"

"Twenty seconds!" Mister Randeem reminded the captain.

"They're nukes, sir," Mister Navashee added, his tone subdued.

Nathan stood. "What?"

"Impact! Port Gentil!" Mister Navashee reported. "Oh my God." He watched his display, then called out, "Second

impact! Cape Town!" Mister Navashee turned to face the captain. "They're both gone, sir."

"Captain," Mister Randeem urged. "The missiles!"

"Jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping," Mister Riley responded, eschewing the usual three second countdown.

Nathan turned forward as the jump flash washed over them.

"Jump complete."

"That bastard," Nathan muttered. "It's like a game to him. He's using them as pawns... millions and millions of pawns."

\* \* \*

"Jump complete!" Loki groaned as he was thrown forward by the Falcon's sudden impact with the Earth's atmosphere. He readjusted himself as the initial shock subsided. The sudden change in conditions was always drastic—from the calm, smooth ride in space to the jarring, bouncy ride in an atmosphere. This time, it was even more severe, as they had come in faster than usual.

*"Range to crash site?"* Josh asked.

"Two hundred kilometers to starboard. We're headed south right now."

*"Threat board?"*

"The fighters are still there," Loki said. "I count sixteen total: eight high, eight low. Still no shuttles to speak of."

*"Have they picked us up?"*

"Not yet... Wait. The top eight are turning toward us. They're accelerating."

*"That's it; come to Papa,"* Josh mumbled. *"What about the eight low?"*

"Four are climbing but holding position. The other four are still circling the search area at low altitude."

*"No problem,"* Josh said. *"We can blow right past them."*

"They're definitely on an intercept course," Loki said. "They'll be in weapons range in thirty seconds."

*"You got the jump ready?"*

"Plotted and locked in," Loki answered. "Twenty seconds."

*"Turning toward them,"* Josh announced as he rolled the Falcon onto her right side and pulled the nose over to turn. A moment later, he snapped the ship level again.

"Ten seconds," Loki said. "Jumping in three..."

*"Wait!"* Josh interrupted. *"Not yet! Let them waste some missiles first!"*

"Okay." Loki looked at his threat display. "They're firing! Four inbound! Ten seconds!"

*"Pitching up,"* Josh said. *"Now you can jump."*

*"Jumping!"*

Josh watched as his visor become opaque to protect his eyes against the jump flash. A second later, his visor was clear again.

"Jump complete!" Loki announced.

*"Dropping to the deck!"* Josh called as he put the Falcon into a steep dive and pulled his throttles back to minimal power. The ship's nose went down sharply, diving toward the moonlit forest below.

"Five thousand meters!" Loki announced. "Three thousand...two thousand...one thousand."

Josh slowly pulled the nose level, bringing his throttles up to ten percent as the Falcon leveled off just above the treetops. *"Skimming the treetops!"* he announced.

"Four bandits turning toward us!" Loki announced.

*"Send the message!"* Josh reminded him.

"Nash, Falcon! In the blind! Deep down, eyes shut, ears up, saw wood! Do you copy?" Loki looked down at the threat board. "They're moving in to fire!"

*"Going to full power!"* Josh announced as he slammed the throttles all the way forward.

Loki was pushed back in his flight seat as he keyed his mic again. "Nash, Falcon! Do you copy?"

*"Deep down, eyes shut, ears up, saw wood!"* Jessica's voice called over the comms. Loki could hear the tension in her voice and the sound of her weapon firing in rapid succession. He looked at the threat display. "They're firing! Five seconds! Pitch up!"

*"Pitching up!"* Josh replied as he pulled the nose up gently.

"Jumping!" Loki's visor went opaque momentarily, obscuring his vision for a second. "Jump complete!" he announced as the ship suddenly stopped bouncing.

Josh pulled back on his throttles. *"Worked like a charm,"* he bragged.

"Did you hear the weapons fire in the background?" Loki said. "She's in a firefight."

*"Who isn't?"* Josh said.

\* \* \*

"Mister Navashee!" Nathan called, anger in his voice. "Do we have a clear jump line to the battleship?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Navashee answered from the sensor station.

"Helm, come about to port. Put us on course for that battleship."

"Coming to port, aye," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Captain, recommend engaging the cruiser first, sir," Mister Randeem said. "She's already damaged from our previous encounter, and she's currently too far from the battleship to receive fire support. If she moves closer, not only will we be unable to attack her, but she'll be able to provide fire support for the battleship as well."

Nathan took a deep breath, realizing that his emotions had gotten the better of him. "You're right, Mister Randeem." Nathan stepped forward and bent over, looking at the navigation display on the center console between his helmsman and navigator. "New course," he said, pointing at the display. "We want to jump here, directly astern of the cruiser and one light minute out. Then we'll turn and accelerate so we're going just a little faster than the target. That way, we won't blow past her faster than we can shoot. Then we jump in directly behind her, as close as you can and still translate down enough to pass under her, and start our attack run."

"We'll receive a pounding as we pass," Mister Randeem reminded his captain.

"We'll roll over before we pass under them, show them our belly. We should survive the pass, and that will give us time to recharge the plasma torpedoes so we can fire another spread at her stern."

"So I'll be flipping us over as we pass?" the helmsman wondered. "That means we'll need more space between us."

"Yaw, Mister Chiles, not pitch," Nathan said. "Spin us laterally."

"She pitches over much faster than she yaws, sir," Mister Chiles reminded him.

"That's why we're going to jump in stern first. We'll launch nukes, pitch over quick, and fire plasma torpedoes,

making them hit a split second apart just like before. Then we spin laterally as we slide under, bringing all four forward tubes, nukes and plasma onto the cruiser's stern." Nathan looked at his helmsman. "Piece of cake, right?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Chiles answered, smiling. "Changing course."

"We may not get the plasma torpedo cannons completely recharged in time," Mister Randeen warned.

"Calculate the time needed and the transition speed to get you that time. I want to put a pair of plasma torpedoes and nukes in both her back and front ends, all on the first pass. Then we'll finish her off with a round of missiles before we jump away."

"You want us to try to take out a Jung cruiser with a single pass?" Mister Randeen asked, surprise in his voice.

"Not try, Mister Randeen, do," Nathan said. "I want to put the fear of God in the crew of that battleship."

"Plotting jump," Mister Riley announced.

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee reported. "The Falcon's back!"

"She's hailing us, sir," Naralena reported.

Nathan pointed to his comm-set, then to the overhead speakers. Naralena understood, putting the call through to the captain's comm-set as well as to the overhead speakers so that everyone on the bridge could hear. "Falcon, go for Actual."

*"She got the message, sir,"* Loki's voice announced over the loudspeaker. *"I don't know how well she'll be able to hide though. We heard weapons fire over the comms. I'm pretty sure she was in a firefight at the time."*

"How hot was the area this time?" Nathan asked.

*"Sixteen fighters, eight flying high cover and another eight low. We jumped in farther out and drew the top eight*

*off, then micro-jumped in below the other eight. We barely got away as the second eight were firing on us."*

"Damn it," Nathan swore to himself. He tapped his comm-set again. "Any chance you can give her some air cover?"

*"Sure, but you told us not to put our ship at risk. I'm pretty sure we've nearly stepped over that line already, sir."*

Nathan thought for a moment before continuing. "Loki, I'm authorizing you to assess the situation and determine the risk. If you believe you can help her out without losing the ship, go ahead."

*"Understood. Falcon out."*

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"All weapons charged and ready," Mister Randeem announced.

"Very well," Nathan said. "Jump us in."

\* \* \*

*"Loki, I'm authorizing you to assess the situation and determine the risk,"* the captain's voice said over the Falcon's comms. *"If you believe you can help her out without losing the ship, go ahead."*

*"Isn't that what we were already doing?"* Josh wondered.

"Understood. Falcon out," Loki acknowledged, ending the communication. "Plotting new jump."

*"Coming about,"* Josh said excitedly as he started a turn.

"Don't get too crazy on me," Loki warned.

*"Who, me?"*

"We'll come in on the same vector as before," Loki said.

*"Why not from a different angle,"* Josh suggested, *"so they can't guess which direction we're coming from and*



*shoot us down?"*

"If they see us jumping in to the same spot, maybe they'll move their fighter cover closer to that spot and away from Jessica."

*"Clever,"* Josh said. *"Turn complete."*

*"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."*

The jump flash washed over the Falcon, instantly transitioning her from high orbit above the Earth to only a kilometer above its surface.

"Jump complete!" Loki groaned as he was thrown forward against his restraint harness.

*"We have got to find some way to compensate for that!"* Josh complained. *"I'm sure I'm getting bruises on my shoulders!"*

"Contacts!" Loki reported. "Two hundred kilometers at our three o'clock! Eight high, eight low!"

*"Coming right,"* Josh announced as he rolled the Falcon into a tight turn.

"Wait! More contacts!" Loki reported. "Three slow movers, probable combat shuttles, skimming the treetops! I'm pretty sure they're headed for Jess!"

*"Where are they?"* Josh asked.

"Four o'clock!"

*"Adjusting,"* Josh announced. *"We'll take the shuttles first. The last thing she needs down there is more boots on the ground."*

"Activating nose turret," Loki reported. "The high eight are turning to intercept. Twenty seconds to weapons on us."

*"On course for the shuttles."*

*"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."*

Loki's visor went opaque again as the jump flash washed over them.

Josh's visor cleared instantly after the jump flash dissipated, revealing a formation of three Jung combat shuttles flying across their course and directly ahead of them. *"WHOA!"* He yanked the control stick back hard as he pushed his throttles to full power, spinning the thumb lever on them to increase lift thrust.

The interceptor's nose pitched up quickly as her engines screamed to full power, and the ship felt as if it had suddenly been pushed upward. The three shuttles passed under them, barely missing the Falcon's underside.

*"A little close, don't you think?"* Josh yelled as he pushed the nose back down and decreased power.

"Sorry about that," Loki said as he swung the nose turret around. "Come hard left and give me a shot!"

*"Coming left,"* Josh announced as he rolled the Falcon on its side and pulled the nose up hard. The ship came around quickly to the left.

"Firing!" Loki announced as he depressed the trigger.

Bolts of plasma energy fired in rapid succession from the ball turret tucked into the underside of the Falcon's nose. The turret tracked left and downward as the ship leveled off, finding its first target and blowing it apart with only three hits.

*"One down!"* Josh cheered.

Loki glanced at his threat display as he continued to fire. "Low eight are turning toward us!" he reported as another blip indicating the Jung combat shuttles disappeared.

*"Two down!"* Josh cheered.

"Fighters are firing missiles!"

*"Disengaging!"* Josh announced. *"Standing up!"* Josh pulled the nose up hard and went to full power again, climbing straight up. *"Are they tracking?"*

“Missiles are turning up with us!” Loki reported. “Popping countermeasures!”

Twenty decoys quickly dropped out of the Falcon’s wings on either side. The decoys began spreading out and emitting heat and radiation signatures meant to mimic that of the Falcon. Three of the four missiles followed the decoys, exploding as they made contact. The fourth missile blew past the decoys and continued on toward the still climbing Falcon.

“One still coming!” Loki yelled. “Three.....two.....”

*“Hold on!”* Josh yanked his throttles back to idle as he again applied full lift power. The Falcon suddenly translated laterally in relation to the surface, perpendicular to their vertical flight path. The missile passed under them, missing by no more than a single meter.

Josh saw the missile pass beyond their nose. To his surprise, the missile suddenly began to slow, pitching back as if it were attempting to turn into them. *“What the fuck?!”* Josh pushed his throttles forward again as the missile fell back and tried to move closer. His sudden increase in forward thrust shot them above the missile’s path, causing it to pass under their tail and across to their topside. *“They’ve got fucking smart missiles!”* he exclaimed as he put the Falcon into a snap roll in order to bring their gun turret onto the same side as the missile that was still pursuing them. *“Shoot that bitch!”*

Loki opened fire with the Falcon’s nose turret, blowing the missile apart a few moments later.

*“Damn!”* Josh yelled as the Falcon shook from the missile’s shock wave. *“Pitching over!”* he announced as he pushed the Falcon into a dive again, reducing power once more. *“Get ready to fire missiles at the other four before they decide to join the party!”*

"I'm on it," Loki replied as he armed the Falcon's close range missiles. He tapped the four icons on his threat display that represented the fighters that were still loitering over the search area. "Targets selected. Hold course." He armed four missiles and opened the weapons bay doors along the Falcon's underside. "Firing four!"

Four short, stubby missiles dropped from the open weapons bay under the Falcon's left wing-body. Their engines ignited in rapid succession as they fell away from the Falcon, sending them streaking across the sky toward their targets.

The four Jung fighters maneuvered wildly, all deploying their own countermeasures. Two of the fighters were instantly blown apart, their burning debris spreading over the forest below. The other two managed to escape by dodging the last two missiles, which then struck the ground and exploded in massive fireballs.

"Two down!" Loki reported. "The other two are at full power and in a wide turn."

*"What about the first four?"* Josh asked.

"They're coming around behind us! Go to full power and skim the trees while I make contact! Then we jump out and start over!"

*"Going down!"* Josh announced as he dove toward the surface again. He smiled. This was the part he loved most.

"Nash, Falcon!" Loki called across the comms as they approached the search area.

*"Be careful with those missiles!"* Jessica yelled over the comms.

"We'll keep jumping in and out. We'll try to keep them off your back until Telles can figure out a way to pull you out of there!" Loki told her. "How many to pick up?!"

*"One!"* Jessica yelled, panting.

Loki could tell she was running as she spoke. "Say again?"

*"I'm it! Everyone else is dead. I'm fucking wounded, too, damn it! Tell the lieutenant to hurry the fuck up!"*

*"The first four are launching missiles again!"* Josh warned Loki.

"Understood!" Loki answered Jessica. "Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

\* \* \*

Jessica stopped momentarily, instinctively looking up as the Falcon jumped away in a brilliant blue-white flash that lit up the area for a brief instant. She could hear the whoosh of air and the thunder-like *crack* made by the Falcon's departure.

She knelt down a moment and pulled her med-kit from her combat vest. As she opened the med-kit, she continued to scan the trees for signs of pursuit. The two missiles fired from the Falcon had helped her put a little more distance between her and her pursuers, but she knew that the lead would not last long. She was weak and in considerable pain. The Jung soldiers following her were not. They also had the advantage of reinforcements, which were circling around to land troops behind her at the moment... Of this she was certain.

She jabbed herself in her thigh with the mini-ject, sending additional pain medication into her blood stream. She tossed the spent device aside, grabbed the next one—an energy booster—and repeated the process, giving her the additional strength she needed to continue her evasive efforts.

There was smoke everywhere, the result of several fires set off by both the missile impacts and the burning debris that had rained down on the area when the Falcon had destroyed two Jung fighters a few minutes ago. She could hear the crackle of nearby fires and the shouting of Jung troops as they worked their way around and between the blazes. It would slow them down, but it would not stop them. She could hear the sound of the approaching shuttle's engines as they descended to land and deploy their troops. From the sound, she knew the direction. She would have to change course, no longer able to head for the river. They were putting troops in exactly the right spot, just as they had before, which confirmed her worst fears. Somehow, they were tracking her every move.

As she put her med-kit away, she heard the sound of jet turbines in the distance getting louder with each passing second.

*"Nash, Falcon,"* Loki's voice called over her comm-set.

*"Go for Nash,"* she replied.

*"New troops on the ground. Count twelve thermals moving west by northwest, line abreast and spreading out as they advance."*

"They're trying to pinch me in," Jessica told them. "They know I'm heading for the river. They're forcing me south, and I want to go north toward the city."

*"We'll try to ruin their plans,"* Loki promised. *"Falcon out."*

"Nash out." Jessica looked behind her, noticing movement in the trees not more than a few hundred meters away. She crouched down low and headed in the opposite direction, starting a slow arc to the south as she moved through the woods and staying hidden behind brush and trees whenever possible. The jet turbines became louder

and louder until, suddenly, the Falcon screamed past her, skimming the treetops. She heard its plasma turret as it fired and the *thwumps* and subsequent muffled explosions as the energy tore up the ground, the trees, and with any luck, a few Jung troops.

Once again, she knew it wouldn't stop them, but it would continue to slow them down. Hopefully, it was all she needed.

\* \* \*

"Pitch-over complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm. "We're now flying stern first."

"We're closing on the target at a rate of one hundred fifty meters per second," Mister Riley added.

"The target is approximately four thousand meters in length, so at that speed, it should take us about a minute from the last stern shot to the first bow shot. Will that give you enough time to complete your yaw maneuver, Mister Chiles?"

"That should do it."

"Jump is plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Very well," Nathan said. "Take us in."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered. "Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

The jump flash washed over the bridge, momentarily filling the compartment with blue-white light.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Cruiser, dead ahead!" Mister Navashee reported. "Ten kilometers and closing!"

"Snapshot five and six!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing five and six!" Mister Randeem replied as he pressed the firing buttons for both tubes. "Five and six

away!”

“Pitch us over!” Nathan ordered his helmsman.

“Pitching over, aye,” Mister Chiles acknowledged.

“Thirty seconds to torpedo impact,” Mister Randeem reported. “Standing by to fire plasma torpedoes.”

“Twenty seconds,” Mister Riley reported from the helm as he continued to pitch the ship over to bring her nose onto the cruiser as they rushed toward her.

Nathan turned to his left toward his sensor operator. “Any missile locks?”

“No, sir. We’re too close. The cruiser’s missiles are long-range only.”

“Not ours,” Nathan said under his breath.

“Ten seconds to torpedo impact!” Mister Randeem announced.

“Pitch over complete!” Mister Chiles reported. “Nose on target!”

“One kilometer!” Mister Navashee called out.

“Fire one and three!” Nathan ordered.

“Firing one and three!” Mister Randeem answered.

The inside of the bridge glowed red for a brief moment as a pair of plasma bolts streaked across the spherical view screen toward the cruiser that was growing rapidly in the center of their forward view.

“Translating down!” Mister Chiles announced as he fired the Aurora’s topside thrusters to push her below the rapidly approaching enemy cruiser.

Just as the red glow faded, the bridge was lit with two brilliant white flashes.

“Detonations!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Target has lost aft shields!” Mister Navashee reported.

Nathan leaned forward in anticipation, his eyes fixed on the image of the cruiser’s stern as it rose slightly, moving



above the Aurora's flight path as she translated downward and away from the massive Jung ship. He watched as the fading white flashes were suddenly replaced with a pair of red flashes, then a yellow-orange explosion that tore apart the cruiser's main engines.

"Beginning yaw and roll maneuver!" Mister Chiles reported as the Aurora began to pass under the exploding aft end of the cruiser.

"Switch cameras," Nathan ordered. The image changed, and Nathan watched the Earth and the cruiser twist about on the view screen as the Aurora spun on her lateral axis and rolled on her longitudinal one. The bridge suddenly began to shake violently.

"Taking rail gun fire!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Ten seconds until we're belly up!" Mister Chiles reported.

"Poor choice of words," Nathan said, his eyes still fixed on the main view screen.

"Just lost port side forward rail gun!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Damage control reports outer hull breach in section one seven two!" Naralena reported. "Pressure loss on decks C and D, same section!"

The shaking became less violent, settling into muted vibrations that only occasionally rattled them in their seats.

"Our underside is toward the target," Mister Chiles announced. "Twenty seconds until the yaw maneuver is complete."

"Coming out from under the cruiser's bow," Mister Navashee reported.

"Fire all rail guns!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing all guns!" Mister Randeem answered.

The Aurora's mini-rail guns, located around her perimeter, began spewing a steady stream of slugs at the enemy ship as they drifted apart at one hundred fifty meters per second. Enemy rail gun fire ripped into the Aurora's outer hull, creating craters a few meters across and sending debris flying in all directions.

Nathan looked at the left side of the spherical view screen, following the image of the Jung cruiser as it moved toward the center. As it moved closer to the center, the shaking became more violent. The Aurora began taking the enemy rail gun fire across their own bow.

"Yaw complete. Nose on target," the helmsman reported.

"Range: two kilometers and increasing!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Plasma cannons fully charged and ready to fire!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Snapshot tubes two and four!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing two and four!" Mister Randeem announced. "Two and four away! Ten seconds to impact!"

"Fire plasma torpedoes!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing tubes one and three!" Mister Randeem replied.

Again, the bridge glowed red as the bolts of plasma energy streaked over their heads.

"Lock four missiles on the target and fire!" Nathan ordered.

"Locking missiles on target!" Mister Randeem replied.

Two white flashes on the main view screen that lit up the inside of the bridge announced the detonations of their first two conventional torpedoes. The two red flashes from the plasma shots that followed did the same.

“Firing missiles!” Mister Randeem reported.

“She’s lost forward shields!” Mister Navashee reported.  
“She’s got hull breaches across her bow...!”

“Missile impact in ten seconds!” Mister Randeem interrupted.

“Ten degrees nose down,” Nathan ordered. “Stand by to fire quads.”

“Pitching ten down, aye,” Mister Chiles acknowledged.

“Locking quads on target,” Mister Randeem added.  
“Impacts!”

Nathan watched as four yellow-orange explosions tore open the nose of the cruiser, sending sections bigger than his parents’ estate back in Vancouver spinning off in different directions.

“She’s coming apart!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Fire all quads,” Nathan ordered calmly. “Pound the hell out of them.”

“Firing quads!” Mister Randeem replied.

Nathan watched the view screen as they continued to drift away, pummeling the helpless enemy cruiser with rounds from the Aurora’s quad rail guns. “Full magnification,” Nathan added. The view screen refocused, giving them all a front row seat for the Jung cruiser’s death. The Aurora’s massive quad rail gun rounds drilled into the already crippled ship’s outer hull, digging deep down inside her. Bulkheads, furniture, pieces of hull, structural beams, and even human bodies all hurtled away from the doomed cruiser.

“Target is down,” Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. “Zero threat potential.”

“Cease fire,” Nathan ordered. There was no emotion or remorse in his voice.

"All weapons have disengaged," Mister Randeem acknowledged.

"Pitch us back over," Nathan ordered. "Nose first attitude."

"Pitching over, aye."

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "The battleship is firing."

"At us?" Nathan asked, dreading the answer.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "At the surface. Six nukes."

"Reload all tubes and missiles, and recharge the plasma torpedoes."

"Aye, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

"Range to that battleship?" Nathan asked.

"Twelve thousand kilometers and closing," Mister Navashee answered.

"Mister Riley, new jump. Put us ten kilometers from that battleship on a course to pass under her from a range no more than a kilometer distance."

"Captain, we're no match for that battleship," Mister Randeem objected. "She's at least five times our mass."

"More like eight," Mister Navashee corrected.

Nathan continued staring straight ahead at the main view screen as he spoke in cold, unwavering tones. "That battleship is killing millions of people with every shot it fires at my world, Mister Randeem, and I intend to stop it."

\* \* \*

*"Ten seconds to jump,"* Loki said.

Josh glanced down at his threat display. "Are they turning to attack that battleship?"

*"Looks like it,"* Loki responded. *"Five seconds."*

"Are they nuts?"

*"Three.....two.....one.....jump."*

The jump flash washed over the Falcon. Both her crewmen were thrown forward against their shoulder restraints as the Falcon came out of her jump and slammed into the Earth's atmosphere only a thousand meters above the surface.

"God! My shoulders are killing me!" Josh complained.

*"Contacts! Close in! They're firing!"* Loki yelled.

"Where? Where?" Josh exclaimed glancing at his threat display and shifting his head from left to right as he looked out the canopy into the darkness.

*"Snap roll! Dropping decoys!"* Loki yelled. No sooner had the first words left his mouth than the Falcon began to roll rapidly to starboard. *"Come out and break left! Now! Now! Now!"* The Falcon stopped rolling, ending up on her left side and in a tight left turn. *"No side thrust!"* he warned, knowing that Josh would try to avoid the altitude loss in the turn by adding the translation thrusters on their left side. The Falcon dropped sideways toward the Earth rapidly. Loki looked out the canopy to his right as two Jung missiles streaked above them in opposite directions.

"Fuck! They're everywhere!" Josh cried.

*"Roll out and climb!"* Loki ordered.

Josh rolled right, ending his turn, then pulled the Falcon's nose up while increasing power to full.

*"Jesus!"* Loki moaned. *"We've got eight missiles on our tail! And they're closing fast!"*

"I'm at full power!"

*"They're still closing, Josh! Seven seconds!"*

"Jump us!"

*"I can't! The Aurora's passing directly over us! We might slam into her!"*

"Fuck this!" Josh exclaimed. "Drop more decoys!" He grabbed the throttle for the main space drive and pushed it all the way forward as he heard the sound of decoys being jettisoned from their tail. The Falcon leapt upward, accelerating at an incredible rate. Josh grimaced. The interceptor shook violently as she plowed through the rapidly thinning atmosphere in a vertical climb.

*"Are you nuts?"* Loki yelled over the comms from behind Josh.

Josh eased all his throttles back slowly as the Falcon neared the edge of space, pulling them all the way to zero thrust. He watched their airspeed rapidly decrease as they bled off energy while continuing to climb without power. "Where are those missiles now, huh?" he bragged.

*"Nowhere near us; that's for sure!"* Loki exclaimed as his partner began to push the nose back over. *"You could have torn us apart with that stunt. You know that, right?"*

"It was either that or get *blown* apart by those missiles," Josh argued.

*"Crew Chief is going to go nuts when he sees that maneuver on the flight recorder."*

Josh pushed the nose into a shallow dive, picking up airspeed as they descended. "Not a scratch on us though. He's got to like that."

*"Don't jinx us,"* Loki warned.

"I'm putting us onto a glide path for Jessica. Plot a jump to five hundred meters off the deck."

*"Are you sure that's going to be enough?"*

"We're barely moving right now, Loki. Of course, the longer you take, the faster we'll be going when we come out of the jump."

*"Yeah, yeah, I know."*

"You've got to admit that was a pretty slick idea to climb away at full space power like that."

*"How did you know we weren't going to break up from the stress?"* Loki wondered, knowing that his friend had never been one to study the structural limitations of the ships he flew.

"I didn't." Josh giggled.

*"Not funny."*

"I guess they finally figured out we were always jumping into the same area," Josh added.

*"Next time, can we jump in a little farther out?"* He pressed the button to accept the jump plot. *"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."*

The jump flash washed over them. A split second later, Josh pulled up on the Falcon's nose and gradually added power, transitioning expertly to level flight only ten meters above the trees.

"What, no, 'Jump complete'?" Josh wondered.

*"It's getting kind of redundant, don't you think?"* Loki scanned the surface for Jung troops. *"Movement to port. Come left thirty."*

"I was wondering when you were going to figure that out," Josh said as he started his turn. "Coming left."

*"Nash, Falcon! Head down! Attacking ground forces in five!"* Loki pressed his finger to the target screen and drew a circle around the symbols that represented the Jung troops on the surface that were closest to Jessica. *"It's going to be close,"* he said.

"How close?" Josh asked.

*"Close."*

"Bug's ass close?"

*"Closer. Just hold us steady; that's all I ask."*

"Any threats in the area?"

*"Just the six fighters turning toward us to fire."* Loki engaged the nose turret. *"Firing."*

Bolts of plasma energy spat out of the twin barrels of the Falcon's plasma turret as she skimmed the treetops. The bolts slammed into the ground, the firing pattern snaking back and forth within the defined targeting area and tearing up everything in its path. Trees, bushes, rocks, and Jung troops were all blown apart.

Josh looked down to his left as they passed the target area. Burning debris flew everywhere. Trees and bushes were burning below them. "Fuck, that gun is nasty." Several energy bolts shot upward from the troops on the ground as they vainly tried to defend themselves against the passing interceptor.

*"Fighters have range,"* Loki announced. *"They're firing. Ten seconds!"*

"Time to go," Josh said as he pulled the nose up and brought the jet turbines to full power.

*"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."*

"That's gotta be frustrating, don't you think?" Josh said as they came out of the jump and found themselves in orbit above the Earth.

*"What?"*

"We keep jumping in, they keep shooting, and we keep jumping out again."

*"Probably. Turn toward the Aurora. I'm going to contact Telles,"* Loki said.

\* \* \*



"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

"Ten kilometers and closing rapidly!" Mister Navashee announced.

Nathan looked at the view screen, surprised that he could see the battleship even from ten kilometers out. "Damn, she's big," he said under his breath. "Snapshot two and four!"

"Firing two and four!" Mister Randeem answered.

"Target is firing rail guns!" Mister Navashee reported.

Mister Randeem watched his tactical console as the launch indicators for torpedo tubes two and four flashed green four times to indicate they were launching torpedoes. They then turned red to show that the tubes were empty. "Two and four away!"

The bridge began to shake violently as rail gun fire from the Jung battleship began to rain down upon them as they approached.

"Fire missiles!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing four!" Mister Randeem answered.

"They've got all four starboard guns on us," Mister Navashee warned.

"Hull breach! Topside!" Naralena reported. "Maintenance spaces in the forward quarter are open to space! Damage control reports no damage to inner hull!"

"If we take another round in the same spot..." the systems officer began.

"Roll us over, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered without hesitation.

"Rolling over!" the helmsman acknowledged.

Nathan watched the view screen as the image of the massive battleship, which now filled their entire view screen, rotated around their center point.

“Ten seconds to torpedo impact!” Mister Randeem reported. “Fifteen to missile impacts!” Red lights appeared on the tactical officers displays. “Forward rail guns have taken direct hits! That’s a total of six guns down! We can’t put up a point-defense against missiles without those guns, sir!”

“Then we’ll just have to stay in close so she can’t use her missiles,” Nathan said. “Fire plasma torpedoes! Both tubes!”

“Firing one and three!”

The bright, red light washed over the bridge as the two bolts of plasma energy from the torpedo cannons streaked over them on the spherical view screen. A second later, two red flashes appeared at the center of the view screen as the torpedoes struck the enemy battleship’s shields. Their shields glowed a dull orange. A moment later, the dull orange glow was obscured by two brilliant white flashes, and the nuclear warheads on the conventional torpedoes detonated. They were followed immediately by four yellow-orange explosions as their missiles struck the battleship’s shields and also detonated.

“Dive under her!” Nathan ordered.

The upside down image of the massive battleship began to slide upward. Seconds later, a thin strip of black space appeared between the underside of the enemy battleship and the Earth below. The ship began to shake even more violently than before as they passed under the battleship at close range, exposing their underside to close-range bombardment by the Jung’s rail guns.

“We can’t take much more of this!” Mister Randeem warned. “Recommend we jump!” he added.

“Tubes five and six, drop them out at slow speed so they’ll loiter under her, then detonate them as we jump out,” Nathan ordered.

"Ejecting tubes five and six, no propulsion, manual detonation!" Mister Randeem acknowledged.

"Escape jump ready!" Mister Riley reported.

"Five and six away!" the tactical officer announced.

"Jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three....."

The bridge continued to shake violently from rail gun fire being discharged from directly above them at short range.

"Two....."

"Long-range comms are offline!" Naralena reported.

"Detonate torpedoes!" Nathan ordered.

"One....."

"Detonating!"

"Jump."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge once more as the Aurora jumped ahead five light seconds. The bridge suddenly became calm and quiet as the relentless pounding from the battleship's rail guns ceased.

"Jump complete."

"Range to target is five light seconds and increasing," Mister Navashee reported.

"Damage report," Nathan called over his comm-set.

*"Main propulsion and maneuvering are fine, as are all torpedo tubes, the missile launcher, and the quads," Master Chief Montrose reported over the comm-set. "However, all forward mini-rail guns are down. Our bow guns took direct hits, tore them apart and blew out their bays as well. We're down to our side guns only, nothing fore or aft is working. We've got hull breaches across our bow and stern, but no breaches of the inner hulls as of yet. But we've got a lot of gaping holes in us, sir. They're bound to get lucky sooner or later."*

"Understood," Nathan answered. "What about our long-range comms? Will we be able to contact the Celestia?"

*"Not without jumping to her first," the master chief said. "Took a direct hit to the deep-space comm-array bay. It's a pile of scrap metal right now."*

"Understood." Nathan tapped his comm-set to end the call.

"Target is firing at the surface again, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"How many shots?" Nathan asked.

Mister Navashee looked at his displays, then turned to look at the captain. "Target is firing continuously. Once every thirty seconds."

"Goddamn it!" Nathan swore. "Any chance we weakened his shields?"

"Only for about ten seconds, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "There was about a twenty-five percent drop in the target's starboard shield strength during the detonations, but they were back at full strength ten seconds later."

"Any chance a sustained attack on the same shield set would bring them down?"

"Extremely doubtful, sir," Mister Navashee answered reluctantly. "It would take four times the energy levels to overload them. We just don't have the firepower."

Nathan frowned, a heavy sigh coming from his nostrils. "Mister Chiles, come about in a descending turn," Nathan ordered. "I want us at least five kilometers below the target."

"Coming about and descending relative to target," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Next jump, put us one kilometer off her port side. We'll slide sideways under her, nose up, firing as we pass under."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley acknowledged.

Nathan turned around to face aft. "Mister Randeem, same firing order. Nukes, missiles, plasma cannons."

"Captain," Mister Randeem objected, "if we can't bring down her shields..."

"He didn't say we *can't* bring down her shields, Mister Randeem," Nathan corrected. "He said we can't bring down her *starboard* shields. We have yet to determine if her other shields are as strong."

"Is there any reason they wouldn't be?" Mister Randeem wondered.

"Ta'Akar ships had areas of shielding that were more susceptible to failure than others," Mister Navashee said, "so it is possible."

"Exactly," Nathan said. "We need to find her weakest point."

"The question is whether we can survive her guns long enough to do so," Mister Randeem reminded the captain.

"There's only one way to find out." Nathan turned forward. "Jump as soon as the plasma shots are away, Mister Riley. Don't wait for my order. And no three second count either. Make it a... a snap jump."

Mister Riley turned to look at the captain. "A snap jump?"

"You can do that, right?" Nathan wondered. "Just push the button and jump? That's how we used to do it."

"Uh, yes, sir. I'll have to disable the sequencer and initiate the actual jump manually though."

"Will that be a problem?"

"Hopefully not," Mister Riley answered, his tone less confident than usual.

"Very well. Snap jump it is."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Decelerate to fifty percent current speed," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley announced.

"We're going to have to pitch our nose up relative to our flight path as well, Mister Chiles," Nathan added. "Even at the slower speed, we're still going to pass under that battleship rather quickly. I want to be ready to shoot the moment we come out of the jump."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee reported. "Falcon off our port side."

"Incoming transmission," Naralena said.

Nathan turned to look over his shoulder at her.

"They just finished another air support pass for Lieutenant Commander Nash," she continued. "They're asking to be put through to Lieutenant Telles, sir."

"Go ahead," Nathan said. "Maybe they've got something good for him."

"New ground targets discerned, Captain," Mister Navashee reported. "Belem, Cayene, Paramaribo..."

"Belem?" Nathan interrupted.

"Yes, sir. They're walking them up South America and into the eastern side of North America. They've also hit Trinidad, Guantanamo, Miami, Charleston, and Philadelphia."

"My God," Nathan exclaimed in disbelief. He had not been surprised when they had nuked Perth to demonstrate they were not bluffing, but they were now randomly laying waste to cities on his world. They were not targeting infrastructure or resources. They were striking major population centers as they came along their orbital path. They were striking fear into the hearts of his people, all of whom would blame Nathan for not surrendering. Every fiber

within him was screaming for him to do so to end the devastation once and for all. After all, would life under Jung rule be that bad? Could it possibly be worse than it was at this very moment? The only thing that prevented him from handing over the Aurora was the knowledge that doing so would only make things worse. The Jung would not stop with the core or the Earth. They would continue to spread throughout the galaxy like a plague. *Such is the burden of command*, Nathan thought.

"Speed now reduced by fifty percent," Mister Chiles reported. "Killing the deceleration drives and pitching up."

The report snapped Nathan out of his moment of self-pity. "Very well." He took a breath. "Stand by all weapons, Mister Randeem."

"All operational weapons are ready, sir," Mister Randeem assured him.

"Jump us back to that battleship," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

Nathan closed his eyes momentarily as the blue-white jump flash washed across the Aurora's bridge.

"Jump complete!" Mister Riley reported.

"Nose on target!" Mister Chiles added.

"Targeting a point on her midship underside shields," Mister Randeem announced.

"Snapshot two and four!"

"Firing two and four!"

"Fire all missiles!"

"Firing missiles!" Mister Randeem acknowledged.

"Torpedo impacts in ten seconds. Missiles in twelve!"

"She's firing!" Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge again rattled as the Jung rail guns pounded the Aurora's forward sections. The ship's nose suddenly yawed hard to port.

"I've lost the bow maneuvering thrusters!" Mister Chiles announced. "Compensating with the outboard thrusters!"

"Bring our nose back on the target!"

"I can adjust!" Mister Randeem yelled. "I've got it!"

"Fire one and three!"

"Firing!"

Bright, red light washed over the bridge as the plasma torpedoes streaked over their heads. Nathan watched the image of the underside of the Jung battleship as it slid over top of the Aurora. The room filled with white light as the two nuclear torpedoes detonated. A split second later, the flashes were red, then four more appeared that were yellow-orange.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley announced. A moment later, the jump flash filled the room. "Jump complete!"

An explosion was both heard and felt.

"What was that?" Nathan demanded.

"Bow maneuvering pod is completely dead, sir!" Mister Chiles reported.

"*Captain, damage control!*" Master Chief Montrose called over the comm-set.

"Go for Captain!"

"*Bow maneuvering just exploded, sir! We've just lost a good portion of our nose!*"

"I'm getting dozens of warnings all over the forward section," the systems officer reported from the starboard auxiliary console. "Hull breach on deck D! All compartments forward of bulkhead one are sealing off!"

Images of the dead crewmen Nathan had seen in those same forward sections, ones that he had suppressed long ago, suddenly appeared in his mind.

"Medical reports casualties, forward section!" Naralena announced. "Rescue teams responding!"



*"Reports of fires on deck C as well,"* Master Chief Montrose added over the comm-set. *"Flight ops reports decompression in launch tube four. Outer doors were damaged. The tube is offline."*

"Understood. Keep on it."

"Yes, sir," the master chief responded.

"Helm, how's she flying?"

"Nose is sluggish to respond, but she can still maneuver."

"Captain," Mister Navashee called out, "I'm picking up a fluctuation in one of the target's starboard shield emitters."

"What kind of fluctuation?"

"The energy output keeps dropping by fifty percent. It's random, but it keeps happening about once every ten to fifteen seconds." Mister Navashee turned toward the captain. "We may have damaged them after all."

"If we hit that shield again, will it fail?" Nathan wondered.

"Doubtful, sir," Mister Navashee told him. "All their shield sets have considerable overlap. For example, shields one and three overlap either half of shield two between them, making all shields double-layered in a sense."

"What are you saying, Mister Navashee?"

"If that shield by itself were down to fifty percent, a nuke might be able to pass through the weakened shield, especially if we hit it with plasma torpedoes a split second before the nuke."

"It won't work," Mister Randeem warned. "Those shields are much stronger than anything our torpedoes were designed to withstand. Remember: they're just modified intercept missiles. Nobody in the Pentaurus cluster used torpedoes. Passing through the enemy shield will fry their

circuitry, render them useless. Their hulls are just too thin to adequately protect them.”

“What about something larger with a thicker hull?” Nathan wondered.

“We still have four KKV’s in the cargo deck,” Mister Randeem suggested. “They would have to be prepped first though. They’re partially disassembled in order to fit them in the cargo bays.”

“That will take too long,” Nathan said. “You heard him; they’re nuking another city every thirty seconds. Besides, I was thinking of something much bigger with a three-meter-thick hull.”

Mister Randeem looked at Mister Navashee, then back at the captain.

“Sir, their shield perimeter only extends one kilometer from their hull. We won’t fit.”

“We’re only five hundred meters wide at our widest point, half that from top to bottom,” Mister Chiles said. “If we come in slow enough, I can make the turn and we can run alongside them.”

“At that range, one round of missiles should do enough damage to open up a hole in their shields, right?” Mister Randeem said.

“It might,” Mister Navashee agreed, “if we hit the right spots. Even one or two emitters would do the trick.”

“Suggest we come in standing on our port side, sir,” Mister Chiles said. “Once we pierce their shields, I can push our nose down.”

“That will put our topside facing them,” Mister Randeem pointed out. “Missiles and quads: that should do some damage.”

“Can you get our nose down quickly enough with the bow maneuvering thruster gone?” Nathan wondered.

"If we're going slowly enough, yes," Mister Chiles answered.

"I can calculate the right speed based on the time it takes to pitch down using only the outboard thrusters," Mister Riley added.

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Plot it out, gentlemen, and let's pray that it works. This could very well be our only shot at bringing her down."

*"Captain, Telles,"* the lieutenant called over the comm-set.

*"Telles, go for Captain."*

*"Sir, we may have a way to extract Lieutenant Commander Nash from the surface."*

"What do you need from me?" Nathan asked.

*"Four fighters and a combat shuttle. I'll send one of my squads with them for ground action. I'll also need the Aurora to be in Earth orbit when we launch, preferably on the same side as the extraction point."*

"You've got it. We'll be jumping back in a few minutes. Coordinate with flight ops," Nathan told him.

*"Yes, sir."*

"Lieutenant, be sure to warn your team that we may not last long enough for them to return to."

*"Understood, sir. Telles out."*

"Calculations complete, sir," Mister Riley announced.

"Reduce speed and come about, Mister Chiles."

"Reducing speed and coming about, aye."

\* \* \*

"I'm telling you," Josh said as he raised his shoulders to ease the pain, "I'm gonna dislocate something if we do many more of these jumps into the atmosphere."

*"Contacts. One hundred kilometers and closing."*

"Ha-ha!" Josh exclaimed as the Falcon bounced along in turbulent, night air over the Tasman Sea. "Now maybe you'll spread out and give us a little elbow room, won't you?!" Josh eased back on his turbines and dipped the nose down. "Descending to five hundred."

*"Bring us four degrees to the left this time,"* Loki instructed. *"I'm going to jump us short and wide left this time. All six of them are low, so be ready to climb as soon as we come out of the next jump."*

"Got it!"

*"Our welcoming party will have weapons range in twenty seconds."*

"I wonder how many missiles they actually carry," Josh speculated. "That's five hundred meters," he added as he leveled off and added power again.

*"I don't know, but Prechitt said the Jung fighters have energy weapons for close-in engagements."*

"I say we don't get close enough for that."

*"Seconded."* Loki watched his threat display as the Falcon continued toward the extraction area on the Australian continent one thousand kilometers ahead of them. *"They've got range,"* Loki announced. *"They're not firing."*

"Maybe they're already out," Josh commented.

*"Or maybe they figure we'll just jump away again and they don't want to waste them."*

"Man, that has got to be so frustrating," Josh exclaimed. "I mean, we can just jump in and out as we please, and there isn't shit they can do about it!"

*"One good hit and that could change drastically,"* Loki reminded him.

"Never going to happen."

*"If they're not firing, we might as well jump before they get into energy weapons range,"* Loki suggested.

"What is energy weapons range, anyway?" Josh asked.

*"I have no idea,"* Loki admitted. *"Jumping."*

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Falcon. As their visors cleared, the ship bounced upward because of the land warming the offshore breezes and causing an updraft.

*"Feet dry,"* Loki announced.

"Climbing," Josh said as he added power and pulled their nose up sharply. "Starting a slow, climbing right turn."

*"Nash, Falcon! Status!"* Loki checked his threat board as he waited for a response. *"Two of them are turning to intercept."*

"Only two?" Josh wondered.

*"They probably don't like their odds, and they're trying to keep us from hitting their ground forces again."*

"Well now, that's not very nice."

*"Nash, Falcon! Status!"*

*"Under fire! On the run!"* Jessica yelled over the comms. Loki could hear Jessica's weapon as it fired, as well as the sound of Jung weapons. There were also explosions in the background that sounded like they were uncomfortably close. *"I managed to get around their lines, but I can barely keep ahead of them. It's shoot and run... shoot and run!"*

*"Hang in there, sir!"* Loki told her. *"Ghatazhak are coming to get you!"*

*"Great!"* Another explosion was heard over the comms. *"Can you make another run on these bastards?! They're closing in on me!"*

*"Keep your head down, sir!"* Loki warned. *"We'll see what we can do!"*

"Any ideas?" Josh asked.

*"I'm thinking we target every one of those fighters with a missile,"* Loki said, *"make them fly evasive for a minute while we dive on the ground forces again."*

"Sounds good." Josh started pushing the Falcon's nose back over as he eased off the power. "Turning toward the targets and diving."

*"Locking missiles on all six,"* Loki announced as he tapped each of the icons with his finger to select them. *"Opening weapons bays."*

Two weapons bays on the underside of the Falcon's body slid open. Three short, stubby missiles dropped out of each bay, their engines igniting as they fell. The missiles streaked away at ten times the Falcon's airspeed, traversing the distance to their targets in seconds. The Jung fighters broke formation, flying wild, evasive patterns as countermeasures spat out of their tails. Two of the fighters failed to evade the missiles and exploded in midair. The others managed to climb and jink wildly, barely escaping destruction.

"Two down!" Loki exclaimed. "The other four are dancing around the sky and recovering."

*"Let's destroy a few more trees, shall we?"* Josh said as he continued to dive toward the ground.

"Selecting target area," Loki said as he drew a circle around the thermal images of the Jung ground forces on his screen. "Nash, Falcon! You're awfully close! Time to run!"

*"Do it!"* she yelled over the comms, the sound of enemy gunfire in the background.

"Firing!" Loki pressed the fire button, and the nose turret began firing bolts of plasma energy at the ground in rapid

succession. Loki's screen turned red and yellow as the plasma bolts slammed into the ground, lighting vegetation on fire, melting the ground, and scorching the Jung soldiers still pursuing his friend. In the lower left corner of his screen, he could make out the thermal image of one person running away from the rest. Loki breathed a sigh of relief, realizing she had escaped the bombardment. He disengaged the nose turret. "That should do it," he announced. "Pitch back up so we can jump out of here before those fighters come around and launch on us."

*"Pitching up,"* Josh announced.

"Locking in escape jump," Loki said. "Jumping."

The jump flash washed over them again. A moment later, they were back in orbit above the Earth where their flight was much smoother.

"Only one more jump back to Earth," Loki said.

*"Thank God,"* Josh said.

"I thought you wanted excitement," Loki teased.

*"Excitement, yes. Pain, no."*

\* \* \*

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"Course and speed are matched," Mister Riley added. "Ready for first jump."

"Execute," Nathan ordered from the command chair at the center of the bridge.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Range to target: fifty kilometers and closing," Mister Navashee reported.

"All weapons show ready, sir," Mister Randeem announced.

"Contacts! Missile launch!" Mister Navashee said. "Sixteen missiles spreading out both vertically and horizontally, sir!"

"They're trying to block our jump path," Nathan realized. "Helm, emergency descent! Get us a clear jump path into our attack position!"

"Pitching down and adding full downward translation, aye!" Mister Chiles acknowledged.

"I don't know that there's enough room beneath us," Mister Riley warned. "If those missiles continue to spread out vertically, we're going to end up skimming the atmosphere."

The combat shuttle's crew chief watched from his aft-facing jump seat at the forward end of the shuttle's main compartment as ten Ghatazhak soldiers quickly ascended the shuttle's aft boarding ramp. The Ghatazhak squad leader marched up and sat down in the aft-facing jump seat on the other side of the compartment to the left of the crew chief. The crew chief looked at the Ghatazhak squad leader, noticing that he was wearing a full combat pressure suit, his helmet sealed against the neck collar of the Ghatazhak sergeant's life support torso unit. "Why are you guys wearing pressure suits?" he asked. "I thought this was a ground extraction."

The Ghatazhak sergeant glanced at the shuttle crew chief. "Why are you?"

The crew chief pressed the door control button, causing the aft door to begin swinging upward toward its closed position. "I'm in a spaceship," he answered.



"So are we," the Ghatazhak sergeant responded.

The shuttle bounced slightly as it began to roll across the main hangar deck toward the number two airlock. As the sergeant fastened his restraints, his comm-set crackled.

*"Dog Leader, Telles,"* Lieutenant Telles's voice called over the sergeant's comm-set.

"Go for Dog Leader," the sergeant answered.

*"Rapid extraction, Sergeant,"* the lieutenant began. *"Minimal engagement, only what is necessary to achieve the objective. If the Aurora is not available after extraction, seek alternate escape to either the surface or, if the situation permits, to the Celestia. Do not, under any circumstances, put the Celestia at risk."*

"Understood, sir," the sergeant answered without emotion.

The bridge began to vibrate as the Aurora made contact with the Earth's upper atmosphere.

"Outer hull temperature is starting to rise," Mister Navashee reported.

"That's okay," Nathan said. "Our underside was designed for aerobraking. She can take the heat."

"The friction is reducing our speed slightly," Mister Riley reported.

"That will help us shave off altitude more quickly," Nathan commented.

"Ten seconds to clear jump line!" Mister Chiles reported.

"Flight reports combat shuttle and escort Talons are ready to launch," Naralena reported.

"Very well," Nathan answered.

"Clear jump line!" Mister Riley reported.

"Jump," Nathan ordered.

“Jumping.”

The bridge glowed blue-white for a split second as the jump flash washed over them. The vibrations caused by the Earth’s upper atmosphere suddenly stopped, and the view screen was filled with the image of the starboard side of the Jung battleship, her midship section growing larger as they coasted toward her.

“Range to target: two kilometers and closing!” Mister Navashee announced.

“Green deck!” Nathan announced.

“Green deck, aye!” Naralena answered.

“We’re right on target!” Mister Randeem reported.

“Snapshot two and four!” Nathan ordered.

“Firing two and four!” Mister Randeem answered as he pressed the firing buttons for both tubes. “Two and four away!”

The bridge began to shake as enemy rail gun rounds pounded the Aurora’s forward sections.

“Flight ops reports the combat shuttle and all four Talons are away!” Naralena reported.

“Fire missiles!” Nathan ordered. “Helm, begin deceleration!”

“Missiles away!”

“Deceleration thrusters at full power!” the helmsman answered.

“Ten seconds to shield impact!” Mister Navashee reported.

“Fire plasma torpedoes!” Nathan ordered.

“Firing one and three!”

Bright, red light washed over them as the plasma torpedoes passed over their heads on the spherical view screen that wrapped around the front half of the Aurora’s bridge.

“Five seconds!” Mister Navashee updated.

Two red flashes appeared at the center of the main view screen. The battleship’s shields glowed reddish-orange for a second until they were suddenly obscured by the two white flashes of the conventional torpedoes’ nuclear warheads as they impacted the battleship’s already weakened shield. The nuclear detonations instantly dumped enormous amounts of energy into the already stressed shields, weakening them further. Then all four of the Aurora’s missiles struck the shield as well, resulting in bright, yellowish-red explosions.

“Their shields are down to ten percent!” Mister Navashee announced.

“Hang on!” Nathan warned his crew as he grabbed the arms of his command chair. Nathan suddenly found himself falling forward, nearly crashing face first into the center flight console directly in front of him between Mister Riley and Mister Chiles. The ship shook violently as Nathan stumbled to his feet and plopped back down in his command chair. He looked up at the main view screen at the front of the bridge and saw a red-orange line of energy crawling up the hull of the Aurora toward him. The enemy’s shield fluctuated in front of them, changing from yellow to red to orange, and all combinations in between in the blink of an eye. Warning alarms sounded from all over the bridge as systems failed in numerous compartments all about the ship.

“Pitching down!” Mister Chiles yelled over the chaos.

“Fire quads!” Nathan ordered as he held tightly to avoid being shaken out of his seat again.

“Targeting sensors are offline!” Mister Randeem reported.  
“I can’t lock the quads on a target!”

“Manual control, Mister Randeem!” Nathan ordered.  
“Point and shoot, damn it!”

“Aye, sir!”

“I’ve lost outboard maneuvering thrusters port side!” Mister Chiles reported.

“Rail guns are firing!” Mister Randeem reported as he manually tracked the Aurora’s four massive rail guns back and forth, hoping to hit something important as they flew alongside the enemy ship at extremely close range.

“We’re rolling to starboard!” Mister Riley warned. “If we roll too far, our entire starboard side will be passing through full-power shields!”

“Fire all docking thrusters!” Nathan demanded. “Port side, down translation only!”

“Aye, sir!” Mister Chiles acknowledged.

“Give me some gun cameras!” Nathan demanded. A moment later, four small windows appeared along either side of the main view screen, each one showing the view of one of the quad rail gun cameras. Nathan stared in fascination as the massive rail gun rounds slammed into the side of the enemy ship, tearing apart everything along the hull and digging into it. Debris flew in all directions with occasional secondary explosions going off as the Aurora’s quad-barreled rail guns struck sensitive areas beneath the surface of the battleship.

“Contacts!” Mister Navashee cried out. “She’s launching fighters!”

Nathan looked at the main view screen as the Aurora’s nose pitched downward in a desperate attempt to turn away from the battleship and put her topside toward the enemy.

“We’re halfway through!” Mister Navashee reported.

Nathan felt the Aurora suddenly shift as if her tail had dropped fifty meters in a single instant.

"Her shields are starting to fail!" Mister Navashee announced with excitement. "We must have hit some of her emitters!"

"Keep firing, Mister Randeem!" Nathan urged.

"Enemy fighters are engaging our Talons!" Mister Navashee reported. "Talon Two is gone! Talon Three is damaged!"

"We're not going to make the turn," Mister Riley warned, looking up at the view screen.

Nathan looked at the view screen. They still could not see the forward end of the massive Jung battleship. His navigator was right.

\* \* \*

*"Talon Three just exploded!"* the copilot exclaimed over the sergeant's helmet comms.

*"Did he get out?"* the pilot asked.

*"Yeah! He ejected! I've got his beacon on my scope, three o'clock, twenty up relative, about eight hundred yards out!"*

*"Goddamn it!"* the pilot's voice swore.

*"Aurora! Aurora!"* the copilot called over the comms. *"Talon Three ejected! Repeat, Talon Three ejected! He's drifting about eight hundred meters ahead of us, three o'clock high, twenty up!"*

*"Talon One just got another!"* the pilot reported. *"Whoa! Jesus! One just got smoked! Oh my God! Did you see that?"*

*"Oh, shit!"* the copilot said. *"The last one is turning toward us! Break left and dive!"*

The shuttle suddenly rolled onto its left side and pitched its nose downward relative to the planet below.

*"Heads up, Chief! He's coming right at you!"* the copilot warned.

*"Let him have it, Chief!"* the pilot added.

The crew chief stood in the weapons turret located in the middle of the shuttle's main compartment, his head in the bubble that protruded through the roof. He twisted around to bring his barrels onto the Jung fighter diving toward them and opened fire. *"He's diving at us!"* the crew chief reported as he continued firing their small, double-barreled plasma turret at the incoming fighter. *"I hit him! I hit him!"* the crew chief yelled with excitement. There was a moment of silence. *"Oh, shit. Hang on!"*

There was an explosion on the outside of the ship, and the shuttle's back end suddenly shifted to the left. Smoke poured into the main compartment filled with Ghatazhak soldiers, each of them remaining still and unconcerned about the smoke since they were all wearing pressurized combat armor. A split second later, the back end of the shuttle was ripped away, taking the smoke and two of the Ghatazhak soldiers sitting at the rear of the compartment along with it.

*"We're hit! We're hit!"* the pilot's voice announced over the sergeant's helmet comms. *"Son of a bitch rammed into us!"*

The sergeant looked at the lifeless body of the crew chief as it dangled from its restraints. The entire turret bubble had also been ripped away, taking the crew chief's head and shoulders as well.

*"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!"* the copilot called over the comms. *"Combat One has been hit! We've lost our whole back end! We have to return! Prepare the deck for crash landing!"*

The sergeant closed his eyes as he listened to the copilot repeat his mayday call, disappointed in the unfortunate outcome of his mission to retrieve Lieutenant Commander Nash from the surface of Earth. He switched his comms to the Ghatazhak command channel and keyed the system to transmit. "Telles, Dog Leader," the sergeant said as he unfastened his restraints and stood. "Mission aborted. Returning."

\* \* \*

"It's no use, sir!" Mister Chiles yelled from the helm. "We're going to hit!"

"Aft topside thrusters!" Nathan yelled as the ship rocked from the close-range rail gun impacts. "Push our stern down toward the battleship so we hit her flat!"

"They're not responding!" Mister Chiles replied. "Nothing is responding! I have no controls!"

"Sound collision alarm!" Nathan ordered. "All hands, brace for impact!"

The collision horn sounded as Naralena broadcast the prerecorded alert message throughout the Aurora.

"Talons were shot down! Combat One is damaged and returning!" Naralena reported.

"Ten seconds to impact!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Can we still jump?" Nathan asked in desperation.

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered, "but we have no plot and the..."

"Snap jump! Do it!"

Nathan looked at the main view screen as the massive Jung battleship became so close he could see the rivets in her hull plating. At the very bottom edge of the view screen, he could see the forward edge of the battleship and a small

sliver of the blackness of space beyond her bow. "Jesus, we almost made it," he said under his breath as the blue-white jump flash began to wash over the bridge.

There was a terrible thud and a deafening, screeching sound as metal collided with metal. The sound of tearing metal reverberated through the bridge as the irregular surfaces of the hulls of the two ships caught in numerous places and tore at each other's sides. Nathan found himself in the air, flung forward over the flight console. His face toward the main view screen, he felt as if he were being thrown into the enemy ship. The blue-white jump flash filled the bridge as Nathan landed face first and everything went dark.

\* \* \*

"Jesus! They jumped!" the copilot cried.

"Damn it!" the pilot swore. "Are you kidding me?"

"Now what the hell do we do?" the copilot wondered.

"We get the hell out of here; that's what we do," the pilot said.

"And go where? Our back end is gone. We've got no main propulsion..."

"We've still got maneuvering!" the pilot shouted. "If we could just get clear, we could shut down... go cold. Maybe the Aurora will come back for us."

"No!" the sergeant ordered as he stepped through the passageway and into the shuttle's cramped cockpit. "Move us in closer to that battleship."

"What?" the pilot said in shock.

"There," the sergeant said, pointing at the bow of the massive ship passing alongside them. A massive portion of



the battleship's bow was missing, exposing many of her internal decks to space. "We can access her decks there."

"You want to board her?" the pilot asked in disbelief. "With ten guys? Are you nuts?"

"No, I am Ghatazhak," the sergeant answered. "And there are only eight of us now."

Both the pilot and the copilot turned their heads and looked aft down the passageway beyond the sergeant, seeing the gaping hole at the back of their ship and the crew chief's dead, decapitated body hanging from the damaged turret assembly. They turned and looked at each other.

"As soon as you turn away from the ship, they will see the heat of your thrusters and open fire," the sergeant told them. "We must move closer now while they are still recovering from the collision. Now do as I say, or I will kill you both and fly this ship myself."

The pilot turned forward again, putting his hands on the controls. "What the hell," he said. "We're dead either way." The pilot sighed. "Help me end this lateral spin," he told his copilot.

The sergeant turned and made his way back down the short passageway, returning to his men in the aft compartment. "Ghatazhak! Your attention! We have but one chance at honor! A large portion of the enemy ship's bow is missing, her internal decks exposed. Our pilots shall maneuver this ship closer, and we shall jump out the back end, propelling ourselves across. We shall board the enemy vessel and seize control! Understood?!"

"Yes, *sir!*" the surviving seven Ghatazhak soldiers answered in unison over the sergeant's helmet comms.

"If it breathes, kill it!" the sergeant ordered. "Stand ready!"

The seven Ghatazhak soldiers released their restraints and stood, turning to face the gaping hole at the back of the shuttle.

*"Coming up on the bow,"* the copilot announced over the comms. *"Ten seconds to jump."*

"You have made allowances for our forward momentum?" the sergeant asked.

"Yeah, and it ain't much," the copilot answered.

"Ghatazhak! Stand by!" the sergeant ordered. His men tensed their bodies, ready to exit the damaged shuttle as it coasted alongside the massive battleship.

"Three.....two.....one.....GO!" the copilot ordered.

In unison, all eight Ghatazhak, including the sergeant, stepped lively out the torn open end of the shuttle, pushing off as they stepped into open space. One by one, they each fired their built-in attitude thrusters, spinning their bodies to face their direction of travel as they continued to drift closer to the damaged battleship.

The shuttle continued to drift closer to the Jung ship, eventually colliding with her exposed decks. The collision caused the shuttle to bounce away in a spin, sending her drifting away from the battleship as she began to drift past the vessel's damaged bow.

The sergeant watched as the exposed decks grew closer. He could see flashes of light from inside as power circuits arced. There were also various gases being vented from broken pipes and liquids pouring out into open space. The entire battleship appeared to be dead.

Suddenly, lights started turning back on across the face of the great ship as they continued to drift toward it. From the mighty ship's topside, the sergeant saw a small rail gun turret turn toward the drifting shuttle and open fire. The shuttle was torn apart, finally exploding in a ball of fire,

which was suffocated by the vacuum of space a moment later.

One by one, his men began to fire their deceleration thrusters. They were coming in quite fast in relation to the massive ship, and their thrusters would not be powerful enough to slow them down to a safe contact speed.

The first man missed his target, bouncing off the side of a bulkhead and sliding across it until he was impaled through his abdomen by a twisted metal pipe. The next man managed to grab hold of the same bulkhead and avoid a similar fate, quickly moving deeper into the depressurized deck to make room for his comrades to follow.

Eventually, the surviving seven men were on board, huddling in the darkness of the damaged, exposed deck.

The sergeant looked at his men. "You four, take engineering. We three will head for the bridge. Depressurize each compartment as you go. I want this ship intact."

One of the Ghatazhak moved to the nearest hatch and placed a small, explosive device on its latch mechanism. He stepped aside, and a moment later, the charge detonated, blowing the door open. One by one, the Ghatazhak stepped through the hatch. They were in.

\* \* \*

Pain was everywhere: his neck, his head, his shoulder, his back. The air stank. It was a familiar smell... burning electrical circuits.

Nathan coughed, which made his head hurt even worse. He opened his eyes slowly. The room was dark, only dimly lit by emergency lighting. He was lying flat on his back, yet his head felt as if it were lower than his body. He raised his head slightly off the floor and looked at his feet. Beyond his

feet was the main view screen, the image of the Earth's moon flickering on and off intermittently, each time adding additional light to the room. He was on the bridge. "Report!" he cried out. All he heard was the sound of electrical shorts and the panicked cries of his crew over his comm-set, which lay on the floor next to him.

"Captain!" a voice cried out.

Nathan felt himself being yanked to his feet. Someone's arm was under his left shoulder and wrapped around his back, helping him off the cowlings that ran from the back of the flight console forward to the bottom of the view screen. He looked to his left and saw that it was Lieutenant Telles. "Lieutenant, what happened?"

"I don't know, sir," the lieutenant answered. "I was on my way to the bridge from combat when the ship collided with the battleship."

"Did we jump?"

"We must have," another voice said.

Nathan looked toward the sound of the other voice. It was Mister Riley. He was helping the helmsman, Mister Chiles, back into his seat.

"We were nowhere near the moon when we collided with the battleship, so we must have jumped."

The lieutenant lowered Nathan gently down into his command chair and began to look him over. "How do you feel, sir?"

"Like hell, Lieutenant. And you?"

"I am unharmed, sir."

"Of course." Nathan looked to his left. Mister Navashee was just getting back to his feet. "How about you, Mister Navashee? Are you injured?"

"Bumps and bruises, sir," he said as he took his seat at the sensor station.

Lieutenant Telles jabbed Nathan in the arm with some type of injection device, the likes of which Nathan had never seen before.

"What was that?" he asked.

"It will clear your head and stave off your pain. It will also give you the energy you need to carry on... for now."

Nathan could feel his senses returning to him even as the lieutenant explained it to him. "Very well." He looked at the lieutenant, his vision clearing as well. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Help the others."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan straightened himself in his chair as his senses fully returned. He put his comm-set back in his ear and tapped it. "Damage control, Captain. Report."

"*Yes, sir!*" Master Chief Montrose answered over the comm-set. "*Main power is down. All four antimatter reactors are offline. We're running on the backup fusion reactors.*"

"What about weapons?"

"*The quads are still working and maybe a few of the minis. Conventional torpedoes are still operational as well. However, without the antimatter reactors, we don't have enough power to use the plasma torpedo cannons.*"

"Missiles?" Nathan asked.

"*No, sir,*" the master chief answered. "*Missile launcher is gone. It was torn off when we collided. Screwed up the entire topside. The forward lifts are offline as a result as well.*"

"Flight ops?"

"*Aft apron and transfer airlocks are operational, as are the inner transfer airlocks. I don't know about the fighter launch tubes yet.*"

"What about casualties?" Nathan finally asked.

*"Unknown at the moment," the master chief said. "Medical hasn't given me a number. However, I know they're getting a lot of calls. I'll have more information shortly."*

"Very well," Nathan said, tapping his comm-set again to end the call. "Mister Randeem, threat board?" There was no response.

"Oh my God," Naralena exclaimed.

Lieutenant Telles had rolled the tactical officer over. His face was burned beyond recognition.

Nathan spun around in his chair at the sound of Naralena's reaction and jumped to his feet. He moved around the tactical console, half of which had scorch marks and a blown-out display screen. He looked down at Lieutenant Telles and Mister Randeem's face.

"He's dead, Captain," Lieutenant Telles said.

Nathan sighed. "Take over his station, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Mister Navashee," Nathan said as he took his seat again, "do we have sensors?"

"Short-range only, sir. Long-range sensors are completely offline. We're about one hundred thousand kilometers from the battleship, in between the Earth and the moon."

"What about that battleship? Please tell me she suffered similar levels of damage."

"One moment, sir," Mister Navashee said. "The array is slow to come... Contact!" Mister Navashee interrupted himself. "A big one! Directly above us! Fifty meters out!"

Nathan jumped to his feet again. "Is it the battleship?"

"Too small," Mister Navashee said, "but too big to be a fighter or a shuttle. I'm getting all kinds of strange readings from it: gases, liquids, residual radiation... but almost no

electrical energy detected.” Mister Navashee turned to face the captain. “I think it’s debris, sir.”

Nathan moved over next to his sensor operator, bending over to look at the screen as the system drew an outline based on the radar returns. “Is that a piece of the battleship’s bow?”

“We must have taken a piece of her with us when we jumped,” Mister Navashee said in amazement.

“Well that had to hurt,” Nathan said.

The bridge suddenly shook as rail gun rounds began to pound the ship.

“Helm! Can we maneuver?” Nathan barked.

“Yes, sir, but I don’t know how well,” Mister Chiles answered.

“What about main propulsion? Can we make a run for it?”

“The two inboard engines are still working,” Mister Chiles replied, “but without the antimatter reactors, we’re not going to be able to outrun anybody.”

“What about the jump drive?” Nathan asked. “We should have plenty of energy still left in the banks, right?”

“No, sir,” Mister Riley said. “I’ve got red lights on at least a dozen emitters, all on the topside. Pulling a piece of that battleship along with us must have overloaded them.”

“Helm, roll us over and put our belly toward them,” Nathan ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Mister Chiles acknowledged.

“Lieutenant, can you get our quads to drop to our underside?” Nathan asked. “I’d love to at least shoot back if possible.”

“Working on it, sir,” the lieutenant responded. “At least half these systems are burnt out.”

Nathan turned to the systems officer at the starboard auxiliary console. "Reconfigure your station for tactical, and take over for the lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

"Captain, if that debris is from the battleship, her decks are wide open," the lieutenant said. "If we can get a boarding party in there, we might be able to take the ship."

"Where's Combat One?" Nathan asked.

"She collided with a Jung fighter," Naralena said, "just before we jumped."

"We can launch another shuttle," the lieutenant suggested.

"How are you even going to get close?" Nathan asked. "They'll pick you off as soon as you launch."

"They're hitting us with their long-range guns right now," the lieutenant said. "Why? Wouldn't missiles be quicker? Maybe the long-range guns are all they've got right now. If so, they won't be able to track a shuttle if she is flying erratically enough."

Nathan looked at the lieutenant as the bridge continued to shake. "How long?"

"It will take at least ten minutes to reach that battleship."

"Go."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered, turning to head for the exit.

"Lieutenant!" Nathan called after him. "We've got two shuttles left. Take them both. The more the merrier."

"Yes, sir."

"Naralena, tell flight ops to get some Talons launched as escorts or diversions, whichever works."

"Roll complete!" Mister Chiles reported. "Our belly is toward the target!"



"View screen is working again," Mister Navashee reported.

Nathan turned to face forward. The entire front portion of the Aurora was torn open right up the center, all the way from her bow to the forward camera, exposing her inner structure and many of her systems. "Jesus," Nathan exclaimed. "I'm surprised you have any maneuvering at all."

"Me, too," Mister Chiles agreed, his eyes wide.

"Damage control reports we just lost auxiliary heat exchangers!" Naralena announced.

*"Bridge, engineering!"* a Corinairan voice called over the comms.

"Captain here. Who is this?" Nathan asked.

*"Dunbarton, sir! The power from the fusion reactors is fluctuating! If we lose one of those reactors, we won't be able to hold containment on the antimatter cores. We'll have to eject them."*

"Without those cores, we'll have no way to get back up to full power," Nathan said. "Any chance you can save one or two of them?"

*"Unknown, sir. We'll do what we can, but this pounding isn't helping matters."*

"Helm, move us away, best possible speed," Nathan ordered, "but keep our belly to them at all times."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

The ship continued to shake as the rail gun rounds struck their underside.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee announced. "Oh, God, they're firing missiles, sir!"

"How many?"

"Four missiles inbound," Mister Navashee answered. "Time to impact: one minute."

"Flight ops reports four Talons have launched," Naralena reported. "Combat shuttles two and three are launching now."

"We only have three minis operational, sir," the systems operator reported. "There's no way we can spin up an adequate point-defenses."

"Flight ops, Captain," Nathan called into his comm-set. "Tell those Talons to intercept the incoming missiles at all costs!"

*"Captain, flight ops. Understood,"* Major Prechitt answered. *"Vectoring Talons to intercept."*

"Fifty seconds to impact," Mister Navashee updated.

"Put the tactical feed up for me," Nathan instructed the systems officer. A moment later, the tactical display appeared to one side of the main view screen. Nathan watched as four green icons representing the Aurora's Talon fighters charged toward the red icons that represented the incoming Jung missiles.

"Talons have reached weapons range and are firing," Naralena reported as she received updates from the Aurora's flight operations center.

One red icon disappeared from the screen. A few moments later, another one disappeared. Nathan continued to watch as the last two missiles moved dangerously close to the four Talons attempting to intercept them.

"Oh, no," Naralena said under her breath.

Two of the green icons representing Talon fighters merged with the last two red icons representing the incoming missiles. All of them disappeared, leaving only two Talons and the two combat shuttles on the screen.

"All incoming missiles destroyed," the systems officer reported solemnly.

"Are they firing again?" Nathan asked calmly. There was no response from his sensor operator. Nathan turned to the left to face him. "Mister Navashee?"

"No, sir, they're not," Mister Navashee answered, a curious expression on his face.

"What is it?" Nathan wondered.

"The battleship just lost all power, sir. She appears to be running on batteries at the moment."

"Incoming message," Naralena announced. "It's the Jung battleship, sir."

"Put it on."

The view screen switched from its view of space to that of what Nathan assumed was the bridge of the Jung battleship. The entire room was dark, operating on emergency lighting and battery power. The Jung captain turned toward the screen and began to speak in rather poor English.

*"You think to take this ship with big men is possible? You will not succeed. Surrender, or suffer greatly you shall!"*

As Nathan was about to speak, weapons fire erupted on the view screen. Red bolts of energy streaked across the battleship's bridge, flying back and forth. The Jung captain spun toward the weapons fire just as a bolt struck him in the head. The Jung captain immediately dropped out of the camera's view, leaving only a puff of smoke from his charred flesh. Nathan could see bodies moving in the shadows, lit by the red light of the weapons' discharges. Suddenly, the image went dead. Nathan stood, staring at the normal view of space on the forward view screen. "Did you see that? Was that..."

"Incoming message," Naralena interrupted.

Nathan turned around to face her. "Is it the Jung again?"

"No, sir," Naralena said. "It is Sergeant Mellek of the Ghatazhak. He says they have taken the Jung battleship and are currently venting all compartments."

"You're kidding!"

"No, sir," Naralena said, smiling.

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him. "Raise Telles. Tell him to redirect to Earth to extract Lieutenant Commander Nash."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

\* \* \*

"Come right and go full throttle!" Loki demanded. "They're coming at us from either side!"

*"Got it!"* Josh replied as he banked hard right and applied full power. The Falcon immediately began to accelerate, doubling her airspeed in seconds.

*"Falcon, Telles. Do you copy?"* the lieutenant's voice called over their helmet comms.

"Telles, go for Falcon," Loki replied.

*"Inbound for extraction. Time on point: ten minutes."*

"Falcon copies. Four fast movers in the area. Two heavies inbound. ETA: five. Will try to delay. Falcon out."

*"I'm coming back around and climbing,"* Josh announced. *"I'll get them to climb after us, then drop below them and make another pass over Jess so you can give her the good news."*

"We're going to have to take out those troop shuttles," Loki warned. "They're less than five out. If they get more troops on the ground, the lieutenant's going to have his hands full."

*"He's coming with, what, a dozen Ghatazhak?"* Josh said as he pulled into a climbing turn. *"He took on a whole planet*

*of Jung with only one hundred men. I'm pretty sure they can handle a handful of soldiers."*

"Not if they get into firing positions on the ground before the Ghatazhak set down."

*"So you want to go after the heavies first?"* Josh asked.

"Probably."

*"You got it,"* Josh said, breaking his turn and rolling into a dive. Within seconds, the Falcon was down on the deck, speeding toward the incoming troop shuttles. *"Where are they?"*

"Shuttles are dead ahead, ten kilometers," Loki answered.

*"I meant, 'Where are the fighters?'"*

"They're turning in to intercept," Loki said. "Uh-oh."

*"What?"*

"The fighters are accelerating, and the shuttles are slowing."

*"Well that will make them easier to hit, right?"*

"They're slowing down to let the fighters get in front of them to act as a screen."

*"So we just launch on everyone from far away,"* Josh said.

"We only have four missiles left, Josh," Loki warned.

*"You might have told me this earlier, Loki,"* Josh complained.

"They're targeting us!" Loki announced. "Missiles inbound! Four tracks! Thirty seconds!"

*"Fuck, I bet they're those damned smart missiles again,"* Josh said as he pulled the nose back and started to climb.

"You're giving those missiles a really good angle, Josh!" Loki warned, alarm in his voice.

*"I need some altitude to maneuver."*

"Twenty seconds!"

*"Standing straight up!"* Josh announced as he pulled the nose up farther. He pushed the throttles to full power to keep from losing airspeed too quickly as the Falcon's attitude became vertical.

"Ten seconds!" Loki warned. "Dropping decoys!"

Six decoys dropped from the underside of the Falcon as she continued to climb.

"Five seconds," Loki warned. "Three.....two....."

Josh grabbed the throttle for the main space drive and pushed it forward. The Falcon's speed quadrupled in a single second, sending both of them into their flight seats despite the best efforts of the Falcon's inertial dampeners.

A few seconds later, Josh reduced power and pitched the nose back over to start their descent. *"Where are those damned missiles now?"*

"They ran out of power," Loki said. "They're already falling back to Earth."

*"Why do they even bother shooting those things at us?"* Josh wondered. *"They know we're just going to pitch up and run for the edge of space."*

"Because evading those missiles keeps us off those shuttles for five more minutes, Josh," Loki explained. "They will have landed by the time we get back into attack range."

*"Not if we jump back down."*

"You want to jump while we're diving straight down toward the surface."

*"Sure. Why not?"*

"What if I screw up the plot and jump too far?"

*"Then we'll never know it."*

"Great answer," Loki responded.

*"Just don't screw up, Loki,"* Josh insisted.

Loki rolled his eyes as he entered the jump. "Two kilometers off the deck... that's as low as I'll go."

*"Wuss,"* Josh teased.

"Just be ready to pull up," Loki told him. "Jumping."

The jump flash washed over them. A split second later, the ride became much rougher as they suddenly found themselves in much thicker air.

*"Pulling up!"* Josh said as he slowly pulled back on the control stick.

The Falcon's nose came up, her jet turbines screaming as they rose to full power. The ship rolled onto its left side as it leveled off and went into a tight left turn.

*"Coming left,"* Josh announced.

"Targeting the shuttles," Loki replied. "Firing missiles."

The weapons bays on the underside of the Falcon slid open, and a pair of short, stubby missiles fell from the bays. Their engines immediately ignited, sending them streaking ahead of the interceptor and into the darkness.

"Shit! Those shuttles have point-defenses!" Loki exclaimed as their first two missiles were destroyed in mid-flight.

*"Well, fire two more!"*

"They'll just shoot them down as well!" Loki argued.

*"Then we'll get in close and attack with guns!"* Josh announced.

"With those fighters escorting them?" Loki said. "Besides, it's too late. They're already landing."

\* \* \*

"We have lost all contact with the Jar-Keurog," the general's aide reported.

The general looked at his aide, surprise apparent on his face. "I thought they had finished the Aurora."

"Her last telemetry showed that she was firing her long-range guns, that the enemy vessel was all but destroyed. Then all telemetry ceased. We have been trying to raise her for several minutes, but she does not answer."

"Is she still in orbit?" the general asked. "Perhaps she left in pursuit of..."

"The Jar-Keurog is still in orbit, General, and her power emissions are extremely low."

The general looked at his aide again. "Dispatch interceptors to the Jar-Keurog to determine her status."

"General, her status is apparent. Her starboard shields collapsed. A large portion of her nose is missing. Most of her weapons are inoperable... I believe it is time."

The general's expression turned from concern to controlled disappointment.

"It will take several minutes for the process to begin, and the initial targets are of importance only to the people of Earth. If our interceptors determine the Jar-Keurog is *not* lost, we can cancel the cleansing."

The general took a deep breath and sighed. "Very well," he conceded. "You may begin phase one."

"Yes, sir," the aide answered.

Eli, who had witnessed the exchange in Jung and had taken notice of the general's expressions, stepped forward. "I cannot help but notice your dour expression, General. I pray the news was good."

The general looked at Eli. He had bowed to the traitor for several months now, feeding the would-be leader's ego and letting him believe he was actually in charge of his world. He smiled. "Only in the sense that your role will soon come to an end, Governor."

"I do not understand, General."

"It seems you have underestimated your brother."



Eli turned pale. "What do you mean?"

"We have lost all contact with the Jar-Keurog, and she appears to be adrift."

"And the Aurora?" Eli asked, his voice unsteady.

"Badly damaged but still a threat. Enough so that I must play my 'last card', as you would say."

"General, you cannot..."

"On the contrary," the general interrupted, "I can, and I shall."

"General," Eli demanded, his desperation apparent, "I cannot allow you to..."

"You would do well to never raise your voice to me again, Governor, for I have killed better men for lesser reasons."

"General, it is my understanding that I am in charge of this world, and that you..."

The general snapped, losing his patience once and for all. "You are in charge only because I allow you to play the role in order to placate your people and keep them believing they have some modicum of control over their own destinies." The general stepped closer to Eli, more so than ever before, his tone low and deadly serious. "I strongly suspect that, after we begin the cleansing, your role shall become of considerably lesser value to the empire." The general turned away. "Unless, of course, your brother realizes the futility of his efforts. He may be able to destroy a handful of warships," the general added, turning to look at Eli once more, "but he cannot defeat our ground forces, not from orbit." General Bacca looked back at the row of display screens on the far wall of the control room again. "I doubt very seriously that your brother carries ten thousand troops aboard that rather small ship of his."

"General, please," Eli begged.

“Governor, do not bring shame upon yourself with such behavior. Have some pride.” The general smiled again, pleased with the moment. “It will all be over soon, one way or another.”

\* \* \*

“Captain, I’m detecting missile launches on the surface of Earth,” Mister Navashee reported.

“We’re too far for them to be targeting us, right?” Nathan said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are they targeting their own ship?”

“No, sir,” Mister Navashee answered. “I don’t believe they are surface-to-orbit missiles. Based on their trajectories, I believe they are targeting the surface.”

The wave of relief that Nathan had felt only minutes ago was suddenly replaced with a renewed feeling of despair. “What are they targeting?” Nathan asked with trepidation.

“There is no way to determine with any certainty, sir. They could be targeting population centers, or they could be targeting infrastructure. The two are often in close proximity.”

“Comms, put me through to Lieutenant Telles,” Nathan said.

“One moment, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Helm, best speed back to low Earth orbit.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Chiles answered.

“Lieutenant Telles is on comms, sir,” Naralena announced.

“Lieutenant,” Nathan called over his comm-set, “the Jung are launching missiles from surface bases at targets on the surface.”

*"Have you determined what they are targeting?" the lieutenant asked over the comms.*

*"All we know is that the trajectories suggest major population centers."*

*"Captain, I believe the Jung are executing what your history records refer to as a 'scorched Earth' policy. The Ta'Akar utilized a similar strategy. When a world is about to be lost to an enemy, leave nothing behind of value."*

*"Are you referring to weapons, infrastructure..."*

*"And people, sir," the lieutenant said, interrupting the captain. "They are glassing the planet, Captain. Suggest the Aurora begin neutralizing the surface missile sites with her quads in the same manner used during the attack on Tanna."*

*"Captain," Mister Chiles interrupted, "in our current condition, it will take us nearly two hours to reach Earth."*

*"Incoming message," Naralena announced, "from Jung command. Message reads, 'Your move, Captain.'"*

*Nathan looked dumbfounded. His ship was badly damaged—barely able to make headway with only limited weapons capability—and the Jung were determined to either force his surrender or lay waste to his world. "It doesn't make sense," he said.*

*"Captain," Lieutenant Telles said, "the Jung are a vast empire with unlimited resources. Although they may have preferred to keep the Earth's infrastructure and population available for their use, it is just as easy for them to wipe the slate clean and rebuild to suit their needs. If left without alternatives, they will not hesitate to do so."*

*"We cannot allow that to happen," Nathan said.*

*"Allow me to attack their command and control center in Geneva," the lieutenant insisted. "If they are utilizing a centralized weapons control system, we may be able to stop*

*the launches. It is our only chance of delaying them until the Aurora arrives and destroys the weapons from orbit."*

"Lieutenant, you're talking about attacking what is undoubtedly the most heavily guarded Jung facility on Earth. I know the Ghatazhak are good, but are you *that* good?"

*"I offer you no guarantees, Captain,"* the lieutenant answered, *"but yes, we are that good."* The lieutenant paused a moment before continuing. *"Sir, you realize that this means I cannot rescue Lieutenant Commander Nash."*

Nathan's head fell as the realization hit him. "I know, Lieutenant. I know."

*"I am sorry, Captain."*

Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out in one long sigh. "Good luck, Lieutenant."

\* \* \*

*"Falcon, Telles,"* the lieutenant's voice called over Loki's helmet comm.

"Telles, Falcon," Loki answered as the Falcon rolled onto its right side and started a climbing turn from treetop level. "More troops on the ground! More bandits inbound! Fast movers in five! Heavies in ten! You'd better hurry, sir! She's already surrounded! She'll be pinned down in minutes!"

*"Change of mission,"* the lieutenant said, his voice devoid of all emotion. *"Combat Two and Three have been redirected to higher priority targets."*

"What?" Josh cried out as he rolled the interceptor to the left and pushed their nose down.

"Falcon copies. ETA to next extraction?"

*"Falcon, Telles. Extraction unlikely. Instruct Nash to continue escape and evade for as long as possible."*

"Lieutenant! She is nearly surrounded! They're moving in on her position as I speak. I can see her on my ground sensors!" Loki argued. "If they get more troops on the ground, she's done for!"

*"Continue ground support as long as possible,"* the lieutenant said, *"but do not engage superior forces..."*

*"Is he fucking kidding me?"* Josh yelled. *"What the hell does he think we've been doing?"*

*"The Falcon's survival takes priority. Understood?"*

"Understood," Loki answered.

*"This is bullshit!"* Josh exclaimed.

"The captain has his reasons," Loki insisted.

*"Just like he had his reasons to leave us behind... Yeah, I know. It's still bullshit!"*

"I know."

Josh pulled the Falcon's nose level and tightened his turn, circling around toward Jessica's position. *"I'm turning to fly over her again. We have to tell her."*

"I know," Loki answered.

The Falcon leveled off and continued over the treetops toward the lieutenant commander's position. *"They're still on us,"* Josh said, glancing at his threat display. *"Transmission range coming up."* Josh watched his display as they entered the comm circle on his ground track display. *"We're in range."*

Loki said nothing.

*"You've got to tell her, Loki!"* Josh insisted.

"I... I don't know if I can."

*"Fuck this!"* Josh rolled level again, pulled the Falcon's nose up hard, and slammed his throttles forward, pulling the interceptor into a vertical climb. *"Nash, Falcon! Hit the deck! We're coming to get you!"*

"What are you doing?" Loki asked.

*"I have no fucking idea, but don't bother trying to stop me!"*

"I'm not. I'm not," Loki agreed, "but we need some kind of plan!"

Josh looked quickly around his cockpit, hoping for inspiration. *"You've got more elbow room back there than I do up here, right?"*

"A little, yeah, but..."

*"Think she'll fit on your lap?"*

Loki looked puzzled for a moment, then looked around frantically, realizing there might be enough room after all. He reached down between his legs and grabbed his seat lever, pushing the seat back fifty centimeters until it stopped at its most aft position. "Yeah! Yeah! She'll fit! Barely, but she'll fit! I won't be able to do anything back here while she's on board though. You'll have to do it all yourself."

*"No problem,"* Josh assured him, *"except maybe the escape jump."*

"I can set that up now," Loki assured him. "I've got several micro-jumps already set up as escapes. They won't jump any farther than high orbit. Just make sure there's no one along your jump path."

*"Perfect,"* Josh said as they continued to climb.

"But how are we going to get to her?" Loki wondered. "She's surrounded, and they're not more than fifty meters away!"

*"How fast can you plot another jump, straight down?"* Josh asked.

"Oh, God," Loki said under his breath. "Can you give me an altitude and speed ahead of time?"

*"One hundred kilometers, but I can't promise a speed."*

"I need something, Josh!"

*"Fine! Half a meter per second!"*

"You can't fly at half a meter per second, Josh," Loki argued. "That's a hover."

*"More like a stall actually,"* Josh corrected.

"Oh, God," Loki moaned as he pulled his seat forward again.

*"You've got about twenty seconds to figure it out!"* Josh warned. *"Reducing power."* Josh pulled his throttles back slowly, trying to time the Falcon's stall to occur at exactly one hundred kilometers above the surface of the Earth.

"How close do you want to come out?" Loki asked.

*"How many meters will I need, at a descent rate of half a meter per second, to come to a hover just above the treetops using full lift thrust?"*

"You're not making this easy, Josh."

*"Do I ever?"* he said as he watched their rate of climb begin to drastically decrease. *"Passing eighty."*

Loki furiously entered the jump parameters, pausing and closing his eyes for a moment to make quick calculations in his head.

*"Ninety,"* Josh reported. *"Rate of climb is falling fast. Ninety-three."*

"I've almost got it," Loki said.

*"Ninety-six."*

Loki closed his eyes again, running over his calculations in his head one last time. Pilot reaction time, time it would take the lift thrusters to come up to full power, the acceleration rate of their descent when they came out of the jump and suddenly found themselves in thicker air: he had thought of everything...

*"Ninety-eight."* The stall horn began to beep at them through the helmet comms.

...He hoped.

*"One hundred!"* Josh announced as the stall horn blared. *"Pitching back down!"* Josh used the Falcon's attitude thrusters to push the nose back down as the interceptor transitioned from climb to fall, bringing the ship level with the Earth's surface positioned one hundred kilometers below. *"Falling!"* he announced as he reached for the lift turbine throttles.

Loki's eyes were fixed on the vertical speed reading, waiting for the zero to change to a negative zero point five. A moment later it did, and he pressed the jump button.

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Falcon.

The woods flashed with red light as energy weapons fire flew at Jessica from all sides, forcing her to duck down. She could not rise to return fire from between the rock and the fallen tree trunk where she hid. To do so would have meant instant death. Then the weapons fire suddenly stopped. A man's voice rang out through the eerily still night air. *"Surrender now and you will not be harmed!"*

"Fuck you!" she hollered between rapid breaths. She raised her weapon and fired blindly over the log at her back.

*"You are surrounded! Your air support has abandoned you! Surrender or die!"*

Jessica thought about Sergeant Tonkton. He had given his life to protect her and the knowledge she carried in her memories. She looked at her watch. Nearly two minutes had passed. *Was he right? Had they abandoned her?* A million thoughts raced through her mind, but one thought kept coming back to her, interrupting and overriding all the others. Major Waddell.

"Fuck," she cried to herself in a barely audible whisper. She could hear the crunching of leaves as her would-be



captors moved in on her. She laid her Corinari energy rifle down on the ground next to her and slowly pulled her sidearm out of her holster. She turned the weapon on, flipped the safety off, and stuck the weapon in her mouth, squeezing her eyes shut as tightly as she could before moving her finger toward the trigger.

There was a thunderous clap, like there had been a tear in the sky. A shock wave hit her, and everything went dark.

A split second later, the flash was gone, and the Falcon was falling at one meter per second from an altitude of only twenty meters... and they were accelerating.

As his visor cleared, Josh slammed the throttles all the way forward, bringing all four lift turbines screaming to life.

Loki glanced to his left as his visor cleared. The tops of trees, each of them dangerously close to the interceptor, shot up above them from all sides, shaking violently in the Falcon's thrust-wash. Loki braced himself for impact, but it did not come.

*"Get on the nose turret!"* Josh ordered as the Falcon settled into a hover only five meters above the surface. *"Let them have it!"*

Loki quickly responded, opening up with the Falcon's nose turret and sending streams of energy bolts toward every red icon he could target on his ground sensors.

Josh rotated the hovering interceptor from left to right, firing his wingtip energy cannons into the woods beyond for extra measure as he spun the ship full circle. As he finished the circle, he could see Jessica lying unconscious only twenty meters to their port side. She was covered with tree branches that had been ripped from nearby trees by the shock wave of their sudden arrival. As the Falcon's yaw

maneuver ended, he activated their landing gear and hollered at his copilot. *"Go get her!"*

Loki pulled the canopy release as the Falcon bounced and settled onto the ground. The boarding ladder appeared automatically to the left side of the ship just as Loki swung his leg out over the edge of the cockpit, placing his foot in the first ladder hole that had opened in the side of the interceptor. Two rungs later, he jumped to the ground, falling to one side as he hit.

Josh watched Loki pick himself up and head toward the still unmoving lieutenant commander, climbing over fallen branches in order to reach her. Something caught his eye just to the right of his copilot: three Jung soldiers attempting to move through fallen debris to get to Jessica. Josh pressed a button on his console, and a small control pad jutted out from the bottom edge. He swung the nose turret toward the left, firing as he swept toward the approaching soldiers. The energy bolts ripped through the soldiers, killing them instantly as they fell into smoldering mounds of melted human flesh.

Loki raised his helmet visor as he pulled the fallen branches off the lieutenant commander, tossing them aside. "Jessica!" he yelled, coughing at the heavy smoke. He grabbed her vest and lifted her up, giving her a shake. "Jessica! We have to go! Jessica!"

Jessica's eyes opened. Thick smoke was wafting through the night air, the woods around them building into a conflagration. She coughed, looking about to get her bearings. She looked at him. "Loki?"

"Yeah!" he yelled, laughing with happiness. "Can you walk?"

"I think so," she answered as she stumbled over the debris. "What happened?" she asked as they moved toward

the idling Falcon.

"Only the greatest landing in history!" he yelled.

Josh opened fire again as Loki and Jessica approached the port boarding ladder, sweeping the turret back and forth in case there were any other troops out there that thought they might take a shot at them.

Loki pushed Jessica up the ladder, following closely behind. "How are we going to all fit?" she wondered as she climbed over the edge of the cockpit wall.

"It's going to be tight, but we'll make it. We don't have to go far, one jump and a landing! Shouldn't take more than a few minutes!"

Jessica got her other foot into the back of the Falcon's cockpit, looking around with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Lean forward so I can get in!" Loki told her. Jessica leaned forward over the console. She reached out and tapped Josh on the side of his helmet. Josh responded with a thumbs-up sign.

Loki sat down behind her, fastened his restraints, then closed his visor. After pressing the button to close the canopy, he grabbed Jessica and pulled her unceremoniously backward onto his lap.

Weapons fire began to fly at the Falcon from farther out in the woods as the canopy came down over the back half of the Falcon's cockpit.

"*Let's go!*" Loki yelled over his helmet comms.

"Are you both in? Did it work?"

"*We're in!*" Loki answered. "*Canopy is closed and locked! Get us in the air!*" Jessica was sitting on his lap, twisted to her right with her injured shoulder bleeding onto his pressure suit. Her left shoulder was up against the canopy overhead, and her head was bent over, nearly looking Loki

in the face. He could see the pain and fear in her eyes. She had just escaped certain death, and she wasn't safe yet. None of them were.

Josh pushed the lift throttles forward, causing the Falcon to rise quickly into the air. "Hang on!" he hollered. "We have company!"

Energy bolts streaked over them as approaching Jung fighters fired at the climbing Falcon. There was an explosion as one of the bolts struck the leading edge of the Falcon's right wing-body, sending debris and melting, molten chunks flying across the fuselage. Tiny pieces of metal struck the canopy, causing Jessica to scream, as they were right next to her head.

*"We're hit!"* Loki yelled. *"Starboard side!"*

"I'm losing the starboard lift turbine!" Josh yelled as the interceptor began to roll to the right.

*"Punch it!"* Loki yelled. *"Get some air moving over the wings!"*

Josh pushed the main jet propulsion turbine's throttle all the way forward. The Falcon immediately began to speed away. As she did so, her right wing began to rise, leveling them off. "That's it! Pitching up! Stand by to jump!"

An alarm sounded in Loki's helmet comms. He tried to see his console to identify the alarm but could not see around Jessica. Another red energy weapons bolt from the pursuing Jung fighters flashed past them on the right side, followed by several more. The light revealed the cause of the alarm. There was a crack in the canopy just above them and slightly to the right. *"Wait!"* Loki cried out.

*"Jumping!"* Josh announced.

The blue-white flash washed over them.

Loki's visor cleared. He could barely make out the inside of the canopy in the darkness, but the crack appeared to be

spreading.

"Woo-hoo!" Josh yelled over the comms. "We made it! Was that awesome or what?"

*"The canopy is cracked!"* Loki yelled.

"I've got the Aurora on sensors, three minutes out."

*"The canopy is cracked!"* Loki repeated.

"What?"

*"We're losing pressure!"*

"Oh, shit!" Josh exclaimed. He pushed the throttles forward. "I can get us on deck in two minutes."

*"I don't think she's got two minutes!"*

"How fast are we losing pressure?"

*"I can't see my console!"* Loki told him. *"Call up the systems data on your displays!"*

Josh did as he was instructed, switching his main data display to show the ship's various systems. "Oh my God! We'll be fully depressurized in just over a minute!" Josh keyed his mic to transmit. "Mayday, mayday, mayday! Falcon inbound, two minutes out! Losing pressure! We have Lieutenant Commander Nash on board! Request emergency landing and medical rescue!"

*"Falcon, Aurora flight. Copy your mayday. Cleared for emergency landing. The apron is all yours."*

"Screw the apron! That will take longer! We'll use the forward elevator like usual!" Josh said.

*"Negative, Falcon. Forward elevators are offline."*

"Fuck!" he swore in frustration. "Copy! Ninety seconds! Open the outer doors on bay two so I can roll straight in!"

*"Falcon, Prechitt! Did you say you have Lieutenant Commander Nash on board? How is that possible?"*

"She's sitting on Loki's lap, sir! We're losing pressure, and she doesn't have a suit!"

*"Copy! Come straight in and get down quickly, Josh. We'll be standing by."*

"That's my plan!" Josh assured him.

Jessica was not looking at Loki, but he could see that she was in distress. *"She's having trouble breathing!"*

"Touchdown in one minute!"

Jessica turned her head toward Loki's face, twisting her body around so she could face him. He could see the fear in her eyes. Even worse, her skin color was changing. *"Oh my God! She's turning blue, Josh! Hurry!"*

"I'm at full power!" Josh told him. "Coming over her bow now! Pitching over!" Josh cut his main drive and flipped the Falcon end over, putting her into a tail first attitude. He fired his mains again to slow down as they passed over the top of the Aurora's forward section. As they passed aft of the forward section's highest point, he began to translate downward, closely following the curve of the Aurora's upper hull on his way to the flight apron at her midsection.

Jessica's expression changed from fear to panic as she grabbed at Loki's helmet. Her neck muscles were straining and her mouth was opening wide with each breath as she desperately tried to breathe in oxygen that simply was not there. *"Oh, God. Oh, God."* Her eyes began to bulge as she felt their landing gear slam onto the deck harder than usual. As they rolled into the main transfer airlock, she lost consciousness completely. Her hands released their grip on his helmet, falling onto his shoulders as her entire body went limp. Loki was speechless, in shock at the horror he had just witnessed.

The inner airlock door at the back of the Aurora's main hangar bay began to rise. As the door rose, air was sucked

into the unpressurized airlock before the repressurization cycle had finished in order to allow the medical team access to the lieutenant commander more quickly. Rescue technicians scrambled under the door as it raised, racing toward the Falcon.

The Falcon's canopies were already up. Josh was rapidly removing his helmet and restraints, letting his helmet tumble over the edge of the cockpit and down to the deck below as he stood and turned around. He climbed out, moving quickly along the flattened topside of the Falcon's nose. He grabbed Jessica's lifeless body and pulled her off his copilot with all his might, lifting her upward. Loki pushed her legs up and out, letting them fall off the side of the Falcon's nose. Rescue workers scrambled up the already deployed boarding ladder, grabbing Jessica's legs and taking her weight off Josh. They lowered her down to the medical technicians waiting below them, who laid her on a gurney and immediately began resuscitative efforts.

Major Prechitt ran across the Aurora's massive hangar deck, reaching the main transfer airlock as the medical teams rolled Jessica out of the bay. She was already intubated and had intravenous lines and a cardiac monitor. One of the technicians was straddling her on his knees, riding the gurney and doing chest compressions as they rolled quickly across the hangar deck toward medical. The major stopped in his tracks, watching them as they rolled past. He turned aft again and looked up at the Falcon's nose. Josh was sitting in the back of the cockpit with his best friend, holding Loki as he cried.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Telles watched from the entrance to the combat shuttle's cockpit as another escort Talon was torn apart by enemy fire.

"That's two!" the copilot exclaimed as the shuttle bounced along.

"You must fly lower, below ten meters," the lieutenant told them.

"Ten meters?" the copilot asked. "Seriously?"

"Five would be better."

"Those are mountains up ahead," the copilot pointed out, "big ones."

"Follow the lake," the lieutenant advised.

"Isn't that kind of obvious?"

"If you fly low enough, their ground radar will become ineffective, and they have no ships in orbit to assist with tracking."

"They have eyes."

"Which will be made less effective by the midafternoon sun reflecting off the water."

The copilot turned and looked at the lieutenant as if he were crazy, but the copilot could not find the words to express himself.

"Talon Eight, Telles. Fly your ship low over the water and into the base of the east side of the capitol building."

*"Uh, did you say you want me to crash into the target?"* Talon Eight's pilot asked.

"Affirmative. You may eject just before impact."

*"Of course."*

The combat shuttle's copilot looked at his pilot, rolling his eyes.

"Talon Nine, Telles. Circle around and fly into the opposite side, first floor. Eject before impact."

*"Seriously?"*



"It is the only effective strategy, and it gives you both the greatest probability of survival."

*"What about when we come down?"* one of the Talon pilots asked.

"If we are successful, you should have nothing to fear. If we are not, you would have died either way."

"Just so you know, these shuttles have no ejection systems," the copilot told the lieutenant.

"That is why I ordered the Talon pilots to ram the building."

"How are you going to get to the command center if the building comes down on top of it?" the copilot asked.

"The building is designed to withstand far greater forces. It will not collapse."

"Then why ram it in the first place?"

"The concussion of the impacts and the fire and smoke from their burning fuel should provide adequate diversions that will allow us to deploy onto the upper floors. They will be expecting an attack from ground level."

"You couldn't come up with a less risky way to get in?"

The lieutenant looked puzzled. "If I could, I would have used it." The lieutenant turned around and headed aft, transiting the short, narrow passageway as the shuttle descended to eight meters above the lake. He looked at his men, standing ready to deploy. "Two minutes!" he called out. "Red Leader, Blue Leader. We will enter from the sixth floor balconies. Blue goes up, Red goes down. Access the underground command bunker and take control. Maximum force is authorized. Collateral damage is expected."

"Red Leader copies."

"Talons Eight and Nine, Telles. Begin your attack run."

"Aren't you going to wish them luck?" the copilot asked.

“The Ghatazhak do not believe in luck,” Lieutenant Telles said, “only opportunity.”

Both Talons brought their main engines up to full power and quickly accelerated away from the combat shuttles. Talon Nine veered off to the right, going into a shallow climb. Energy weapons fire began to leap out at him as he gained altitude. The Jung antiaircraft batteries were tracking him now that he was no longer skimming the waves on the lake. He veered out farther, then steepened his climb as he circled around to the far side of the capitol complex.

Eight more Jung fighters lifted off from the tarmac near the capitol building, climbing quickly as they turned to intercept Talon Nine. The lead fighters in the group began to fire at the approaching Corinairan fighter, but Talon Nine’s pilot maneuvered his ship wildly to avoid the fire. The first four Jung fighters overshot and turned to circle around behind him.

The second four fighters opened fire, and again Talon Nine jinked. It was not enough. Three bolts of plasma energy tore off the Talon’s left wing, and he began to spiral as he dove toward the capitol building. Seconds later, he struck the building at ground level, exploding on impact without ever having a chance to eject.

*“Talon Nine is down!”* Talon Eight’s pilot reported over the lieutenant’s helmet comms. *“No chute! I’m going in! Ten seconds!”* Several seconds later, the lieutenant heard the pilot announce his ejection.

*“Talon Eight is down! Right on target!”* the copilot announced. *“I see his chute! Ten seconds to deployment.”*

The shuttle's crew chief pressed the button next to his jump seat, and the cargo hatch at the rear of the shuttle began to swing outward from the top. It quickly dropped open, stopping level with the compartment's deck to form an outside platform.

The lieutenant stood. "Ghatazhak! Stand ready!" His men also stood, turning to face aft. They held on as the shuttle began to yaw to starboard, doing a quick one-eighty so they were sliding up to the capitol building stern first. Black smoke entered the back of the shuttle as it slid through the billowing columns.

*"Go! Go! Go!"* the copilot's voice commanded over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

The Ghatazhak ran out the back of the shuttle, jumping into the black smoke. Unable to see their landing site below, they trusted that the pilots had placed the shuttle in the proper position. The lieutenant followed them out the door, watching his data display as he jumped. The sensors in his combat helmet quickly scanned the balcony below and displayed a green-line drawing as he fell, allowing him to judge his distance and orientation.

Each man landed on the smoke-filled balcony under complete control, moving quickly and expertly to either direction to make room for the man landing behind him.

"Combat Two departing!" the copilot called as the shuttle began to climb out and make a run for orbit. There were still Jung fighters patrolling the skies of Earth. Space was the safest place for them at the moment.

The lieutenant was the last one down, and he immediately stepped through the balcony doorway to the interior foyer. Red targets appeared on his visor, and he quickly dispatched them: two soldiers coming around the corner on the far side of the room and two civilian

technicians with unknown intent. He would take no chances on this day. If it did not wear the uniform of the Ghatazhak, it would die.

"Combat Three departing!" the other combat shuttle reported as it, too, headed for orbit.

"Blue is in," the lieutenant announced over the comms as he advanced.

*"Red is in,"* the other team leader responded.

\* \* \*

"General, enemy troops, the likes of which I have never seen, have somehow entered the building," the general's aide reported. "They are descending toward us at an alarming speed."

The general looked at his aide, genuinely shocked at his report. "How many men?"

"Reports vary: as little as ten or as many as twenty."

"Twenty men? There are over a thousand men protecting this compound. How did they get past our air support?"

"Without the Jar-Keurog, our tracking abilities are limited. They came in without warning, crashed into the building. In the confusion they..."

"We must stop them," the general insisted.

"General, they are unstoppable. They fight unlike anyone we have ever faced before. They are ruthless and quick, and..."

"Are you telling me that..."

"We must leave this place, and quickly. The empire must know what has happened here. They must be made aware of that which they might someday face."

General Bacca's right eyebrow raised. "I suppose you are correct in that." The general sighed, resigning himself to his

failure to hold the Earth. "Destroy everything. The surface missile bases, the airfields, even the spaceports. We must leave them nothing of value," the general insisted.

"Yes, sir," his aide responded. "And the orbital station?"

"Give them five minutes to evacuate, then destroy it as well. It cannot be left for the Terrans to utilize."

"Of course, sir."

The general sighed, realizing that he was accepting defeat. "And ready my ship."

"I have already done so, General," his aide assured him as he stepped aside to let the general pass.

\* \* \*

*"She is alive," Doctor Chen explained over Nathan's comm-set, "but she is in grave condition. Besides the injuries sustained on the surface, she was without oxygen for several minutes, and both her decompression and recompression were quite rapid."*

"Will she survive?" Nathan asked, remaining stoic.

*"I'm afraid I cannot say at the moment."*

"What about the nanites?"

*"We have already given the first dose."*

"Keep me informed," Nathan told her.

*"Yes, sir."*

Nathan tapped his headset to end the call.

"Flight reports Combat shuttles Two and Three have departed with Ghatazhak reinforcements," Naralena announced.

"How are they going to make it back down to the surface without fighter escorts?" Nathan asked.

"The next wave of Ghatazhak are jumping in from orbit," Naralena explained.

“Captain, I’m picking up a ship that is leaving Earth orbit,” Mister Navashee reported.

“A Jung fighter or a transport?”

“No, sir. Too big for a fighter. About one hundred meters in length... It just went to FTL, sir.”

“Course?”

Mister Navashee turned to face the captain. “Alpha Centauri.”

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Telles marched into the reception area of the governor’s office, an energy weapon in each hand. Blood was splattered across his helmet and body armor, with even more smeared down his left thigh.

There were at least a dozen Jung security personnel waiting for him and his men. The lieutenant raised his weapons as he marched through the door, firing at the enemy troops seeking to take cover behind desks, furniture, and doorways to adjacent offices. As his first two shots left his weapons, the lieutenant dropped to one knee and rolled once. Six Jung energy weapons’ blasts pierced the air where he had stood a split second earlier. Four more shots leapt from his weapons as he came back up from his roll, each of them finding their intended targets. Four more Ghatazhak came in behind him, also dodging, rolling, and firing.

A Jung soldier charged at the lieutenant, swinging his damaged energy rifle at the lieutenant’s head like a club. The lieutenant leaned to his left, allowing the weapon to pass by his head and graze the protective armor on his right bicep. The weapon in the lieutenant’s right hand came up into the belly of the Jung soldier and fired. The soldier’s face

froze in pain and horror. The lieutenant pushed him aside, raising his left weapon to fire two more times.

The chaos ended as suddenly as it had begun, and the room was quiet.

“Clear?” the lieutenant ordered.

Each of his men responded in kind until all four had sounded off in response to the lieutenant’s inquiry. He gestured for them to check the side offices. There was more weapons fire—most of it from Ghatazhak weapons—as the surviving members of the lieutenant’s squad dispatched those who had foolishly taken shelter in the adjoining rooms.

The lieutenant stormed into the main office in similar fashion as before, his weapons held high. Again, he fired several times while twisting and contorting his body to evade the rather limited return fire. The weapons fire ceased, and the lieutenant stood motionless, both of his weapons pointed at one man in the center of the room. The sole remaining enemy was tall with light hair that grayed at the temples and was dressed in business attire that had obviously been worn longer than normal this day. He held an older man, bound and gagged, in front of him.

“You fire; I fire; he dies,” the man said.

“Why should I care if the old man dies?” Telles responded, disdain for the man’s cowardly tactics evident in his voice.

“Because the old man is Dayton Scott, President of the North American Union and father of your captain.”

\* \* \*

Nathan entered the main medical treatment room. All the beds were full. Medical personnel were rushing about.

Crewmen normally assigned to other areas helped out as much as they could. Even the less seriously injured, those who could still walk and move normally, were helping however they could.

Nathan moved through the treatment room and out the door on the opposite side. In the waiting area, there were dozens more wounded, all waiting for treatment. Like the wounded volunteers he had just seen, their injuries were not life threatening.

Nathan saw Josh and Loki sitting on the deck and leaning up against the bulkhead, both still in their flight suits. Josh appeared unharmed but worn out. Loki was also uninjured. However, he looked far more distressed than his friend.

Josh looked up at his captain as he approached. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I just couldn't leave her there to die."

Loki also looked at his captain but said nothing. He didn't need to; his eyes spoke volumes.

"That's all right," Nathan told them. "I probably would have done the same thing had I been in your seat."

"No, you wouldn't have," Josh insisted. "That's why you're the captain."

Nathan sighed and sat down on the deck next to Josh. "Maybe that's why I authorized you to provide her with air support. Did you ever think of that?"

"You mean, you knew that I'd do something stupid and risky?" Josh asked. "That I'd disobey your orders and put the Falcon at risk?"

"Consciously, no." Nathan sighed again. "Well, maybe I suspected you might." Nathan thought for a moment before continuing. "One of the hardest things about being in command is having to give orders that you know are impossible or, at the very least, difficult for people to follow. You want them to do as they are told, because only those at



the top know the 'big picture', but you want your people to make decisions, to act on the spur of the moment and take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves. If you had called and asked for permission, as the captain, I would have been forced to say no. Not only that, but the opportunity most likely would have been lost."

"So you're saying it's okay to disobey you?" Josh asked, looking somewhat puzzled.

"No. I'm saying that sometimes you will be forced to make decisions on your own, and at times, those decisions may be contrary to your original orders." Nathan turned his head and looked at Josh. "Battle does not always afford us the time to discuss our options. More often than not, we must make snap decisions based on very little information. It is one of the many things I have learned since command was passed to me. That, and to eat, sleep, and piss whenever you get a chance." Nathan smiled.

Josh smiled back. "Yes, sir."

Nathan looked over at Loki, who was listening to the conversation but had said nothing. "Are you okay, Loki?" Nathan asked.

"I'll be all right, sir."

Nathan gazed at Loki. He knew the young man would be fine. Nathan knew that Loki was far stronger than the young man realized, more so than his rambunctious young friend and pilot.

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena's voice called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Go ahead."

"*Flash traffic from Lieutenant Telles. He has captured the Jung capitol in Geneva and has ended the missile launches against surface targets.*"

"That's good news," Nathan said.

*"There's something else though, sir," Naralena continued. "He has a situation. The lieutenant has encountered a man claiming to be the governor of Earth. He is holding a hostage at gunpoint, threatening to kill him if he is not allowed to depart unharmed. The man insists on speaking with you, sir."*

*"Me? Why me?"*

*"The lieutenant did not say, but the man knew you by your first name."*

*"Who is the hostage?"*

*"The lieutenant says the man claims that the hostage is your father, sir."*

Nathan closed his eyes. A feeling of incredible dread washed over him. He had accepted the fact that his father, and everyone he knew and cared for, were long dead. He had no evidence to support that conclusion, but it had made it easier for him to function. He opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked at Josh again. "Can the Falcon still fly?"

*"Yes, sir."*

*"I need a pilot, Josh."*

\* \* \*

Nathan entered the reception area to the governor's office escorted by four Ghatazhak soldiers. "Lieutenant," he said as he approached.

*"Captain."*

"From what I have just seen on the way in, you may have been a bit premature when stating that you had control of the area."

"I did not say I had complete control over the area," the lieutenant corrected, "only that I had captured the capitol building and ended the missile launches. There are still at

least a thousand Jung troops to deal with in this complex, let alone the rest of the planet. It will take some time to defeat those forces as well.”

“Are we sure the hostage is indeed my father?” Nathan asked.

“I cannot verify his identity,” the lieutenant said. “He does bear some resemblance to the images I have seen of your father, but I believe he has undergone some interrogation involving physical coercion.” The lieutenant removed his helmet, handing it to the captain.

“What’s this for?” Nathan wondered.

“We are similar in size, so it should work for you,” the lieutenant said. “Put it on and look at the visor. It will show you exactly what I saw when I initially entered the next room.”

Nathan placed the lieutenant’s helmet on his own head. A video began to play on the inside of the helmet’s face shield, just as the lieutenant had stated. It was as if Nathan himself were charging into the room, firing weapons, and killing Jung troops. The sound of weapons fire boomed and screeched in his ears. The sound of sizzling flesh invaded him as the weapon seemingly fired by Nathan himself burnt through the flesh and bone of his enemy. The experience was overwhelming, lacking only the smells and the physical sensations of movement. The weapons fire suddenly stopped, and Nathan’s view turned toward the captor and his father. “Oh my God!” Nathan exclaimed, quickly removing the helmet.

“Then it is your father?”

“And my brother, Eli,” Nathan exclaimed. His pulse was racing as thousands of thoughts flashed through his mind. His hands went to his face as he twisted about in confusion and shock. “This can’t be happening,” he exclaimed. “This

doesn't make any..." Nathan's hands pulled away from his face as his body froze and a realization washed over him. He looked at Lieutenant Telles. "That son of a bitch," he cursed as he turned and marched toward the door to the governor's office.

Nathan burst through the doors and marched into the room, unconcerned with his own safety. Lieutenant Telles was in step a half meter behind him and to his right.

"Well, that was faster than I expected," Eli said as he tightened his grip on his father, holding him up as a shield. "In the neighborhood, were we?"

"Not exactly," Nathan scowled as he approached. He looked at his father. He was bound and gagged, and he looked like he could barely stand on his own. His eyes, however, were open... open and pleading to Nathan. Pleading for him to do what was right. "What the hell's going on here, Eli?"

"I'm surprised to admit that I find *myself* somewhat proud of you, little brother."

"Wish I could say the same," Nathan retorted. "Are you working for the Jung now?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I was doing this for our people?"

"Probably not," Nathan replied, "especially while you're using our father as a personal shield."

"Ugly, I admit, but it seemed necessary, considering the muscle you've hired."

"It was you, wasn't it?" Nathan asked. "You told the Jung about the jump drive test. You even got me assigned to the Aurora."

"Actually, it was our mother's idea. She has always babied you. I just contacted one of Galiardi's aides. You might want to ask the admiral about that one, although I

wouldn't believe everything he says. My dealings with that man have proven difficult, to say the least."

"The captain's father or not," Lieutenant Telles said, "the man you are holding does not offer you the protection you seek."

"I disagree," Eli responded. "I doubt very seriously that my dear brother would risk our father's life just to take a shot at me."

"I, however, would," the lieutenant said.

"Which is why I must insist that you wait in the outer office," Eli said.

"I am sworn to protect my captain," the lieutenant said. "I stand by his side, in front of him if need be."

Eli laughed briefly. "Where did you find this guy?"

Lieutenant Telles leaned toward Nathan. "I do hope your safety is disengaged," he whispered.

"Since I climbed out of the Falcon," Nathan whispered back.

"You know, it wasn't supposed to be this way," Eli said, looking off to the side.

"Be what way, Eli?"

"The Jung were supposed to flatten a few cities, kill a few million people, and that was it. With a smaller population and an increased demand for production to fuel the Jung's galactic expansion efforts, everyone would be better off."

"Are you crazy?"

"It was already working," Eli insisted. "Unemployment is all but gone. Wages are up... With the Jung setting prices, everyone gets paid a livable wage for their efforts."

"As slaves?"

"No one is working as a slave," Eli defended.

"The market controlled by the Jung? The population culled to ensure loyalty? How is that not slavery?" Nathan

wondered.

"What do you want, Nathan?" Eli demanded. "Freedom?"

"Yes!"

"Freedom is a myth," Eli argued. "It can only exist if limitations are placed upon it. Can't you see that?"

"That's bullshit!"

"Typical Nathan!" Eli exclaimed. "You always think you have the answers, but you don't even know what the questions are!"

"What are they, Eli?!" Nathan demanded. "What is it you want?"

"I want safe passage for myself and my family!"

"To where?"

"Anywhere! Anywhere but here! You have a jump drive. You have several of them, don't you? Aren't there other human-inhabited worlds out there? Take us somewhere and leave us to live out our lives in exile. Isn't that what they do with deposed leaders?"

"You're not a leader, Eli, you're a traitor..."

"...*You* are not going anywhere," Lieutenant Telles interrupted, waving one finger on his left hand as he spoke.

"Lieutenant," Nathan said under his breath.

"No, I have heard this before, Captain," the lieutenant began, "from nobles who had promised to do what was best for their people, when all the while they had been lining their coffers and building their base of power. He does not seek prosperity for your people; surely you can see through his lies. He speaks of freedom, yet he doesn't even know what it is." The lieutenant turned back toward Eli, disdain tainting his very tone. "Freedom is not a physical thing. It exists in the hearts and souls of the human animal. It is in our genetic code. It is at the root of our very existence and,

therefore, can neither be given nor taken away, especially by people such as you."

"Lieutenant!" Nathan yelled.

"This is getting us nowhere!" Eli hollered. "Provide what I ask, or our father dies!" he added, putting his gun to his father's head.

"Don't do it!" Nathan demanded, his left hand reaching out in front of him, his right hand going to his sidearm but hesitating to draw the weapon from its holster.

Lieutenant Telles had no such hesitation. In the blink of an eye, his sidearm was drawn and aimed at Eli.

"Wait!" Nathan ordered the lieutenant.

Eli shifted, moving his helpless father into the lieutenant's line of fire.

"Draw your weapon, Captain," Lieutenant Telles instructed.

"Lieutenant, you can't..."

"Draw your weapon now."

"He's right, Nathan," Eli said, desperation creeping into his voice. "But you never were man enough to fight your own battles, were you?"

Nathan slowly drew his sidearm. "Happy now?" he asked as he raised his weapon and took aim at his brother. Oddly enough, Eli did not shift to attempt to shield himself from his brother's line of fire.

"He's right, Eli," Nathan said. "You're not going anywhere. You're going to stay right here on Earth and stand trial."

"I don't think so," Eli answered, a slight maniacal lilt in his tone.

"If what you're saying is true, that you were trying to avoid total destruction, then perhaps you'll be spared."

"You're a student of history, Nathan," Eli said. "Surely you know that history always needs a scapegoat." Eli shook his head. "No, if I am to die, it will be at a time of my choosing." A desperate smile crossed his lips, as if he was about to get something he had always wanted. "And you will be the one to kill me, little brother."

"I'm not going to do it," Nathan refused, releasing his grip on his weapon and letting it dangle on his index finger. "I'm not going to be the one to kill you."

"Then history will remember you as the coward I always knew you to be," Eli said as he took aim at Nathan and squeezed the trigger. At the same moment, Nathan's father went limp, his weight pulling his oldest son off-balance and to the left.

Both Nathan and Lieutenant Telles fired. Nathan's weapon's bullet struck Eli in the chest just to the left of his sternum. Lieutenant Telles's energy weapon's blast struck Eli just to the right of his sternum, barely missing President Scott as he fell to the ground.

The lieutenant ran to Eli's body, his weapon trained on him the entire way. Nathan ran to his father, rolling him over and pulling the gag from his mouth.

"Eli!" President Scott cried.

Nathan stood up, taking a step back in horror as his father dragged himself across the floor, his hands still bound, to get to his firstborn son, who now lay bleeding to death on the marble floor of what was once Eli's seat of power.

Nathan put both hands to the sides of his head, his still-smoking gun in his right hand, as he realized what he had just done. His face grimaced and his eyes squeezed tightly closed, as he tried unsuccessfully to stop the flow of tears and the pain that now tore through his very soul.



Lieutenant Telles kicked the handgun away from Eli's body as President Scott moved next to his son, cradling his head in his hands. Telles looked over to his captain, who had collapsed into a ball on the floor. Nathan sat and watched his father mourn over his eldest son, killed by his youngest. The four Ghatazhak in the outer office burst through the door. The lieutenant gestured for them to stand down.

Eli coughed and sputtered, his face in disbelief as he tried to catch a glimpse of his chest wounds. He looked at his father's eyes, welled up with tears as they were. "I was only trying to save us all," he whispered as the life drained out of him.

"I know," his father said as he cried. "I know."

Lieutenant Telles looked up at the vaulted ceilings of the massive office. For the first time since he had reported for training some fifteen years ago, the lieutenant felt sadness: sadness for his captain, sadness for his captain's father, and sadness for the world he was about to liberate.

## CHAPTER TEN

Nathan sat, staring at the images being displayed on the view screen that filled the forward bulkhead of his ready room. He watched as Captain Roberts's dog chased the waves in and out, barking happily whenever his feet got wet. It was a peaceful scene, one he had played many times over the months since the captain's passing, but he had never played it for as long at a single sitting.

The hatch swung open, and Lieutenant Telles stepped quietly inside. "Am I interrupting, sir?"

"No, Lieutenant," Nathan answered, turning off the display. "I didn't realize you were back on board."

"I required medical treatment."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Serious enough to warrant my return. The hospitals on Earth are quite busy at the moment."

"I imagine so. Will you be out of action long?"

"Only long enough for the Corinairan nanites to mend my injuries. A few days at the most, during which I will remain well behind the lines, so to speak."

"How may I help you?" Nathan asked.

"I thought you might like a personal report on the ground campaign."

Nathan gestured for Lieutenant Telles to sit, something that the lieutenant normally did not do in the presence of a superior officer, especially one whom he was programmed to protect and serve. "How is my father?" Nathan asked.

"Stubborn beyond belief," the lieutenant answered bluntly.

Nathan nodded his agreement. "He is that."

"He has been through as much as any of us, has even suffered physical torture, yet he insists on remaining in the command center... even though he has yet to issue a single command. It is most curious."

"He calls it 'leading by presence'," Nathan explained. "I take it you are having a difficult time of it."

"It has been a difficult three days, and our losses have been heavy, but most of the Jung ground forces have been eliminated. However, when facing capture, many of them retreat and disappear."

"I thought the Jung didn't surrender," Nathan commented.

"Indeed, which is why I am concerned. Many of them are reported to be quite adept at English. This may be by design."

"You think they may be trying to set up an underground network similar to the resistance the EDF prepared ahead of time."

"It is possible," Lieutenant Telles said. "Not a resistance, of course, but an intelligence and sabotage operation would make sense, especially considering that reinforcements are only four to five months away."

"That is unsettling," Nathan admitted.

"To say the least, it will make the return of order more difficult, as the people of Earth will be suspicious of one another. We are already seeing cases of innocent people being killed by angry mobs simply because their accents sounded similar to that of the Jung."

"Really? That doesn't make sense. The last thing a Jung spy would have is a discernible accent."

"Of course. However, these are chaotic times for your world. Your people are not thinking clearly. They are desperate to feel safe. Some are even taking advantage of that desperation by attempting to set up security co-ops that act as tiny nation-states."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It is not, as such organizations are usually started by nefarious men, those who enjoy feeding on the fear and desperation of others."

"It seems the fall of Jung rule on Earth has created a power vacuum," Nathan observed.

"I believe it is why your father is doing his best to provide leadership, at least in the North American Union where he is still accepted as the duly elected leader by the majority of the surviving population."

Nathan nodded his agreement.

"I should warn you, however, that you should not rely on the Earth for any assistance in preparing for its own defense, as it may be some time before they are able to do so."

"Yes, I'd thought of that," Nathan told him. "We should be able to handle our repairs ourselves using our fabricators, and there are ample resources within the system, even without the Earth's support. We were hoping, however, for some additional manpower."

"That is unlikely to be a problem," the lieutenant assured him. "Many have volunteered to help with the fight, providing support in whatever way possible. We have even received messages from survivors of the Intrepid asking to serve aboard the Aurora."

"With two ships to repair and crew, we could certainly use them," Nathan agreed.

"How is the Celestia?" the lieutenant asked.

"She is on a slow return trajectory. She should arrive in ten days."

"And the Aurora?"

"Badly damaged, but repairable," Nathan said. "I loathe the return of Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy. The Russian expletives are sure to fly."

"And your jump drive?"

"We're still replacing the damaged emitters. It should be operational in a day or two. The hull repairs, however, will take considerably longer. There was a lot of damage, especially to the outer hull, both fore and aft."

"I am confident your people will restore her to glory," the lieutenant said.

"I hope so."

"And what of her captain?" the lieutenant asked.

"Pardon?"

"How are you doing, sir? It has been a difficult time for you as well."

"I will be fine, Lieutenant," Nathan assured him. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, sir."

"You're dismissed then." Nathan paused, then added, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

The lieutenant did not move for several seconds, which was also something he did not regularly do. Nathan looked at him. "Something else?"

"You did the right thing, Captain."

"I hesitated."

"As any brother would," the lieutenant insisted, "including me."

"I find that hard to believe," Nathan said. "Had you not been there, I would probably be dead." He turned back to

the reports on his monitor in an effort to avoid the conversation.

Lieutenant Telles stood and turned to exit the room. He paused for a moment, then reached into his uniform breast pocket and pulled out a misshapen bullet. He turned back to the captain and placed it on the desk in front of him.

"What's this?" Nathan asked, picking up the bullet and looking at it.

"The cause of death, pulled from the chest of your brother."

Nathan looked at the bullet for a moment. "I'm not sure this makes it easier."

"The truth seldom does," the lieutenant said as he backed away, turned, and departed the ready room.

Nathan stared at the bullet for nearly a full minute, then placed it in his desk drawer.

\* \* \*

Yanni was escorted down the long corridor by four heavily armed guards. He had been shadowed and shuffled about by such men since his arrival on Takara hours ago. Although everyone had been polite thus far, there was a palpable tension everywhere he went. The people on this world were worried, unsure, distrusting. It did not seem the wonderful place described to him by Captain Scott only a few days ago.

The massive doors at the end of the corridor opened, and Yanni was led inside. A well dressed man, many years his senior, stood and came out from behind the desk, his hand extended.

"You must be Yanni," the man said.

"Yes, sir," Yanni answered, shaking the man's hand. The old man's hand was rough, not the soft touch he might have expected from the leader of an entire world. "Are you...?"

"Yes, I am Prince Casimir of Takara."

Yanni felt a wave of relief wash over him. "Finally."

"I do apologize for the delays. These are difficult times for the Pentaurus cluster."

"Captain Scott expected as much," Yanni told him.

"Tell me;" the prince said eagerly, "how is my friend, Nathan?"

Yanni handed the prince the data pad given to him by the captain. "I was instructed to give this to you, and no one *but* you. It contains records of the Aurora's journey home, as well as the events that followed."

"I take it by your dour expression that things in the Sol sector are not going as the captain had hoped."

"No, they are not. I'm afraid we need your help, sir, and badly."

Thank you for reading this story.  
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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