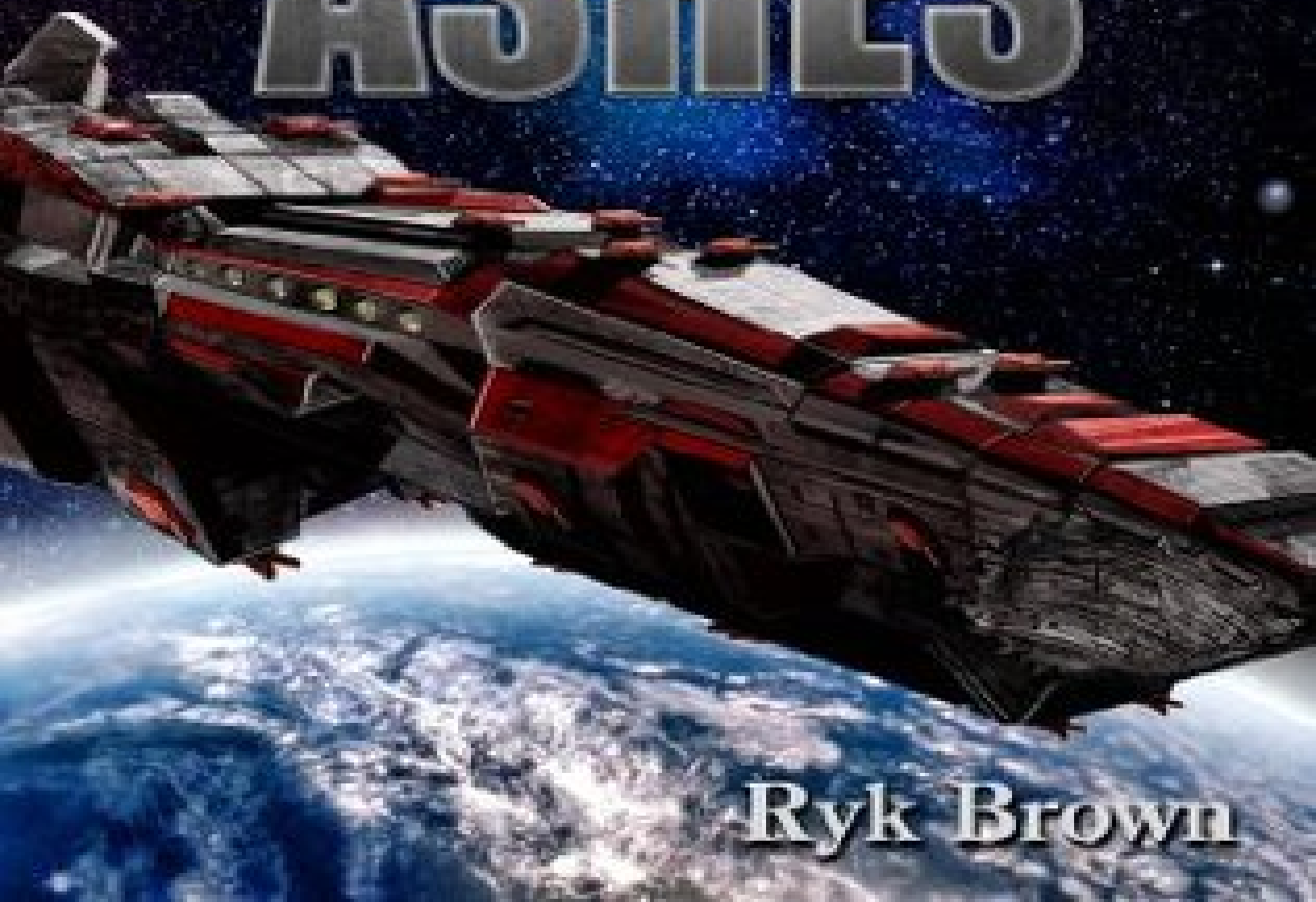


THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 11

BORN OF THE ASHES



Ryk Brown

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 11

BORN OF THE ASHES

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #11: Born of the Ashes
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CHAPTER ONE

Lieutenant Telles sat on the edge of the floor of the Kalibri airship, his feet firmly planted on the foot rails outside and slightly below the bottom of the small Corinairan aircraft. He looked out at the city below. Sydney was an impressive city, with its bays and numerous rivers snaking their way inland. Although the landscape and vegetation were alien to him, there was still a familiarity about it all. He had experienced the same feeling on numerous excursions to the surface. First, in Geneva. Then in Port-Gentil, Miami, and Winnipeg. It seemed that there were similarities in all places inhabited by humans. The environment and landscape might change, but the many ways that human beings created their pockets of civilization all shared common threads, even a thousand light years from his own homeworld.

"Winnipeg was greener," Master Sergeant Jahal said over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Indeed it was," the lieutenant agreed. He shifted his position for the third time since departing the airfield.

Master Sergeant Jahal noticed the frequency with which his commanding officer adjusted his position. "Are you certain you've fully healed, sir?"

The lieutenant did not respond, instead only looking at him from the corner of his eye.

"How many of these security inspections are we going to do today?" the master sergeant asked.

"At least six."

"Don't you think that's pushing it, sir?"

"Why? Afraid you'll get tired?"

"Never happen, sir," the master sergeant grumbled. "Still, four would make more sense, don't you think? I mean,

they're just recruiting stations, after all."

"Perhaps," the lieutenant admitted, "but four out of twenty-eight of them have been attacked by Jung sympathizers in the last two days. How many people do you think will volunteer to help defend the planet if they're getting killed just standing in line to sign up?"

"Not as many, I suspect. Then again, the ones that do will be the truly brave ones, will they not?"

"Or the truly stupid," the lieutenant added, still without smiling. "Besides, I suspect that these demonstrations are being organized by Jung operatives."

"Or Jung sympathizers," the master sergeant said, "whose lives were better under Jung rule. You yourself stated that the governments of this world were, for the most part, divided, self-serving, and corrupt. Surely many of the Terrans recognized this as well, and favored Jung rule over the previous ruling factions?"

"A possibility," the lieutenant agreed, "but until proven otherwise, it is better we assume that the Jung are still present on this world, and are well supported and organized. To assume otherwise would be unwise."

"Of course," the master sergeant agreed.

"Lieutenant," the pilot called over the comms. "Urgent traffic from the Sydney recruiting station. They are under fire."

"So much for the inspection," the master sergeant said.

Lieutenant Telles lowered his helmet visor, covering the upper half of his face. "Take us in low and fast," he ordered the pilot as the tactical displays came to life on the inside of his visor. "Approach with the fire zone on our starboard side. I want to size up the situation and decide where to put down."

"Yes, sir," the pilot responded over the helmet comms. "I'll put the fire zone on our starboard."

"Weapons hot, gentlemen," the lieutenant added. "Maximum force. If it's armed and doesn't ID as a friendly on your visor, kill it."

"And if it's a local trying to fight back?" the master sergeant wondered.

"Then we'll apologize later," the lieutenant answered coldly. "I've already lost a quarter of my platoon, so I don't mind wasting a few innocent Terrans to ensure I don't lose any more."

The Kalibri airship dropped down to just above the height of the tallest buildings in the city as it continued to advance toward the recruitment station at the city center. The lieutenant looked forward and slightly right of their flight path as a distant explosion sent a fireball expanding upward.

"Sydney station, Telles. Inbound with four, thirty seconds out. Say your sit."

"Telles, Sydney station, Sergeant Mikovo," the voice responded excitedly over the lieutenant's helmet comms. *"We're taking fire from the north and east rooftops. Also from the west at street level. Locals have scattered. They're popping grenades every few seconds, as well as a few vehicles rigged to explode. Estimate force strength at ten to twelve! We're outnumbered four to one!"*

"Mikovo, Telles. Is the incoming projectile or energy weapons?"

"I'm pretty sure all incoming fire is projectile, sir! Yes, that's right! No energy weapons yet!"

"Very well. Where do you want us, Sergeant?"

"The rooftops to the west are clear! If you can get an angle on the rooftop shooters to our north and east, it would sure help!"

"Understood. Targets lighting up now," the lieutenant answered as red icons representing hostile targets began appearing on the inside of his helmet visor.

"Those locals won't last long at four to one," the master sergeant declared.

"We'll have to narrow the odds for them," the lieutenant responded. "Pilot, drop down behind the gray building just

west of the station, then pop ten meters straight up and we'll take out the guys on the rooftop as we crest."

"*Copy that,*" the Kalibri pilot answered as the airship began to descend between the buildings that rushed past them on either side. "*Ten seconds.*"

Lieutenant Telles braced himself for the maneuver. The small airship pitched back slightly as its overhead forward-ducted fans rotated forward and their blades changed their pitch to increase their thrust potential. The airship came to an abrupt stop only a few meters from the gray building, about two meters below its rooftop. The lieutenant raised his weapon, as did all of his men.

"*Popping up,*" the pilot reported over their helmet comms.

A second later, the airship began to ascend rapidly. Lieutenant Telles felt the hundreds of tiny tubules in the legs of his primary combat garment as their fluid pressure increased, stiffening his legs to support him against the sudden increase in gravity as the airship ascended. The same thing happened in his arms to assist him in holding his weapon up and ready. As his finger slid over the trigger, the combat systems built into his gear sensed that he was about to fire and a small red targeting reticle appeared on the inside of his visor. "I've got the two to the left, on the north building," he announced, his voice straining against the additional gravity.

"I've got the two to the east of the station," the master sergeant chimed in as the building rooftop passed by and dropped below them.

The lieutenant felt his stomach change and his body become lighter as the airship abruptly slowed its ascent. He moved his weapon slightly, causing the targeting reticle on his visor to move onto the first target. He pressed his trigger, allowing three small bolts of energy to leave his weapon. Without hesitation, he immediately moved his weapon a bit more to the left, putting the targeting reticle

on the inside of his visor onto the next shooter on the distant rooftop, and quickly ended his life as well.

There was a series of thuds across the bottom of the airship that rocked it violently.

"We're taking fire!" the pilot announced.

The airship spun to its left and rolled forty-five degrees to the same side. The lieutenant held onto the side rail of the doorway tightly with his left hand as the airship rolled back level and then yawed sharply to the right.

"They're on the roof below us," one of the lieutenant's men sitting on the other side of the airship reported as he opened fire. *"No shot."*

"Put us on the roof," the lieutenant ordered calmly.

"I don't think I have any choice!" the pilot announced as smoke began to pour from the underside of the airship.

The lieutenant felt the ship begin to fall from the sky. He looked down at the rooftop below them. It was only ten meters below and it was coming up toward them at alarming speed. *"Bail out and engage!"* the lieutenant ordered as he jumped from the falling airship. He glanced at his visor's tactical display as he fell, identifying the hostile targets on the rooftop below. There were four of them all together, two on either side of the falling Corinairan airship.

The legs of the lieutenant's suit stiffened once again, along with its pelvis and torso sections. As his feet touched the rooftop, the tubules around his knees softened to allow them to bend. His primary combat garment was working perfectly. He landed and rolled to his right, away from the falling airship which came crashing down a moment later. The roof moaned and cracked open as he came to his feet, and the center of it where the airship had fallen dropped nearly a meter.

The lieutenant opened fire as he came to his feet, killing the enemy combatant to his left while Master Sergeant Jahal eliminated the one closest to him. *"Sound off,"* the lieutenant ordered as he headed for the cockpit of the fallen airship.

"Jahal," his master sergeant led off.

The lieutenant stepped carefully into the rooftop depression that cradled the smoking airship wreckage.

"Alluti."

The lieutenant looked through the cockpit window. The Kalibri's pilot was unconscious, his face and chest covered with blood, and his right shoulder sitting unusually lower than his left.

"Sinnott."

The lieutenant paused, focusing his gaze on the unconscious pilot as his helmet's sensors scanned the man for signs of life. A moment later, the pilot's heart and respiratory rates appeared on the visor next to the pilot. "Jahal, call for a medevac," he ordered as he pulled at the door but found it stuck. "Alluti, Sinnott. Secure the rooftop. Make sure no more hostiles are coming up the stairs." The lieutenant stepped back a meter and raised his weapon as he adjusted its power setting. He took aim and fired, blasting a chunk out of the airship's fuselage just aft of the cockpit door's latch.

"Telles, Mikovo. You guys all right?"

"We're good," the lieutenant answered. "However, our airship is down, and the pilot is injured. They must have had guys on the way up when we came in. How are you and your men doing?"

"We're good for the moment. With those rooftop shooters gone, we're free to maneuver down here. We're going to sweep the north and east buildings for hostiles."

"We'll sweep this building on our way down," the lieutenant told him.

The roof groaned and dropped another meter, causing the lieutenant to nearly lose his footing. He could hear the sound of bending metal and feel rivets popping beneath his feet. He stepped up to the wreckage again and grabbed the door handle. He tensed his muscles and felt the tubules in his left hand and forearm tighten once more as he twisted the handle and pulled at the door, forcing the latch free and

pulling the door open. He reached inside and released the pilot's flight harness and pulled him from the wreckage, dragging him away in a backwards walk up the side of the drooping ceiling.

"Hostiles coming up the stairwell," Sinnott called over the lieutenant's helmet comms. He could hear Sinnott and Alluti firing as he pulled the Kalibri's unconscious pilot away from the wreckage and onto the undamaged section of the roof.

"I've got him," the master sergeant said as he grabbed the unconscious pilot's jumpsuit and continued pulling him toward the side of the rooftop. "I'll stabilize him and wait for the medevac."

The lieutenant spun around as the roof under the wreckage behind him gave way and the fallen Kalibri airship fell along with it, sending a wave of dust into the air. His visor immediately showed him the width of the opening, and the lieutenant began to run toward the cloud of dust coming out of the collapsed rooftop. Four strides later, as he reached the edge of the hole, he leapt, sailing easily across the hole as he passed through the cloud of dust and landed on the roof on the far side. Letting his momentum continue to carry him, he continued running across the rooftop as energy weapons fire began to spray the rooftop at a shallow angle from his right. Several bolts of energy struck him, on his right thigh, abdomen, and chest, nearly knocking him over. He raised his weapon to his right and fired blindly, adjusting his aim as he turned his head and his visor identified the location of the shooters for him. They were on another rooftop, one that had not had hostile targets on it moments ago.

The lieutenant came to a halt, nearly falling against the stairwell entrance shack. He quickly rolled along the wall and ducked inside the doorway to escape the incoming energy weapons fire. "Jahal, Telles. Keep down. Hostiles on the rooftop to the north. They're using energy weapons, so

they're probably Jung. Tell that medevac to stay clear until we deal with them."

"*Copy that,*" Master Sergeant Jahal answered over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Alluti, Sinnott, situation."

"*Blasting our way down, sir,*" the lieutenant heard Sinnott announce over the comms, the sound of his men's energy weapons blasting away in the background as it also echoed up through the stairwell.

"We've got energy weapons fire coming from a rooftop to the north," the lieutenant reported. "Hold position while I sweep the top floor behind you."

"*Yes, sir.*"

"*Telles, Mikovo. Which building is the fire coming from?*"

"North of us. The next building over. Tall and brown."

"*Got it,*" the sergeant answered over the comms. "*We'll try to clear it first so the medevac can get in.*"

"Watch yourselves, Sergeant. They're probably Jung regulars."

"*Yes, sir,*" the sergeant answered over the comms.

"Jahal, sit-rep." the lieutenant inquired over his helmet comms.

"*I've got this.*" the master sergeant answered with all the usual confidence of a Ghatazhak.

"Sinnott, Alluti, I'm coming in behind you," the lieutenant announced as he moved toward the stairs.

"*We'll push them down a level and keep them from advancing while you sweep the top floor,*" Sinnott said as he and Alluti continued to fire.

"Copy that," the lieutenant answered as he descended the stairwell, his weapon held high and ready. As he made his way quickly down the stairs, his peripheral vision watched the tactical display on the inside of his helmet visor. Even in the poorly lit stairwell, the enhanced vision system of his combat helmet made everything easy to see in great detail. "Thermals," he instructed his combat systems. A moment later, faint thermal images appeared on

his visor, showing the varying temperatures in the stairwell, most of which were relatively cold.

The lieutenant passed through the doorway from the stairwell onto the top floor of the building. It was a large, open office area, with desks and cubicles scattered about. Much of the ceiling had collapsed, shaken loose by the collapse of the ceiling elsewhere on this same floor. Many of the overhead lights were out. What few that were still operating flickered on and off, casting pulsing shadows across the room. "Penetrating scans," he whispered. Red outlines of people on their knees, hiding behind partitions and desks appeared. The lieutenant scanned the wall on the far side of the room. The penetrating scans indicated that the offices along the far side were empty. "I am Lieutenant Telles of the Earth-Pentaurus Alliance! Stand and reveal yourselves, hands held high above your heads, or you shall be considered hostile and subject to the use of deadly force!"

One by one, every image shown kneeling began to rise, none of them wanting to be the recipient of the lieutenant's idea of deadly force. The lieutenant kept his weapon ready as he watched each of them rise, waiting until his scans showed there to be no one still hiding. A quick count showed eight persons. "You, young lady," he called to the woman nearest him. "What is your name?"

"April," the frightened woman stammered, her hands held high.

"Do not worry, April. Unless you show hostile intent, you shall not be harmed. Do you understand?"

April nodded.

"Is there a room without windows nearby, one large enough for all of you?"

"The break room," she mumbled, pointing toward the back of the room.

The lieutenant moved to his right, giving himself a clear line of sight to the doorway to the indicated room on the

opposite wall. "Magnify penetrating scans, twenty percent," he said under his breath.

"Excuse me?" April asked, believing the lieutenant was addressing her.

Lieutenant Telles held his left hand up to quiet her as he watched the display on the inside of his visor zoom in on the door on the far wall. The scan penetrated the wall, but revealed no bodies on the other side.

"Everyone will go into that room and remain there."

"Is it safe?" a man further back asked. "Something came crashing through the ceiling over..."

"Maybe we should all leave the building..." another woman interrupted.

"There are Jung sympathizers still in the building," the lieutenant explained, "possibly even Jung regulars. It is better you remain here for the time being. I will send one of my men to escort you all out after the building has been swept for combatants."

"But..."

"It was not a request," the lieutenant interrupted, sternly. "Move!"

All eight of the men and women turned and headed toward the break room door, their hands still held high. The lieutenant followed them across the room. "I will secure the door so that no one can enter."

"You're going to lock us in..."

"It is for your own protection," the lieutenant explained, knowing full well that he cared little for their safety. It was for his own safety, and the safety of his men, that he would confine these Terrans. Any one of them could be a Jung sympathizer as well, or even a Jung agent, and he had no time to determine the truth at the moment.

He followed April as she followed the rest of her coworkers into the break room. Once she was inside the door, she turned to face him, her eyes wide with fear. "Do not worry, my men are driving the combatants downward as I speak. You will not be in here for long."

"But the ceiling," she said, her lower lip quivering as she spoke.

"The damage is on the other side of the building. You will be safe here." Without further words, he pulled the door closed, wondering what guilt felt like. He had deceived them, for none of them were safe at the moment.

The lieutenant pulled a small device from the utility compartment on his left thigh armor. He hung the device on the door handle and attached a small wire to the device. He then attached a small sensor to the other end of the wire stuck it to the door frame. He pulled a pin from the device, arming it. If any of the Terran captives tried to open the door, the result would be unpleasant at best. "Do not attempt to open this door," he called through the door.

"*Why?*" April's voice called from the other side.

"Trust me," he told her, the irony of his statement striking him as odd. "You will not enjoy the result."

"*How long do we have to wait in here?*" the woman called from behind the door.

"Until someone comes to release you."

Lieutenant Telles turned and headed back toward the stairwell on the far side of the room. "Top floor secure," he reported over his helmet comms. "Eight noncombatants are secure in the back room of this floor. I'm descending to your level now."

"*All known combatants have been eliminated, sir,*" Sinnott reported over the comms. "*We'll sweep the rest of the floors on our way down.*"

"Very good," the lieutenant responded as he entered the stairwell. "I'm heading back up to the roof." The lieutenant hit the stairs running, ascending the four flights and finding himself once again at the doorway to the roof less than a minute later. He peeked out the door and saw the energy weapons fire on the next rooftop as it rained down on the street below. He ducked down low and ran out onto the rooftop, heading for the edge of the roof closest to the enemy position. Within a few strides, the energy weapons

fire had been redirected toward him, causing him to dive for cover and crawl the remaining few meters to the roof's edge. "I take it you're not having much luck up here, Jahal?"

"No, sir," the master sergeant answered over the comms from the far side of the rooftop.

"How's the pilot?"

"Thready pulse, labored breathing, tracheal shift. Pretty sure he's developing a pneumo."

"Decompress him," the lieutenant ordered as he activated his weapon camera. The image from his gun camera appeared on the inside of his visor as he swung his weapon up over the ledge and took aim, spraying the edge of the rooftop from where the enemy was firing.

"I was going to, but my med-kit got smashed when I landed," the master sergeant answered. *"I don't suppose you can run yours over."*

"Not unless you want to be treating me as well," the lieutenant answered as he fired another volley at the enemy position. "They've got at least a floor on us. There's no way I'm going to take them out from here. What's the ETA on the medevac?"

"Eight minutes."

"Mikovo, Telles. Situation?"

"These are definitely Jung regulars, sir!" the sergeant answered over the comms, the sound of both incoming and outgoing energy weapons fire in the background. *"They're barricaded in there pretty well! There's at least ten of them on the ground floor. No way we're getting to the rooftop. Even if we get past the guys on the ground floor, there's bound to be more of them on the way up!"*

"Stay calm, and try to keep them occupied for a few more minutes, sergeant," the lieutenant ordered. "Then fall back to a safe distance. I'm dropping that building."

"Sir, I can't guarantee you that there aren't any noncombatants in there," the Australian sergeant warned, concern evident in his voice.

"I didn't ask," the lieutenant said as he switched channels. "Aurora, Telles. Requesting immediate air strike on enemy position. Coordinates to follow."

"What's going on, Major?" Captain Scott asked as he entered the Aurora's flight operations center.

"Lieutenant Telles is requesting an air strike, sir," the major answered.

"Do we have assets in range?"

"Nearest patrol is about ten minutes away, *if* they go sub-orbital to get there, but that's not the problem. The target is a building full of suspected Jung regulars, and it's right next to the Sydney recruitment post."

"That's right in the middle of the city's business district, isn't it?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir, it is."

"What do the overheads look like?"

"Crawling with innocent civilians," the major answered, "but it gets worse. They're using energy weapons, so our Talons can't get close enough to strafe the rooftop with low-power plasma shots. They'd be taking fire before they got close enough. If we take a missile shot, like the lieutenant suggested..."

"We destroy the entire building," Nathan finished for the major.

"And probably damage at least one or two of the neighboring buildings, depending on which way the target falls."

"Any options?" Nathan asked.

Major Prechitt turned to look at the captain. "Yes, sir. One. But it puts a valuable asset at risk. That's why I called you in."

"Telles, Aurora combat," Mister Willard's voice called over Lieutenant Telles's helmet comms. *"Fall back to safe*

distance. Strike inbound. Time on target: one minute."

The lieutenant changed channels on his comms. "Mikovo, Telles. Fall back. Aurora combat reports air strike in fifty seconds."

"From where?" the sergeant wondered. *"I've got no inbounds on my aerals."*

"Just fall back, now!" the lieutenant ordered. He tried never to raise his voice during combat, as it just added to the already high adrenaline levels that clouded the thinking of most men. However, over the past five days, he had learned that lesser trained men sometimes required such vocal emphasis to get them to respond more quickly.

"Yes, sir!"

"Keep your head down as well, Jahal," the lieutenant said to his master sergeant on the other side of the rooftop.

"Telles, Aurora combat. Twenty seconds. If possible, distract the target until strike."

"Aurora combat, Telles. Understood." The lieutenant checked his aerial scans once more, but still there was no indication of incoming aircraft. "What the hell?" he said to himself as he held his weapon up over the short rooftop wall and sprayed the top edge of the target building to get the enemy to duck down. "One med-kit, coming up!" he yelled as he rose to his feet and ran toward the master sergeant. Energy weapons fire from the target building returned a moment later as the enemy combatants tried to target the lieutenant as he leapt across the gaping hole in the roof.

As he sailed over the Kalibri wreckage at the bottom of the hole one floor below him, a bright blue-white flash caused his visor displays to disappear. They returned a moment later, just as he landed and rolled on the other side of the hole. He came to his feet, his weapon high and aimed in the direction of the target building across the street, but he did not fire. There was no need.

Fifteen meters above the target building and slightly to one side of its center was the Falcon, hovering over the enemy, her four lift turbines screaming, as she pounded the

rooftop below with the twin plasma cannons in her nose turret. As the enemy combatants on the rooftop attempted to return fire, the roof beneath began to collapse under the incessant pounding of plasma shots raining down from above. The Falcon continued to fire, shaking the target building just short of collapse.

The lieutenant turned toward his master sergeant a few meters away, kneeling next to the critically wounded Corinairan pilot. He smiled as he pulled his med-kit out of his right thigh compartment and tossed it to Master Sergeant Jahal. "Better decompress that guy before he dies on you, Master Sergeant."

"Yes, sir," the master sergeant answered as he opened the med-kit and got to work.

Lieutenant Telles walked over to the edge of the roof and looked at the street below as combatants ran from the building as its floors collapsed downward, one floor at a time. He took aim and began easily picking off the fleeing enemy, one man at a time. Within seconds, Sergeant Mikovo and his men had advanced once again and were dealing with the rest of the enemy combatants as they poured out into the street. The lieutenant ceased fire, turned around, and walked back to the master sergeant. "How's he doing?"

"He's breathing better now," the master sergeant answered. "I think he'll survive until the medevac gets here."

"*Telles, Falcon,*" Loki's voice called over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Falcon, go for Telles," the lieutenant answered.

"*Target destroyed,*" Loki reported over the comms. "*Anything else we can help you with, sir?*"

The lieutenant turned back toward the Falcon, still hovering over the collapsing building. "That should do it, gentlemen. Thank you," he said as he raised his helmet visor.

"*Telles, Falcon. Glad to be of help, Lieutenant. Talons will be on station in two, medevac in three. Falcon departing.*"

The lieutenant watched as the antique Takaran interceptor's back end dipped slightly to starboard and began to accelerate upward with surprising quickness. Two seconds later, just as it was becoming too small to see against the blue Australian sky, it disappeared in another flash of blue-white light.

Lieutenant Telles turned back toward the master sergeant, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. "I'm starting to like those guys."

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Doc?" Nathan asked as he stepped into Doctor Chen's office.

"Yes, sir," the young doctor answered from behind her desk.

Nathan could see the frustration on her face. "Jessica?"

"Of course. She's got to be the worst patient I've ever had," the doctor complained. "Considering the seriousness of her injuries, you would think that she would be more cooperative."

"What is she doing?"

"Well, for one, she is constantly asking my staff to get her status reports on everything from the surface campaigns to the surveys of the Jar-Keurog."

Nathan smiled. "She doesn't like being out of touch." Nathan sat down across the desk from his medical chief. "You want me to talk to her? Tell her to stop pestering your staff?"

"I'm not worried about the staff," Doctor Chen assured him. "They know to ignore her requests. They've got enough work to do."

"Yeah, I noticed things are still hopping around here," Nathan noted, his tone turning more somber.

"We've been lucky so far," Doctor Chen told him. "However, if Jessica doesn't relax and allow her nanites to do their work, she may not be as lucky."

"I thought she was doing better?"

"She is, but there was a lot of tissue damage throughout her body. The decompression sickness should have killed her. Had it not been for the nanites, it likely would have, even with the hyperbaric treatments."

"But the nanites will repair the damage, won't they?" Nathan couldn't imagine the Aurora without his security chief and close friend.

"Yes, despite her best efforts to impede their progress, they should be able to repair everything. But the more active she is, the longer it takes. As you know, we have not yet figured out why the nanites cause so much discomfort to Terrans. Lieutenant Commander Nash is carrying a heavier than average load of nanites, requiring considerable levels of analgesics to control the pain."

"So, she's being doped up," Nathan commented.

"There's a war on, Captain. A lot of people are in pain. I cannot continue to waste analgesics on patients who are in large part responsible for much of their own pain."

The light went on. "Ah, yes. I see your point." Nathan stood again. "I'll make sure Jessica sees it as well, Doctor. I assure you."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

Nathan smiled as he turned to exit. "Of course, I may need a bed myself, after I threaten to turn off her pain meds, that is."

"I'll make sure the medics are standing by, Captain," the doctor quipped.

Nathan left the doctor's office and stepped through the corridor separating the main treatment area from the recovery unit. He made his way through the overcrowded recovery room, where as many as twelve beds had been squeezed into a space designed to hold half that number. In the far back corner lay his security chief. Nathan noticed the empty bed in the curtained cubicle to her right. "What did they do with Synda?" he asked as he stepped into Jessica's cubicle.

"Daily nanite reprogramming," Jessica mumbled as she tried unsuccessfully to find a comfortable position in which to lie.

Nathan noticed the pained expression on her face as she continued to shift in her bed. "Little suckers hurt, don't they?"

"Unbelievably."

"I seem to remember you telling Cameron she wasn't tough enough when she complained about the nanite pain."

"Yeah? Well, she didn't have half the number I have in me." Jessica arched her back slightly and moved her right arm toward her left side, tugging at the IV lines in the process. She looked at the IV tubing as she felt it tug at her skin from the tension. "If it weren't for all the meds they're pumping into me..."

"Yeah, about that," Nathan began.

Jessica looked at him with one eyebrow raised.

"You know, there are a lot of people in pain, both on this ship and on the surface."

"Well, tell them to get in line," Jessica said, closing her eyes. "I was here first."

Now Nathan's eyebrow went up. "Doc says you need to rest more, fidget less. She says you're making it take longer for the nanites to do their job."

Jessica opened one eye at her captain's sudden change in tone. "Relax, Skipper. I was kidding."

"They can't keep dumping three times the normal ration of pain meds into you, Jess..."

"Don't you dare take away my pain meds," she said, both eyes open.

"If you don't lie still and rest, that is exactly what will happen, Lieutenant Commander."

"All right, all right," she acquiesced, laying her head back down against her pillow and closing her eyes again.

Nathan looked his friend over. Rather than standard patient wear, she was dressed in gym shorts and tank top. IV tubing was connected to her right arm, and a drain tube

was coming out from under her tank top, a yellowish fluid visible through the tubing. An oxygen mask dangled under her chin, blowing the supplemental gas up to her mouth and nose. He suspected that she was supposed to be wearing the mask, but that the loose dangling position was the best that the staff was able to convince her to do. He glanced up at the display screen attached to the head of her bed that displayed her vitals. All were in the green ranges, which he knew to be a good sign. As they talked, he couldn't help but notice some of the levels as they dipped down toward the red range of their respective meter tapes.

"So, you gonna fill me in, or what?" Jessica asked.

Nathan's eyes left the display screen and angled back toward Jessica's face below the screen. Both her eyes were open again. They were bloodshot, and slightly puffy, with some mottled discoloration in the skin below and around her orbits. Despite the green meter tapes on the display screen, his friend didn't look well at all.

"Sit-rep?" Jessica asked, trying to snap her captain's attention back to the topic. "How are things on Earth?"

"Uh, still pretty wild, I guess," Nathan answered, his mind finally returning to the moment. "Prechitt has finally been able to stand down from the air strikes. They've pretty much forced whatever Jung are left to go underground for now."

"I didn't know we had enough Talons left to conduct air strikes," Jessica said.

"We brought the Celestia's Talons back to Earth as soon as she turned around. Took them most of the day to get here. As soon as they did, between them and our rail guns, we were able to achieve air superiority in a couple days."

"How is Telles handling things?"

"A bit on the aggressive side, as you might imagine."

Jessica smiled. "I'll bet. EDF spec-ops are gonna love him."

"He's already met some of them. So far, the spec-ops units have been operating independently, seeking out

underground Jung units on their own. Telles has been keeping clear of them, only stepping in to help when requested."

"Why not just let the Ghatazhak kill them all?"

"I prefer to keep the Ghatazhak actions on Earth to a minimum for now. Things are chaotic enough down there without some super-soldiers storming in and blowing the hell out of everything."

Jessica nodded agreement. "What about the Jung battleship? Find any goodies?"

"They shot the hell out of that, as well," Nathan said. "Most of her compartments were vented to space during the Ghatazhak's boarding raid. They swept the ship, found twenty or so survivors, mostly technical personnel. We've got them all locked up in the brig, waiting for things to die down a bit so that we can interrogate them. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Montgomery and his team are sifting through the Jar-Keurog's control core, trying to determine if it's safe to bring it back online. Problem is, it's all in Jung, which no one speaks, let alone reads."

"I thought Montgomery was on the Celestia?"

"I had the Falcon ferry Vlad, Montgomery, and a few of his team back, one by one. They've been here a couple days now. They only got the key decks re-pressurized this morning."

"Maybe someone from Tanna?" Jessica said, her eyes closed again.

"Huh?"

"Maybe they can translate."

"I hadn't thought of that," Nathan admitted sheepishly.

"They were occupied by the Jung for a few decades, weren't they?"

"That they were."

"Surely somebody there must read Jung," Jessica commented.

"It's worth trying," Nathan agreed.

"Captain, tactical," the tactical officer called over Nathan's comm-set.

Nathan tapped the side of his earpiece to activate the comm-set. "Go ahead."

"Four targets just launched from the surface, climbing fast. Tactical database shows them as EDF fighters, sir. Suggest intercept until verified friendly."

"Very well, launch intercepts," Nathan ordered as he stood. "I'm on my way." He turned and looked at Jessica. "Rest."

"Just keep me in the loop," she said, her eyes pleading. Nathan smiled. "As long as you rest, we've got a deal."

* * *

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard announced as Nathan emerged from the port bridge airlock corridor and moved toward the center of the bridge.

"Report," Nathan called as he passed the tactical station, headed for his command chair at the center of the bridge.

"Four Talons have launched. Time to intercept is three minutes, sir," the tactical officer reported.

"Any communication from the inbounds?" Nathan asked as he turned aft to face Naralena at the comm station.

"Just started hailing them, sir," Naralena reported.

"Lead Talon?"

"On the comms, Captain. Talon Eight is lead."

"Talon Eight, Aurora Actual," Nathan called over his comm-set. "I need visual confirmation on the targets."

"Aurora Actual, Talon Eight. Understood. Two minutes out. We'll intercept just before they clear the atmosphere."

"Put the database readouts on the main view screen," Nathan instructed his tactical officer. He watched as the specifications for the EDF fighters flashed onto the screen. "Eagle two twenty-fives," he said more to himself than anyone else. He turned back toward the tactical station behind him. "I did my basic combat flight training in the two-seat variant."

"They're fast, that's for sure," the tactical officer said.

"Even faster once they clear the atmosphere. They use the same electrical propellant acceleration propulsion system that the Aurora uses. Gets them to max thrust really fast. Not much for onboard inertial dampening, though. When you punch an Eagle, you feel it."

"One minute to intercept."

"Picking up EDF identifier codes from all four targets," the tactical officer reported. "They're squawking as friendlies."

"Codes confirmed?" Nathan asked.

"Outdated, but time cycled properly. According to the EDF database, they're from the Intrepid."

"She went down over Australia during the invasion," Nathan said, "but that was more than two months ago." He turned back to the main view screen, watching the target tracks as they converged with the tracks representing the Talons that were intercepting them.

"Aurora Actual, Talon Eight. We have visual on the targets. They're EDF fighters all right. All four are Eagle two two fives. No weapons pods on the wings, and their weapons bays are open and empty. We're moving in behind them now."

"Comms coming in from the targets," Naralena announced.

"Put them up," Nathan ordered.

The overhead speakers crackled to life. *"UES Aurora, Slider Two Seven, leading a flight of four EDF Eagles. We are unarmed friendlies. Requesting permission to land and come aboard."*

Nathan looked at Mister Navashee to his left.

"I'm not picking up any ordnance, Captain. In fact, they're nearly out of propellant and they're running their power plants at barely enough energy to fly. Our cargo shuttles have a more threatening sensor profile than these guys."

“Set the deck green and hand them over to flight ops to be cycled aboard,” Nathan ordered. “Have security take them to medical arrival quarantine. As soon as they are cleared by medical, I want to speak to them.” Nathan turned and headed toward the exit. “I’ll be in the command briefing room with Montgomery and the cheng.”

The port and starboard spacecraft transfer airlocks opened simultaneously, their massive doors rising up into the overheads. Deck crew stopped what they were doing and watched as four unfamiliar fighters, two from each side of the aft end of the Aurora’s main hangar bay, rolled forward. The fighters rolled two thirds of the way across the hangar bay before they all pulled toward the center, coming to a stop in an overlapping parking pattern along the center of the hangar.

Eight armed Corinari security officers moved into position at the head of the newly arrived fighters as the transfer airlocks slammed shut again in preparation to recover the intercepting Talons. Apprehensive deck crewmen rolled debarkation ladders up to the EDF fighters as their cockpits slid backward to reveal their pilots.

The EDF pilots looked just as apprehensive as the Corinairan deck crews, as they too stared at all the unfamiliar spacecraft and equipment strategically placed about the Aurora’s cavernous hangar bay.

Lieutenant Ketang removed his standard EDF issue flight helmet as the young deckhand climbed up the ladder to assist him.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” the deckhand said in his typical Corinairan brogue.

The lieutenant looked at him funny. “Thanks...”

“McKenna, sir,” the deckhand answered. “We’ll take care of your spacecraft, sir.”

“Very well,” the lieutenant said, handing his helmet to the young man.

Mister McKenna placed the lieutenant's helmet on the platform beside him. "I'm not terribly familiar with this spacecraft, sir," he admitted. "Mind showing me how to safe your ejection seat?"

The lieutenant smiled as he rose up out of his seat and turned to face aft. "Red lever, just under that cowling, there," he explained, pointing. "Twist and pull up until it clicks and the red light under the cowling goes out."

"Ah, of course," Mister McKenna said as he followed the lieutenant's instructions and disabled the fighter's ejection systems.

"Where are you from, Mister McKenna?" the lieutenant asked as he climbed out of his spacecraft and set foot on the top of the boarding ladder.

"Aitkenna, sir."

"Aitkenna? Never heard of it."

"I wouldn't think so, sir," the deckhand said, a grin on his face. "It's a bit far from these parts, it is."

Lieutenant Ketang nodded, unsure of what the young man meant.

"Those men will take you to medical, sir," Mister McKenna advised.

"Of course," the lieutenant said, noticing the men with the guns. "Of course."

* * *

"Gentlemen," Nathan greeted as he entered the command briefing room. Vladimir was staring intently at the schematics of the Jung battleship being displayed on one of the view screens by Lieutenant Montgomery and one of his scientists. "Interesting stuff, I take it?" he said as he took his seat at the head of the conference table.

"That ship is enormous," Vladimir exclaimed. "It has so many redundant systems," he added, shaking his head in disbelief, "I am amazed you were able to take her down."

"Luck, and a few good Ghatazhak," Nathan said. "What have you learned about the Jar-Keurog, Lieutenant?"

"Not much, I am afraid," the lieutenant began. "At least we are confident that none of her basic life-support and power systems are rigged with fail-safes."

"Makes sense that they would not be," Vladimir said. "I mean, who would want their ship to explode if someone were trying to rescue them?"

"You might be surprised," Lieutenant Montgomery commented. "For now, it appears safe to move about the ship freely. I would like to concentrate our efforts, for the moment, on closing up and pressurizing all her compartments once again. It will make our work considerably easier, to say the least."

"Of course," Nathan agreed. "Any chance her weapons or her data core will be accessible?"

"Anything is possible," the lieutenant said. "However, the ship's control codes will first need to be overridden. For this, I will require additional manpower, as well as someone to translate the Jung language."

"I'm afraid we don't have any manpower to spare, at the moment," Nathan said.

"That's an understatement," Vladimir agreed. "I haven't seen this ship so badly damaged since you first rammed her into the Campaglia." Vladimir looked at the lieutenant, who looked somewhat annoyed by the lieutenant commander's reference. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I forgot."

Lieutenant Montgomery nodded, then turned back to the captain. "When I asked for additional manpower, I was referring to my people still aboard the Celestia."

"She's still five days out," Nathan reminded him.

"Can you not ferry them over using the Falcon," the lieutenant inquired, "just as you did with us?"

"I could, but I was planning on sending the Falcon to find you a translator on Tanna," Nathan explained, "and that will take a couple days."

"I see."

"Which is more important to you right now, Lieutenant? A few more scientists or a Jung translator?"

"As the scientists can do little without the translator, the decision is obvious."

"The Aurora's jump drive will be back online some time tomorrow," Vladimir said. "We can jump out to the Celestia and pick up your people then."

"Well, that's good news," Nathan said. "I feel awfully nervous without that jump drive online."

"It will still require a few test jumps to calibrate the new emitters," Vladimir warned, "but that should not take long."

"As long as we can jump," Nathan said. "That will be enough for me." He turned back to Lieutenant Montgomery. "Once you have your translator and your team, how long will it take to override the Jar-Keurog's control codes?"

"There is no way to tell at this point," the lieutenant told him. "I cannot even promise that I can override the codes."

"Can you give me a ballpark?" Nathan asked.

"A ballpark?" the lieutenant wondered, unfamiliar with the expression.

"A very rough estimate," Nathan explained.

"Assuming that we can find a translator, and assuming that the computer systems of the Jar-Keurog are not considerably more sophisticated than any of the other Jung systems we have seen... Perhaps a week, maybe two."

"Good enough," Nathan said. "Make it your top priority," he urged. "I want everything that ship has to offer available to us as soon as possible. Like I said, it was one huge lucky break for us to capture that ship, and I want to take full advantage of her."

"Of course."

* * *

Josh's visor became clear again as the Falcon's jump flash subsided. He scanned his instruments and checked his position. After an auto-jump series of forty-six single light year jumps, he was exactly where he was supposed to be; deep in the heart of the 72 Herculis system, five minutes from Tanna.

"That wasn't so hard," Josh mumbled as he called up the Tanna control frequencies on his comms. "Tanna Control, this is the Falcon. I'm five minutes from orbit. Requesting clearance to land."

"Falcon, Falcon, Tanna Control. What is the nature of your visit?"

"Tanna Control, Falcon. I have been sent by Captain Scott of the UES Aurora to speak on his behalf with Garrett Munras."

Josh waited for a response, but got none. He checked his instruments again. He was now three minutes from his de-orbit burn point. For a moment, he wondered if they were going to deny him permission to land, and if so, how they might try to deny him access to the surface. His preflight briefing from Major Prechitt indicated that the Tannans did not yet possess any interceptors, and all of the surface defenses around the original Jung bases had been destroyed by the Ghatazhak.

He looked at his instruments again. Two minutes until burn. It was not terribly critical for him to hit his burn mark, however, at his current velocity it would take considerable propellant to make an open turn. It was now standard operating procedure to use the least amount of propellant possible, as the Aurora had no idea what resource challenges lay ahead of her. A small deceleration burn at the precise moment would allow Tanna's gravity well to catch him and pull the Falcon into orbit.

One minute. "Tanna Control, Falcon. I'm still waiting for clearance, and I'm less than a minute from de-orbit burn."

"Falcon, Tanna Control. You are cleared to land. Stand by to receive landing coordinates. Representatives of Mister Munras will meet you there. Tanna Control, out."

Josh glanced at his comm-systems as the coordinates appeared on his message screen. He accepted the coordinates and adjusted his de-orbit burn rate so that he would be ready to break atmosphere as he came around the

far side of the planet. "Landing coordinates received. Falcon out."

Less than a minute later, Josh began his de-orbit burn, settling the Falcon into a shallow orbit around Tanna, his altitude above the planet decreasing as his orbital velocity decreased. Minutes later, his ship pierced the upper layers of the atmosphere and his thermal shields began to heat up. As usual, he came in too hot and too fast, diving toward the surface at the very edge of the Falcon's safe performance envelope. As he neared the surface, with his engines at zero thrust, he pulled his nose up gradually to level off a few kilometers from his touchdown point. The city slid under him at blinding speed as he throttled up his lift turbines to replace his diminishing lift as his ship's forward velocity fell below its stall speed. He was no longer flying in the aerodynamic sense. Instead, he was hovering atop four powerful tails of thrust coming from under the Falcon's lifting body. He pivoted the ship to the right, sliding sideways as he kept his nose facing the greeting party standing off to the side of the landing platform on the edge of the city. Moments later, the Falcon bounced gently onto her four, robust landing-gear wheels, and her lift turbines began to wind down.

Josh waited for the dust to settle before opening his canopy, a trick he learned years ago on the dust-swept surfaces of Haven. Tanna was far more lush and green than Haven could ever hope to be, even in its wettest seasons. He removed his flight helmet as his canopy rose. He took in a deep breath of fresh Tannan air. It was pleasant and moist, with the aroma of vast forests in the distance. Josh looked at the approaching group of men, four of them, their faces partially obscured by the large hooded cloaks worn by the men of Tanna. He stood tall as the access ladder deployed from the side of the Falcon, waving at the approaching men. He wondered if any of them were the same ones who had held guns to him and Loki during their first visit weeks ago.

Josh turned and climbed down the side of his ship, then pressed a button on the side access panel. The access ladder retracted, and the canopy of the ship closed and locked. He then punched in a code and placed the palm of his hand against the reader, arming the Falcon's security system. Captain Scott considered the Tannans allies, but allies or not, Josh was under strict orders not to allow anyone access to the Falcon's systems. With the ship properly locked down, any attempt to access the ship would result in the simultaneous destruction of the ship and its intruders. Josh paused for a moment, contemplating the fact that he had just booby-trapped his only means of return. Unfortunately, he had little choice, as he was under orders. There had been no contact with the people of Tanna since they had been liberated only a week earlier, and they could not risk the jump drive technology falling into the hands of the Jung, either directly or indirectly.

Josh turned and walked toward the approaching group of Tannans. "Gentlemen," he called out in as pleasant a tone as possible. "Any of you know Garrett Munras?"

"Young Joshua," a deep voice called from under the hood of the lead Tannan. The man removed his head to reveal his face as a broad smile fell upon it.

"Garrett!"

"It is good to see you well, young Joshua," Garrett replied. "From Loki's reports, I was worried for your health."

"All patched up and back in the thick of things," Josh declared.

"That is wonderful news, my young friend. And how are things on the Aurora?"

"A lot has happened in the last week, Garrett. Is there someplace nearby where we may talk?"

* * *

Nathan sat at the conference table in the command briefing room, examining the data pad just handed to him.

"Their ships have been scanned and inspected," Vladimir reported. "We did not find any Jung devices, hidden explosives, or any other devices that did not belong. They are standard issue Eagle two twenty-five fighters, all assigned to the Intrepid. Even their onboard service logs check out, right up to the day of the invasion."

"Their flight data recorders show no activity since the day of the invasion," Major Prechitt added, "other than today's flight that is."

"How the hell did they stay out of Jung hands for more than two months," Nathan wondered.

Lieutenant Telles entered the room, followed by two Corinari security guards. The lieutenant and the two guards went to the right, making room for the four Eagle pilots and the two guards following them. The pilots lined up abreast and stood at attention as the trailing guards moved to the left and took up position.

"Captain," Lieutenant Telles began as he moved to his position at the conference table, "may I present four of the Intrepid's fighter pilots. Lieutenants Ketang, Doragor, Opwalla, and Shay. Lieutenants, this is Captain Scott."

Nathan rose from his seat. "Gentlemen, it's a pleasure to meet you all," he said as he shook each pilot's hand. As he finished, he turned slightly and pointed to his officers who had also risen to greet the pilots. "This is our CAG, Major Prechitt, and our cheng, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy. I assume that you've already met Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Ketang said as he shook the other officers' hands. He looked at Nathan, a look of surprise on his face. "I thought William Roberts was the captain of the Aurora?"

"He was killed in action just after our departure from Earth," Nathan explained, "as were most of our crew. I was the ranking officer at the time and thus assumed command."

"Scott... aren't you the president's..."

"Yes, President Scott is my father."

"Did the president survive?" the lieutenant wondered.

"Yes, Lieutenant, the President of the NAU is alive and well."

"Sorry, sir," Lieutenant Ketang apologized. "It's just a lot to take in all at once."

Nathan smiled as he stepped back to his seat. "Trust me, Lieutenant, I know the feeling well. If you and your fellow pilots would please take a seat, we'd all like to hear how you managed to survive the invasion, as well as keep your birds hidden from the Jung for more than two months."

"Of course, sir," Lieutenant Ketang answered. The four pilots took their seats at the opposite end of the conference table. Lieutenant Telles also took a seat closer to the captain.

"Your transponders indicate you were all attached to the Intrepid," Nathan, opening the conversation.

"That's correct, sir. We were all on our second tour with the Intrepid. We had been in port for more than a month while the Intrepid was getting some refits. Most of our time had been spent planet-side, flying surface training sorties and such. We'd only been back aboard a few days when the Jung showed up."

"So, how'd you all end up hiding out on the surface?" Major Prechitt wondered.

"The Intrepid was put on alert as soon as the Jung showed up, and as best we can tell, she was tasked with protecting the OAP and the Celestia. Four frigates came in over the moon and launched on the OAP. The captain managed to take out most of the missiles, but at least one of them got through and the OAP and the Celestia were destroyed."

Nathan noticed the lieutenant's dour expression. "You'll be happy to know that the Celestia escaped unharmed."

Lieutenant Ketang's eyes widened. He looked at his fellow pilots, all of whose expressions showed similar surprise. "Seriously? But how? Where did she..."

"Long story," Nathan said, cutting him off. "Suffice to say that she is alive and well. She'll be arriving in five days."

Lieutenant Ketang smiled from ear to ear. "That's unbelievable."

"That's an understatement," Vladimir mumbled.

"Continue your story, Lieutenant," Nathan urged.

"Yes, sir. Well, after the Intrepid destroyed the frigates, she returned to low orbit to engage the Jung ships in orbit. We were launched to fly a ruse. We ran for the surface, as if we were going after Jung air assets supporting the ground attack. Instead, we came up behind one of the battle groups and finished off the already damaged elements."

"What happened to the Intrepid?" Vladimir asked.

"She went head-to-head with a few Jung ships, got pounded pretty bad. She was dead stick and on a collision course with a Jung cruiser. She tried to break the target up in the hope of surviving the collision, but it didn't work. Our last orders were to fight to bingo fuel, then ditch and go into hiding."

"Apparently, you did not ditch your spacecraft," Major Prechitt observed.

"I'm sorry, sir, we know we disobeyed orders, but we just couldn't. Not after all that happened. See, we were coming down in a loose flight of twelve. There were a couple more flights as well. When we got down to the deck, we broke up into four element units. Not everyone made it. There were Jung fighters all over the place. If it hadn't been for the Intrepid's debris falling everywhere, we'd have been detected and taken down as well. Our flight leader sacrificed himself and his wingman trying to lead the Jung away from the rest of us."

"What were you hoping to achieve, Lieutenant?" Nathan asked. "Were you planning on launching a four-man aerial assault against entrenched forces?"

"We didn't really have a plan, sir. We just got low and shut down all emissions, flying as cold as possible. We put down in a canyon in the mountains just west of Manza Bay.

Spent a few days pulling vegetation over our ships. We rigged them to self-destruct if anyone messed with them, then we walked to the nearest town and tried to blend in. Once word of the liberation got out, we figured it was time to come out of hiding. We heard the Aurora was back, we just weren't quite sure if it was true or not. So we decided to find out for ourselves."

"So you were living in East Africa all this time?" Nathan wondered.

"I don't know that you'd call it living," the lieutenant said. "More like surviving. The people there were nice enough, but it's kind of a different world there."

"Why didn't you make your way to the coast?" Nathan asked. "Surely the conditions there would be better."

"Felt like we needed to stay close to our ships, I guess. To be honest, we didn't really know what to do. We were pretty well cut off from world events."

"How did you even know about the liberation?"

"I guess the bigger the news, the faster it travels," the lieutenant responded. "As soon as we were aware of what was happening, we headed back into the mountains to get to our ships. Took us two days to get back to our ships and another two days to get them uncovered and ready to launch."

Nathan leaned back in his chair, looking at Vlad and the others. "Hell of a story, Lieutenant. I don't suppose there are any more Eagles hiding out down there?"

"I wouldn't be surprised, sir," the lieutenant answered. "The Intrepid carried eighty fighters. At least sixty of them launched that day. I'm pretty sure at least half of them survived to get down to the surface. But, they probably weren't as lucky as we were. I mean, we were hidden pretty far off the beaten path, if you know what I mean. Probably the last place the Jung would go looking for hidden fighters, right? If any of the others did manage to set down and hide, they'd likely be found sooner or later, wouldn't they?"

"One would think," Nathan agreed, "assuming the others disobeyed the order to ditch as well."

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Ketang looked around the room at the other men, most of whom had a different air about them. "Excuse me, Captain, I hope I'm not out of line by asking, but I've noticed something a bit, well, odd about your crew. They're not EDF, are they?"

"No, Lieutenant, most of them are not. In fact, other than yourselves, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy and I are the only other ones from Earth in this room."

"Really." The lieutenant looked around again.

"It's a really long story, Lieutenant," Nathan explained, "one that I'm sure you'll learn all about in the coming days."

"Of course, sir." The lieutenant frowned.

"Something else bothering you, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry sir, but, how the hell did one ship drive off all the Jung forces?"

"The Aurora is one hell of a ship, Lieutenant," Nathan answered, a wry smile on his face, "with one hell of a crew, I might add."

"Apparently," the lieutenant agreed, still appearing somewhat baffled by the captain's statement.

Nathan looked over the four pilots again. They were all weather-beaten and scruffy in appearance, much as one might expect having lived in a small African village for several months. "You have all been cleared by medical for now. If you'd like to return to active duty, you will need to undergo some briefings to be brought up to speed on events. There have been a lot of changes on board the Aurora since her departure from Earth, many of which you may find somewhat unbelievable. If you choose to serve aboard this ship, you will be under the command of Major Prechitt, who is not from Earth. He, like many others on our crew, are part of the Earth-Pentaurus Alliance. However, this is still an EDF ship, operating under EDF policies and procedures... for the most part," Nathan snickered.

“If it means we get to kill Jung, then I don’t care where your crew is from, sir, and I suspect my friends feel the same way.”

“Very well,” Nathan said, rising to his feet. “Major Prechitt, if you’ll take over from here?”

“Of course, Captain,” the major answered.

“Welcome aboard the Aurora, gentlemen,” Nathan told the four pilots.

Lieutenant Ketang rose to his feet, as did the other three pilots. “It will be an honor to serve under your command, Captain.” The lieutenant raised his arm and saluted, as did his fellow pilots.

Nathan returned the salute. “Gentlemen.”

CHAPTER TWO

Prince Casimir stormed into his office, tossing his coat to his aide as he passed. "The nobles are idiots!"

"I assumed that was common knowledge," Admiral Dumar remarked.

The prince spun around and glared at his old friend. "Not one of them has any sense of honor."

"Captain Scott's call for help is less than two days old," the admiral reminded Prince Casimir. "You cannot expect parliament to sound the trumpets and declare a call to arms at the drop of a hat."

"Even when it is the right thing to do?" Prince Casimir fell into his overstuffed sitting chair, exasperated by the day's events. "I must have talked with half of parliament in private today. Not one of them showed any willingness to act."

"Not one of them showed refusal to act, either."

"They don't dare," Prince Casimir scowled. "Not alone anyway. They don't have the courage."

"The nobles do what is best for the nobles," Admiral Dumar stated plainly. "This is how it has always been, and this is how it shall always be. It is the way our system is designed. The nobles rule over their realms. They once answered to your father..."

"If he were alive, they would do as he asked."

"They would do as you asked, had you not relinquished your power to the parliament."

"There was no other way, Max, you know as well as I..."

"Of course, of course. You might have taken a bit longer to relinquish power, but what is done is done."

"We must find a way to rally support."

"Perhaps a bribe?" the admiral suggested.

"The rules of parliament prohibit such actions."

"Since when did the nobles follow rules?"

"If only a Jung ship would appear and attack one of the nobles," Prince Casimir mused. "Then, we would see how quickly they would pledge their support."

"Unfortunately, that just may happen, should the Aurora fall to enemy hands."

"The very thought occupies my worst nightmares," Prince Casimir admitted. "We have but one jump-capable warship, and are unlikely to have another in the near future."

"And neither shall the Jung," Admiral Dumar insisted. "Captain Scott will not allow that to happen."

"Yes, of course you are correct," Prince Casimir agreed. "Nathan's honor was never in question," he added with a wave of his hand.

"Perhaps you should wait... a week, maybe two. Work up a plan that can be presented to parliament. One that does not appear too extreme in their eyes."

"You heard the message," Prince Casimir said. "Jung reinforcements will arrive in five months. If they are to retake their world, either they must do so before those reinforcements arrive, or deal with the reinforcements before they reach Sol. Either way, the Aurora needs our help."

"They do have the Celestia now as well," Admiral Dumar reminded the prince.

"An unarmed ship, without a jump drive."

"Given time, the Aurora can manufacture another jump drive."

"They have only two sets of fabricators and limited resources. Even if they could, it will take them months to complete, and the Celestia would still be unarmed."

"Perhaps you are underestimating the good captain," Admiral Dumar suggested. "He has proven to be quite resourceful when the stakes are high."

Prince Casimir stood and walked to the window overlooking the gardens. He thought back to his molo farm on Haven, to that fateful day when Jalea Torren had brought Nathan to his stand at the market. Everything had begun on that day. Even after decades of fighting, it was that day that made the difference. "Yes, he is at that. However, we owe everything to Nathan Scott and the Aurora, we all do. Even if some of us cannot see it. More importantly, we cannot risk apathy. To do so most assuredly invites disaster. No, too many have suffered, and too many have died. We will find a way."

* * *

Though most of his flights were mundane, there was one thing that Josh loved about flying the Falcon... its acceleration. Nowhere was its performance more apparent than during takeoff and climb-out. The time it took the Falcon to clear a planet's atmosphere was truly remarkable, even to the most seasoned pilots. Even after numerous such flights, it still put a smile on Josh's face.

"Have you flown before?" Josh asked as they stepped up onto the landing platform.

"On several occasions, yes," Garrett answered, "but never in such a craft."

"Then you're in for a treat."

Garrett looked at Josh, bewildered by the young pilot's grin.

Josh opened the access panel, entered in his code, then placed his palm on the reader window. The system beeped, flashed his name and ID on the status screen, then disarmed. Another tap of the keys and a small panel slid open on the side of the Falcon's nose, and a narrow boarding ladder extended downward.

"You go up first, and climb into the back seat," Josh instructed as the Falcon's canopy opened. "Start with your right foot, so you'll end up with your left foot in the top step. Then swing your right leg up and over the side of the

cockpit. The cockpit is rather wide, with panels on either side, so you'll have to swing your foot farther over than you think to avoid stepping on the side panels. Then grab the handle on the opposite side of the roll bar and pull yourself up onto your right leg. Then just lift your left leg up and in, and take a seat." Josh looked at Garrett. "You get all that?"

"Yes, yes. Start with my right foot, end with my left. It sounds a bit like mounting a *rahma*."

"A what?"

"I believe on Earth they are called horses."

"Horses?"

Garrett placed his right foot onto the first rung of the boarding ladder and started his ascent. At the top of the ladder, he did as Josh had instructed and climbed into the cockpit and took a seat. He was a tall man and found the procedure much easier than Loki.

Josh quickly ascended the ladder behind Garrett. He reached over behind Garrett's seat and pulled out Loki's helmet. "This is for you," he said as he handed Garrett the helmet. "You might have to adjust the inside a bit. I think your head is a bit larger than Loki's."

Garrett took the helmet and played with the interior padding as Josh pulled the shoulder harness down from the head of Garrett's seat. "Plug these into either side down next to your legs, crossing them over your chest," Josh explained as he pulled the right belt over and plugged it into the receptacle along the left side of Garrett's seat. "Then fasten the lap belt. The system will automatically cinch up and adjust to your body, as will the seat. It'll feel odd at first, but then it will become very comfortable."

"Understood," Garrett answered, a slight hint of trepidation in his voice as he pulled his left shoulder belt down and plugged it into the right side of his seat.

"These two red handles down here, between your legs... don't touch those," Josh warned. "Not unless you want to be blasted a few hundred meters away from the ship."

"Ejection system?"

"Exactly."

"And if we should need to eject?"

"Not gonna happen," Josh insisted. "But if it does, I'll let you know."

"Do you not wear pressure suits when flying this craft?" Garrett wondered.

"Normally, yes, but no worries, mate. We'll be fine." Josh pulled out the comm cable and attached it to Garrett's helmet. He then turned and climbed into his seat in front of Garrett, sliding down into the seat with ease. He donned his helmet and plugged it in, then buckled his restraints as he began activating systems. "Firing up the reactors." Josh's displays flickered to life as power began to surge through the system. "Reactor one is hot, reactor two is hot. Starting lift turbines."

Garrett felt the Falcon begin to vibrate as the four lift turbines began to spin up. Just as the whine of the turbines began to intensify, his helmet comms suddenly crackled to life, and the noise canceling systems made the whine of the turbines all but disappear. Fresh cool air began to blow from vents on either side of the console in front of him, and from down around his feet, as the canopy lowered into its closed position and sealed up. He noticed Josh pushing up on the canopy with both hands, as if checking that it were actually locked.

"Cabin pressure shows good," Josh's voice crackled over the helmet comms. "Main atmo drive is online, space drive is spinning up to standby."

Garrett looked around outside the Falcon. Several of his men were standing at a safe distance. He waved to them.

"Instruments are set, engines are green, reactors at full... we're good to go. You ready?"

"Ready," Garrett answered confidently. His eyes widened markedly as the Falcon leapt up off the ground, pitched up slightly, and then accelerated forward with amazing quickness. Despite the Falcon's inertial dampeners, Garrett felt himself being pushed back in his seat with considerable

force. A Tannan expletive exploded from Garrett's lips as the Falcon pitched up even more, transitioning from an aircraft to a rocket in mere seconds.

"I thought you said you were ready?" Josh teased.

"I thought I was," Garrett answered with some difficulty.

Josh smiled, then returned the Falcon's inertial dampeners back to maximum efficiency, ending his fun. "Oops, guess I missed a step."

The joke was lost on Garrett, who was merely happy to feel somewhat normal again. He looked back over his shoulder as his world fell away and the blackness of space enveloped them. "Do you always climb out with such quickness?" he wondered.

"It's what she was designed to do."

"I see. How long will our journey be?"

"Earth is a little over forty-five light years away. The Falcon can only jump one light year at a time, but we don't have to recharge between each jump, so we can jump repeatedly."

"It sounds like a complex set of maneuvers," Garrett commented. "And risky."

"You're right on both counts, but the auto-jump sequencer will do all the complex calculations for us. As far as the risk, well, if something goes wrong we'll probably never know."

"So, how long will it take us to make all those jumps?"

"Depends on the jump interval I set. We can jump every few seconds and get there in minutes, or we can jump every few minutes and get there in hours. It's up to you."

"Your recommendation?"

"I'd choose minutes, myself. It's not like there's much to see along the way."

"Very well, minutes it is, young Joshua."

"Okay then. Setting a rapid jump series back to Sol," Josh stated as he programmed in the parameters. "Your visor will turn opaque just before the jump series begins," he warned, "and it will stay that way until the last jump completes."

"And yours will do the same?"

"Sort of. Mine will synch with the jumps, so that I can quickly check my displays in between jumps."

"Seems a difficult way to pilot a spacecraft," Garrett said.

"Yeah, it is," Josh admitted as he finished entering the jump parameters into the auto-sequencer. "The Takarans are working on making the entire canopy turn opaque instead."

"That would make more sense," Garrett agreed. "So, when the series of jumps has completed and my visor clears, what will I see?" Garrett wondered.

Josh smiled again. "Earth."

Garrett also smiled. "I must admit, I never thought I would live to see the birthplace of humanity. Forty-five light years seems an unreachable distance."

"To be honest, a few months ago I would have said the same thing," Josh admitted. "Now, it seems like it's right next door."

"Amazing."

"Okay, we jump in twenty seconds," Josh announced. "Be sure to close your eyes tight, and keep them closed until you hear me say you can open them."

"I thought the visor will become opaque to protect us?"

"It will, but there's still plenty of light bleeding in from under the visor. Trust me on this. One or two jumps, no big deal. Forty-five jumps... you'll be seeing blue spots for a week."

"Understood."

"Jumping in three....."

Garrett closed his eyes tightly as instructed.

"Two....."

Josh did the same.

"One.....jumping."

The inside of Garrett's eyelids began to flash red-orange in two second intervals, as the Falcon's auto-jump sequencing system began the jump series. The jumps

continued to flash, one after the other, pausing just long enough for the Falcon's jump navigation computers to update the ship's position and adjust the parameters of the next jump before execution. Garrett felt nothing, the repeated flashing inside his eyelids the only indication he had that anything was happening. It seemed unreal, the idea that within two minutes they would travel halfway across the core.

Finally, the flashing ceased.

"Jump series complete," Josh announced over the helmet comms. "You can open your eyes."

Garrett opened his eyes and found himself gazing at the Earth growing rapidly in size before them. "Is that...?"

"Yup, that's the Earth."

Another Tannan phrase left Garrett's lips, this time one of astonishment and wonder. He looked to his left. "What is that? Is it a moon?"

"That's the Earth's moon," Josh answered.

"What do they call it?"

"Surprisingly enough, they just call it 'the moon.'"

"Odd. Why would one name a moon, 'moon'?"

"You know, that's what I said."

"It's like calling a *saba* a *saba*."

"What's a *saba*?" Josh wondered.

"On Earth, they call them dogs."

"Not helping."

"A small domesticated animal used as a pet, or for hunting." Garrett could not stop staring at the Earth, which now filled most of the forward canopy. "There is so much water."

"I said that too. I think it's like eighty percent water or something."

"Where is the Aurora?" Garrett wondered.

She just went around the backside of the planet," Josh explained. "We'll catch up to her in a few minutes."

Garrett shook his head. "Simply amazing," he reiterated.

* * *

Nathan approached the Falcon as Garrett climbed down the boarding ladder. "Pleasure to see you again, Mister Munras," he called out over the noise of the Aurora's busy hangar deck.

"The pleasure is all mine, Captain," Garrett answered as he shook the Captain's hand. "I hope that you do not take offense, but I did not expect to see any of you again, let alone this soon."

"We've had a surprising turn of events, to be sure," Nathan responded. "Allow me to introduce our linguistics specialist, Naralena Avakian."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, sir," Naralena said, extending her hand.

"An honor, miss," Garrett returned.

"It is my understanding that you understand the Jung language, then?" Nathan asked, seeking confirmation.

"Of course. Most Tannans are fluent in the Jung language, both spoken and written. To be treated better than a slave under Jung rule, it is a necessity."

"Then you would be able to translate some Jung for us?"

"Of course. What is it you wish me to translate?"

"You saw the disabled Jung battleship on approach?" Nathan wondered.

"Yes, of course." Garrett looked confused. "You wish me to translate a battleship?"

"Lieutenant Montgomery and several technicians are on board that ship now. However, they need help understanding the interfaces, which of course, are all in Jung. I was hoping that you could not only offer assistance in the translation, but also, teach Naralena about the Jung language as well."

"It is a complex language, Captain," Garrett warned. "It is not easily learned."

"I am a quick study," Naralena assured him.

"I am certainly willing to try," Garrett promised, smiling.

“Excellent,” Nathan exclaimed. “We have a shuttle waiting to take you both to the Jar-Keurog.”

“Is there some urgency I should know of?” Garrett wondered.

“I would like to be sure that the battleship is not about to self-destruct, but other than that, no urgency.”

Garrett smiled. “I understand, Captain. We will depart immediately.”

“Thank you, Garrett.” Nathan turned to Naralena, and the two Ghatazhak troops standing behind her. “Naralena, if you would show Mister Munras to the shuttle.”

“Of course. This way, sir.”

Naralena led Garrett and the two Ghatazhak soldiers toward the waiting shuttle, as Josh climbed down from the Falcon.

“How were things on Tanna?” Nathan asked Josh as he approached from the bottom of the Falcon’s boarding ladder.

“Seemed okay. A bit chaotic. I’m pretty sure approach control was nothing more than a guy on comms with no clue what was going on outside of their atmosphere.”

“No ships in the system?”

“A couple cargo shuttles running between the fighter base on the fifth moon, and a light cargo ship in orbit, interplanetary at best. I got full sensor sweeps and vids on the way in and out, just like you asked.”

“Good, turn it over to intelligence,” Nathan ordered.

“Transmitted it all to them as soon as we jumped into the system, Captain.”

“Well done, Josh.”

“What’s with the goons?” Josh wondered. “You don’t trust Garrett?”

“Trust, but verify,” Nathan told him. “Remember that.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

“There are many Ghatazhak aboard this vessel,” Garrett said as they approached the Jar-Keurog’s control center.

"They were the ones who originally captured this ship. They have taken the task of protecting it to heart, I'm afraid."

"By the look in their eyes, I believe they do not trust me."

"The Ghatazhak do not trust anyone," Naralena told him. "In turn, no one trusts the Ghatazhak."

"I thought they were honorable warriors."

"It depends on your definition of honor, I suppose."

Garrett's eyebrows raised. "Quite true."

"Where I come from, the Ghatazhak are greatly feared," she explained, "for when they come, they bring death with them."

"Is this not expected of a warrior," Garrett asked, "to kill his enemy?"

"The Ghatazhak do not always limit their killing to combatants," Naralena stated with obvious disdain.

"Surely they have their reasons."

"I suppose they do. That doesn't mean that everyone agrees with their reasons."

Naralena and Garrett stepped into the control room and found Lieutenant Montgomery and two Corinairan computer technicians studying the consoles along one side of the room. The lieutenant looked their way, then turned toward them as he stood.

"Lieutenant Montgomery, Garrett Munras, of Tanna," Naralena introduced.

"Mister Munras," the lieutenant answered, extending his hand in greeting. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine," Garrett answered politely. "I understand you require assistance translating Jung?"

"Desperately," the lieutenant admitted. "Most importantly, we wish to avoid triggering any fail-safe devices."

"I'm impressed that you have not yet done so," Garrett said, "as the Jung are quite fond of such devices."

Lieutenant Montgomery turned back toward the consoles he and the technicians had been studying. "I believe these consoles are for the ship's main power systems."

Garrett leaned over and studied the screens for a moment. "I'm afraid you are mistaken, Lieutenant. These consoles monitor the ship's sewage processing systems." He looked around the compartment a moment, moving from console to console. "In fact, I do not believe this is the room in which you should start. All of these systems are mundane secondary systems. Sewage treatment, water reclamation, oxygen processing and distribution... this is basically a big environmental control room."

"Then it is a very good thing that you are here to help us," the lieutenant admitted.

"Perhaps we should look for the proper compartment?" Garrett suggested with a smile.

* * *

"All systems are online," Mister Riley reported. "The jump drive shows ready, Captain."

"Very well. Take us to a higher orbit, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir. Climbing to higher orbit," the helmsman answered.

"Our first jump will be to within a few hundred kilometers of the Celestia," Nathan instructed. "However, keep us well to one side of her course. We don't want to slam into her if we come out long."

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered. "Plotting a jump to three hundred kilometers short of the Celestia's estimated position, one hundred kilometers off her course."

"Position of the Falcon?" Nathan asked his tactical officer.

"The Falcon is holding station, five kilometers off from the Jar-Keurog, same orbital altitude."

"Very well."

"Passing five hundred kilometers," Mister Riley reported. "Jump plotted and locked."

"Very well. You may execute the jump when ready."

"Activating auto-jump system," Mister Riley reported. "Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

Once again, the blue-white jump flash swept over the Aurora's bridge.

"Jump complete."

"Verifying position," Mister Navashee announced from the sensor station. "Position verified." He turned to look at the captain. "Only a zero point zero zero four variance in distance, sir."

"Not bad," Nathan admitted. "But we're going to have to do better than that before we start doing interstellar jumps again."

"I have the Celestia on the board, Captain," the tactical officer reported. "Four one two kilometers out, one hundred to port, four above."

"I have the Celestia on comms, sir."

"Put them up."

"*Aurora, Celestia Actual,*" Cameron's voice called across the overhead speakers. "*It's good to see you again.*"

"The feeling is mutual, Commander," Nathan responded. "Are Lieutenant Montgomery's people ready?"

"*And waiting, sir.*"

"We'll send a shuttle over to pick them up. Do you need anything?"

"*Some fresh vegetables would be nice,*" Cameron answered.

"I'll see what we have," Nathan promised. "Aurora Actual, out." Nathan turned to the comm officer. "Ask the galley to add the commander's large salad to the supply shuttle."

"Aye, sir," the comm officer answered.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "We're three hundred thousand kilometers above the Earth, headed for orbital insertion in one minute."

"Very good," Nathan answered. "Variance, Mister Navashee?"

"About the same sir. We'll definitely need to do some calibrations and more test jumps."

"At least we can jump enough to fight if we have to," Nathan said.

"Captain! Flash traffic from the Falcon," the comm officer reported. "Winnipeg is under attack. Organized forces, possibly as many as fifty, using energy weapons."

"Contact Lieutenant Telles and inform him of the situation. Tell him to ready a response team."

"Yes, sir."

"Give me the Falcon," Nathan added.

"Channel open."

"Falcon, Aurora Actual. Tell me what you know."

"Aurora Actual, Falcon. The attack started a few minutes ago. There was a major explosion in downtown Winnipeg, near the temporary NAU capitol building. Lots of civilian casualties, energy weapons fire..."

"Sir, I'm picking up at least forty separate energy weapons being discharged in the combat area," Mister Navashee reported. "Half the capitol building is gone, as well as the two buildings next to it."

"Captain, Telles," Lieutenant Telles called over the comms.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Nathan answered.

"Suspect these are Jung regulars. Their goal is obviously to topple one of the few governments on Earth that have managed to take hold early on."

"And if they succeed?" Nathan wondered.

"Every legitimate government entity they take down makes the next one more difficult to arise. As I understand the Earth's pre-invasion geopolitical makeup, the NAU was one of the eight major powers. I believe it is imperative that this attack be repelled at all costs."

"Recommendations?"

"Go down full force, complete with maximum air support. Send a clear message that all organized attacks against legitimate governments will be met with maximum force."

Nathan cringed. "Is that really necessary, Lieutenant?"

"Considering the fragility of Earth society at the moment, yes, sir, it is. Strength is what your people need right now. Strength that they can see, strength that they can believe in."

Nathan looked about the bridge for a moment as he thought. "Very well. Coordinate with the CAG for air support and prepare for immediate deployment."

"Yes, sir. Telles out."

"Tactical, yellow deck," Nathan ordered. "We'll set green once we make stable orbit."

"Yellow deck, aye."

"Falcon, Aurora Actual. You still there?"

"Aurora Actual, Falcon, affirmative."

"Jump down and get us some live recon. Provide what air support you can to help out the NAU security forces until our forces get on the ground."

"Yes, sir."

"Comms, relay that order to flight ops so they know what the Falcon is up to. Make sure the Falcon's data feed is patched through to Lieutenant Telles's tactical systems as well."

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Navashee, keep your eyes open for anything coming out of FTL. There's always the chance that this is a diversionary tactic. I don't want to get jumped by some loitering Jung gunboat when we're looking planet-side."

"Aye, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

The tactical officer looked at his captain. "You don't really think there are Jung ships hiding in the system, do you, sir?"

"No, but I'd prefer to be ready. I'm getting tired of surprises. So you keep your eyes open as well."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

"Recon vids from the Falcon show enemy force strength at approximately one hundred thirty combatants," Lieutenant Telles told the master sergeant as they strode quickly across the Aurora's main hangar deck toward their waiting combat shuttle. "Based on their movements and firing patterns, at least half of them are Jung soldiers."

"I didn't think there were that many left on the whole planet," the master sergeant commented.

"Apparently there are." The lieutenant paused at the foot of his shuttle's boarding ramp and looked at the other shuttles in the loading line. "Are we ready?"

"All six combat shuttles are loaded and ready to go, six men in each," Master Sergeant Jahal answered. "The rest will ride down behind us in the cargo shuttles."

"A flight of twelve Talons is launching now," Lieutenant Telles said. "They'll get there a few minutes ahead of us and soften the LZ up."

"How do you want to deploy, sir?" the master sergeant asked as they boarded their shuttle.

"I'll decide once we get real-time data on the fight," the lieutenant said as he took his seat and tapped his control module on his wrist. "Pilot, Telles. How are we looking?"

"All shuttles loaded and ready," the pilot responded over the lieutenant's helmet comms. "Flight has given us the deck. We can launch whenever you're ready."

"Very well. Launch," the lieutenant stated calmly.

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant tapped his comm-control on his wrist, changing comm channels again. "Falcon, Telles."

"*Telles, go for Falcon,*" Loki answered over the comms. Lieutenant Telles could hear the strain in Loki's voice as the Falcon maneuvered.

"Talons will be there in six minutes. We'll be there in ten. Continue providing close-air support until the Talons get

there, then orbit the area so you can feed real-time data to us and combat control."

"Understood," Loki answered. *"Make it quick, Lieutenant. NAU forces are getting pounded down there!"*

Lieutenant Telles felt the artificial gravity lighten as the shuttle rolled out of one of the Aurora's three transfer airlocks and out onto her flight apron. He looked at the time display on the inside of his combat helmet visor. "Nine minutes, twenty seconds. Telles out."

Nathan entered the Aurora's combat command center. The room was dark, with light only showing where it was needed. As in all compartments, the upper and lower edges of the room were lit with a red glow that signified the ship was at general quarters. On either side of the compartment, technicians sat at their consoles, each studying the data streaming onto the displays. Radio chatter could be heard in the background, including cries for help from the NAU security forces currently under attack on the streets of Winnipeg below.

"Captain in combat!" the guard at the hatch announced as Nathan passed.

Nathan moved to the center of the room, taking position next to Mister Willard at the tactical display table at the center of the compartment. "How are we looking?"

"Flight reports the Talons will start their first attack run in five minutes, sir," Mister Willard answered. "The Ghatazhak will be there in seven. The Talons will have time for one full pass on the targets before the combat shuttles move in to deploy."

Nathan listened to the desperate radio calls in the background. "Are they going to last that long?" he wondered aloud.

"They can't descend any faster, sir, not without risking damage to their thermal shielding."

"Are you ready for this?" Nathan asked, sensing Mister Willard's apprehension.

"Lieutenant Telles briefly outlined our responsibilities, Captain," Mister Willard explained. "Our primary tasks are to coordinate with the NAU forces, and to ensure that the Ghatazhak are continuously fed real-time battle data." He looked at the captain. "He also warned us that we may need to provide orbit-to-surface fire support."

Nathan sighed as he looked at the holographic display of the Earth's surface hovering over the tactical plotting table. "How long until we're in position?"

"The Aurora will have a firing solution on the engagement zone in ten minutes. However, the window will only last ten minutes. After that, the angles are too steep, and our ability to avoid collateral damage will become severely degraded."

"I'm hoping we don't have to use the quads at all, Mister Willard," Nathan reminded him. "Even with a straight-down solution, there's going to be collateral damage. Remember Tanna?"

Mister Willard caught Nathan's solemn expression as the captain turned and headed toward the exit. "Yes, sir. I remember."

The Falcon snap-rolled onto her starboard side as bolts of red energy streaked under their left wing. Josh pulled back hard on his flight control stick and brought the Falcon into an impossibly tight right turn as their nose turret continue to fire on the Jung targets below.

"Are you going to hit something with that cannon, Loki?"

"If you'll stop jerking us around so much, sure!"

Josh rolled the interceptor back to port and initiated another tight turn in the opposite direction, as if responding to Loki's complaint. "They are shooting back, you know."

"No kidding."

"How far out are the Talons?"

"Two minutes," Loki answered as the Falcon leveled off and started to descend toward the engagement area again. "Let's make one more attack pass before we climb up out of their way."

"Circle the outside again?"

"You got it," Loki answered as he keyed his mic. "Combat, Falcon. We're going to pound the perimeter of the engagement area one more time before the Talons come in. Tell those NAU guys to keep their heads down again."

"Falcon, Combat. Understood. Talons on station in ninety seconds."

"Hurry up, Josh," Loki warned.

"Ten seconds. Give me ten seconds." Josh advanced his throttles and rolled back to starboard, powering the Falcon through another tight turn to bring them around the outside edge of the battle raging below them. He looked out the side of his canopy as the interceptor laid on its side. The streets of Winnipeg streaked below them as they rotated around. Just over a kilometer ahead, he could see the red bolts of energy traveling in all directions. From building to building, from wrecked car to open doorway, and streaking up into the air. He could also see the yellow muzzle flashes of the NAU's projectile weapons as they tried to repel the Jung attack on what was left of their capitol building.

"Port or starboard?" Loki asked as the Falcon rolled out of its turn.

"Port side," Josh answered as he leveled off just above the rooftops.

"Got it." Loki angled the nose turret to port in preparation as the Falcon bounced along the thermal updrafts of the city below. Loki found turbulence the most difficult part of atmospheric flight, especially at low altitudes. The waves of heat radiating from the asphalt and concrete below made the ride feel like they were driving down a dirt road back on Haven. It made it difficult to accurately tap the relatively small buttons on the Falcon's touch screens. He found himself having to press his thumb

and little finger against unoccupied areas of the touch screen in order to avoid hitting the wrong button with his forefinger. "One of these days, we need to design a better interface for this kind of flying."

"She wasn't designed for this type of flying," Josh reminded him.

"Maybe, but that's the kind we've been doing lately."

Josh smiled. "Here we go."

Red bolts of energy began to stream up from the engagement area toward the onrushing Falcon. Loki activated their nose turret, and its twin barrels began spitting out a continuous stream of energy bolts toward already mapped Jung positions on the surface. Chunks of asphalt, concrete, and masonry flew in all directions as the bolts of energy from the Falcon's cannons tore apart everything they touched. Jung soldiers ducked for cover as destruction rained down upon them. Those who continued firing at the passing interceptor did not last long, as the Falcon's targeting system locked in on their energy weapons and tore them apart as well in an explosion of combat armor, blood, tissue, and bone.

"Yes!" Loki exclaimed as he watched the magnified image provided by the turret's gun cameras. "You see!" he exclaimed, looking up momentarily toward Josh in the seat in front of him. "Keep her steady and I can do some damage!" He looked back down at his displays as red warning lights began to light up. His eyes widened. "Oh, shit! Break right!"

Josh immediately snap-rolled the interceptor onto its right side and pulled the nose up hard as he slammed the throttles forward. There was an explosion, and the Falcon's tail lurched to the right as something struck their port side with considerable force.

"Fuck!" Josh felt his head snap to the left as the interceptor lurched to starboard. "So can they, Loki! So can they!"

"We're okay!" Loki assured him as he scanned the systems displays on his side console.

"What the hell was that?"

"Must have been a shoulder-launched anti-aircraft weapon of some sort!"

"The Jung have those?"

"All systems are good! It must have glanced off our hull!"

"Falcon, Talon Leader. Climb clear. We attack in fifteen seconds."

"Talon Leader, Falcon," Loki answered as Josh pulled the nose back and pushed the throttles forward. "Understood, climbing out. Be aware, ground forces have anti-aircraft weapons."

"Understood. Talon Leader, out."

Josh looked back over his left shoulder as they continued to climb, gazing at the destruction they had just caused. "That was fun."

Loki shook his head as his eyebrows raised.

"Falcon is orbiting the engagement area," the pilot reported over Lieutenant Telles's combat helmet comms. "She's sending real-time data now."

"Understood," the lieutenant answered as he activated his combat data display and connected it to the Falcon's data feed. "Listen up, gentlemen," he called out to the other five men in the compartment. The lieutenant pulled a small device out of the right thigh pocket of his combat armor and activated it. "We're getting live data feeds now." He held the device out in front of him, and a holographic display of the engagement zone came to life just above the surface of the device, giving everyone a real-time, three-dimensional view of the battle they were about to join.

"Ugly," Corporal Sinnott commented.

"Just the way we like it," Sergeant Alluti added.

"Combat Shuttles Two, Three, Four, and Five will insert on all four sides of the engagement area," the lieutenant

explained. "It's too tight, and the enemy is not wearing uniforms. The only way our targeting computers can tell the difference between friend and foe at this point is when the target is carrying an energy weapon."

"Or when the target starts shooting at us," Corporal Sinnott added.

"True. Unfortunately, we are a foreign power here, and as such, tensions are high. There has already been a lot of collateral damage as a direct result of our combat actions on this world. So, restrict your auto-fire to only those targets carrying energy weapons."

"And if one of those NAU boys should pick up a Jung weapon?" Sergeant Alluti asked.

"Then he'll be a dead combatant, just like the others."

"And no longer tainting his government's forces with stupidity," Sinnott added.

"Where are we going to insert?" Master Sergeant Jahal asked, trying not to smile. He already knew the answer.

"Right in the middle, along with Six."

"Where else?" the master sergeant chuckled.

Sergeant Alluti smiled. "Yeah, baby."

"That's why I like you, Lieutenant," Corporal Sinnott said. "You keep things exciting."

"All that training, might as well use it," the lieutenant said with a wry smile.

They watched as Talon fighters streaked through the holographic image, explosions in their wake, as they pounded the enemy positions in preparation for the Ghatazhak landings.

"Those Corinari can fly," Corporal Sinnott said. "They smell like *quilar* feces, but they can fly."

"*One minute*," the pilot's voice called over the comms.

The roar of jet turbines faded away as the last Talon fighter climbed up into the sky. Smoke drifted between the buildings and across the rubble-filled streets as the

cacophony of the bombardment was replaced with an eerie silence.

Officer Tremblay peeked out from the blown-out window of the coffee shop where he and several of his fellow NAU security officers had taken shelter.

"Are you nuts?" Officer Gagnon wondered.

"The bombardment stopped," Officer Tremblay said as he scanned the streets.

"He's right," Officer Lee agreed. She too looked out the window.

"Which means that the Jung are going to open up again, so get your heads back inside so you don't get them blown off!" Gagnon growled.

"Relax, Sam," Tremblay said.

A chunk of the window frame exploded next to Officer Tremblay's head, causing him to fall backward. Officer Lee swung her automatic weapon around and opened fire in the direction that the energy blast had come.

"Relax, Sam," Officer Gagnon jeered as he too raised his weapon and fired. "Still got your head, there, Johnny?"

A distant whine of jet turbines suddenly became overwhelming as two combat shuttles came in quickly and took a hovering position over the nearby intersection, their door guns blazing in all directions.

"What the hell?" Officer Lee exclaimed as she pulled back and shielded her eyes from the dust being blown into the room from outside.

Officer Tremblay crawled back to the blown-out window and peered through the incoming dust. Nearly simultaneously, twelve armored soldiers jumped from two hovering combat shuttles, falling at least twenty meters to the rubble-strewn street below. They landed with surprisingly loud thuds, as they raised their weapons and began firing at Jung positions with amazing accuracy. The cluster of armor-clad soldiers did not disperse and run for cover as one might expect, but instead they held their ground, gathering in a tight circle as they continued to fire

in all directions. After nearly a minute of continuous fire, they began to separate into pairs, each pair moving off in different directions. Seconds later, they were gone, having disappeared into the surrounding buildings. All except for two of them, who now stood in the shambles of a coffee shop, with three NAU officers staring up at them from the floor.

"Who the fuck are you?" Officer Gagnon asked in disbelief.

"You're Ghatazhak, aren't you?" Officer Tremblay asked.

Lieutenant Telles's visor retracted upward into his combat helmet. "That is correct," he answered as both he and Master Sergeant Jahal moved into position alongside the doorway. "I am Lieutenant Telles, commanding officer of this platoon. What is your estimated remaining force strength?"

Officers Tremblay and Lee both looked at Officer Gagnon, who was senior to both of them.

"I don't know," Officer Gagnon admitted. "We lost contact with command ten minutes ago. We could be all that's left, for all we know."

"How many did you start with?" the lieutenant asked.

"At least sixty, but..."

"Thirty-six of us have just joined the fight," Lieutenant Telles said, cutting the officer off in mid-sentence. "Twelve, and four more groups of six, each on a different side of the new capitol mall. Fifty more will be landing to secure the outer perimeter in approximately five minutes."

"Then those fighters, they were ours... I mean, yours?" Officer Lee asked.

"Indeed," Telles answered, "and they will be back to provide air support, so please, do not fire on them... or us."

"Can we fire on the Jung?" Officer Tremblay asked.

"Fire on anyone carrying an energy weapon," Lieutenant Telles began.

"Not all of them are carrying energy weapons," Officer Gagnon pointed out.

"I assume that you can tell the difference between friend and foe, and take appropriate action as needed?" Telles asked.

"Yes, we can," Officer Tremblay answered.

"Very well," the lieutenant said. "Remain and hold this position until the battle is over. You have already been marked as friendlies by our tactical systems." The lieutenant pulled his visor back down from the brow of his combat helmet. "All units, report in," he called over his comm-set.

"Where are you going?" Officer Tremblay wondered.

Because of the lieutenant's visor, his eyes were not visible to them, but the confidence in his smile was. "To destroy the enemy."

"Combat Shuttles One through Six all report successful deployment," the flight operations supervisor reported. "They are taking up station to provide support as needed."

"Just be sure they stay out of range of those Jung energy weapons," Major Prechitt reminded. "Those are all the combat shuttles we have left."

"Yes, sir."

"How long until the cargo shuttles deliver the remaining ground forces?" Nathan asked his CAG.

"Five minutes before they start dropping perimeter forces," Major Prechitt answered. "It will take them about five minutes to get them all in position on the ground once they start deployment."

"So, ten minutes before the lieutenant can make his squeeze play, then."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan looked at his watch. "In twelve minutes, we'll no longer be able to offer orbital fire support, should it become necessary."

"I'm sure Lieutenant Telles is well aware of that, Captain."

"Of that I have no doubt."

"We just picked up something from one of the few working security cameras on the street," the president's security chief reported as he pressed a button on the remote. Video images replayed on the screen on the wall of the makeshift, underground bunker used by the NAU as a command center.

President Scott squinted as he studied the images. Men in black body armor falling from hovering combat shuttles, and landing safely despite the great height of their falls. No sooner had they landed than the combatants opened fire. Each soldier held a weapon in each hand, firing into the surrounding buildings as small laser turrets fired repeatedly from their shoulders at targets located off camera. "Those are Ghatazhak, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir, that's what we believe."

"I thought the Aurora was away?"

"It seems she has returned, sir."

"How many of them?"

"Unknown, sir. At least twelve on this video, but we're getting reports of more of them dropping in on all sides of us."

"Then those fighters, they were from the Aurora as well," President Scott exclaimed.

"Yes, sir. If they hadn't come, we'd probably all be dead by now."

"Remind me to thank them later," President Scott told him as he watched the video replay again. "Incredible." He turned to his security chief. "But will they be enough?"

"From what we've seen of them so far, they just might be."

Thick red bolts of energy streaked across the streets, slamming into buildings and blowing holes in the walls as the Jung attackers tried to destroy the fast moving

Ghatazhak soldiers. Every thick red bolt was met with several narrow red beams as Ghatazhak lasers fired at the source of the energy weapons fire.

The Jung soldiers were well trained, and after firing, they quickly changed positions, even if only slightly, to avoid being targeted. It did not always work, as the Ghatazhak targeting systems were both fast and accurate.

Lieutenant Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal dove through the last remnants of the already shattered window, tucking into balls and rolling back up to their feet on the inside of the room. As they came to their feet, each of them pivoted around, away from one another, and came around to fire on their pursuers. It was a game of cat and mouse, drawing the Jung out to pursue them, then turning the tables on the overconfident conquerors of the birthplace of humanity. Robust bolts of energy leapt from their weapons in rapid succession, striking all four of the Jung soldiers who had so foolishly followed them. The Jung soldiers shook violently as the Ghatazhak energy blasts tore through their bodies, sending burning chunks of flesh and bone flying in all directions. Within moments all four bodies lay smoldering on the cracked sidewalk outside the window.

Lieutenant Telles looked at his tactical display on the inside of his visor. The number of red dots indicating Jung positions had already been reduced by one quarter of its original number. However, he knew that not every enemy combatant had been identified by the Ghatazhak tactical logic systems. They had been designed to identify all humans not transmitting Ghatazhak ID signals as enemy targets, especially if they carried weapons or approached them in an aggressive fashion. In this theater of war, identities were often difficult. Not all of the NAU forces were yet properly uniformed. They tried to all wear similar combinations of blue and white, but so did many of their enemy, further blurring the lines.

"Inner perimeter is in place," one of his men reported over the comms.

"Very well. Hold positions. Do not advance until the outer perimeter is in position as well. Meanwhile, we will continue attacking the core forces."

"Yes, sir," the leader of the inner perimeter group responded. But next time, sir, how about we get to play in the middle?"

"We will see," Lieutenant Telles answered.

"Not a chance," Master Sergeant Jahal insisted.

Lieutenant Telles peeked around the corner of the building. "The street is clear for now. But my display shows six Jung in the storefront around the corner."

"Another dance then?" the master sergeant said.

Lieutenant Telles did not answer, instead stepping out through the empty window box onto the sidewalk outside, moving quickly along the wall already pot-marked from previous energy weapon blasts. He glanced up at his data display, noting the position of the enemy as he reached the corner of the building. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed what he already knew, that Master Sergeant Jahal was only a step behind him.

Telles stepped out into the open, firing with precision as he charged down the street, jumping over rubble. Three combatants holding energy weapons fell before the others reacted and spun around to open fire on the two charging Ghatazhak.

Telles dodged from side to side, ducking and weaving, changing his target profile whenever possible as he advanced. Red bolts of energy flew past him. The first six shots missed him by millimeters. The seventh shot glanced off his left thigh armor just above the utility compartment. He dove to the right as the master sergeant dove to the left. Again they rolled and came back to their feet, still firing. Two more Jung dropped in smoldering heaps. More energy bolts rained down from rooftop positions on either side of them. As Telles and Jahal continued firing at the targets in front of them, their shoulder-mounted laser turrets snapped upward and fired at the snipers above. Three snipers took direct

hits, sending them sprawling backwards in agony. The fourth took the shot to his shoulder and spun around, lost his balance, and tumbled over the edge to the pavement below, landing a few meters behind Telles. The lieutenant took a brief moment to turn one of his handheld weapons back toward the fallen sniper, putting three energy bolts into him for good measure before darting off to one side of the street. The Jung weapons fire had been decreased by a factor of six in less than a minute.

"Telles, Brattak," his subordinate's voice called over his helmet comms. *"All boots on ground."*

"Telles to all units. Close the box." The lieutenant peeked out from behind his cover. "Your forces are surrounded and vastly outnumbered!" he hollered. "Surrender and you shall not be harmed."

"You don't really think they're going to surrender," Jahal said, fighting back a laugh.

"I sure hope not."

"You want to get one more charge in before it's too late?"

"Why waste the energy?" the lieutenant answered. "They'll be coming our way in a few minutes."

"How many more minutes left before we lose our firing solution?" Nathan wondered.

"Three minutes," Major Prechitt answered. "Telles has requested that our Talons make another attack run. Pinpoint munitions, at these three locations," he explained, pointing at the holographic representation of the engagement area.

"Those targets are awfully close to the NAU's underground bunker, aren't they?"

"Blast yields have been dialed down to minimums," the major assured him. "As long as they don't miss, it shouldn't be a problem."

Nathan sighed. "Bird farts."

Major Prechitt looked at Nathan. "Pardon me, sir?"

"Something one of my flight instructors once said to me," Nathan answered. "Atmospheres are in a constant state of flux. Every little thing can affect your aircraft, all the way down to bird farts." Nathan looked at the major, then raised his left eyebrow. "Not literally, of course..."

"I get your point, sir. Nevertheless, I'm sure the lieutenant has taken, uh, bird farts, into consideration."

Three Talon fighters climbed straight up at full throttle, gaining several kilometers of altitude in mere seconds. They cut their power, waited until they had lost enough energy, then pitched back over in three different directions, coming into vertical dives toward the engagement zone directly below. Their weapons bays opened up, and each fighter released their respective ordnance as they veered outward away from each other and away from the falling weapons. The weapons continued to fall toward the surface as the Talons pulled away. Tiny fins along the weapons' surfaces made minute adjustments as the weapons maneuvered toward their target points directly below.

"Weapons away," the lead Talon pilot reported over the lieutenant's helmet comms. "Everyone get your heads down and your asses covered. Twenty seconds to detonation."

"Telles to all units. Take cover and power down all systems." The lieutenant ducked behind a large pile of building debris and scrambled to get underneath as he too powered down all his weapons and tactical combat systems. His visor display disappeared, and his comms went dead as he wiggled in under a large slab of concrete lying against the side of the building. He could have moved inside the building, but he needed to be where he could get back into action in an instant. He continued counting down in his head as he closed his eyes. Three.....two.....one.....

Three bright flashes lit the waning daylight, making it appear to be midday for an instant. A shock wave of displaced air struck the area, knocking over most of what was still standing. Several chunks of falling debris struck the concrete slab over him, but the high angle of the slab deflected the debris away.

A second later, the shock wave subsided. The lieutenant powered up his weapons as he came out from under the concrete slab that had protected him a moment ago. As he came around the slab, he powered up his combat systems as well. Red dots scrambling in all directions began to appear on his visor's tactical display as it snapped back on. In the street ahead of him, Jung soldiers dressed as civilians came running toward him, pointing their weapons as they squeezed the triggers with futile effort.

Lieutenant Telles smiled as he opened fire, cutting the panicked enemy down at will. He could hear the cries of the enemy as they fell, as well as the delighted expletives from his men as they too dispatched their enemy with ease.

A shot rang past the lieutenant's head, causing him to duck instinctively. One of the Jung had a working weapon and he was intent on using it. The lieutenant spun around to his right to avoid the next series of energy blasts. His laser turret came to life once again and popped up out of the right side of his backpack. It rotated slightly to take aim at the Jung attacker, firing three quick shots into the enemy soldier's chest and face.

The lieutenant finished his rotation coming back to face the direction of his enemy, but there were no more targets that required his attention. He could hear the sounds of energy weapons fire coming from all directions as the rest of his men engaged the few Jung who still had operating energy weapons. He walked forward, poking at fallen Jung as he passed their bodies, making sure they were dead.

"This was a slaughter," Jahal said as he approached.

"It was a demonstration of strength," the lieutenant responded, "of commitment." He turned back toward the

master sergeant. "It is what the people of this world will need if they are to survive what is yet to come."

* * *

Nathan stood silently in the Aurora's flight operations center, peering through the windows that looked down into the main hangar bay. Below him, the wounded, both NAU security forces and civilians alike, were being unloaded from the cargo shuttles. Every med-tech, rescue-tech, doctor and nurse was down there, along with every other member of the Aurora's crew who was not otherwise occupied with their duties. The scene was one of pain and suffering, of blood and carnage. It was organized chaos, if ever there were such a thing.

"Looks bad," Major Prechitt mumbled.

"And we only got a quarter of the casualties," Nathan said, "the ones that the area hospitals couldn't handle."

"We are at war, Captain," the major reminded him. "Death is an integral part of war. That is why it is avoided."

"Of course," Nathan said softly. He looked at the major out of the corner of his eye. "I just never expected to see so much of it in my lifetime."

"Nor I." The major looked back down on the chaos below them as two combat shuttles rolled to a stop and dropped their ramps. "Unfortunately, there is bound to be more death on your world. At least until your military is able to reassert itself and take control."

"That's the problem," Nathan said, "there's not enough left of our military to do the job."

"Surely there are enough able-bodied men and women who can take up arms to restore order?"

"Perhaps, but under what flag? Most of the Earth's nations have been wiped from existence, their borders erased from the maps that defined them." Nathan looked at the major again. "It's only been six days since we defeated the Jung fleet holding our system. In that time, everything

on Earth has fallen apart. No governments, no economies, no industry... only chaos and destruction."

"It will take time," Major Prechitt insisted. "Leaders will arise. Leaders like your father..."

"Leaders like my father are doing all they can to counter the destructive efforts of the remaining Jung forces still hiding among them. How do you do that when half your citizens wish the Jung were still in control?"

"Have they not declared martial law?" the major wondered.

"Of course, but without a proper military, martial law is not very effective at maintaining order."

"What of your EDF? What of your national forces?"

"National forces have all but disbanded, their members returning to their homes to protect and care for their families. And the EDF, well, ninety percent of the EDF was dedicated to space operations. Special operations was a small contingent, and most of them went underground."

"Perhaps they will surface?"

"Many of them have," Nathan told him, "and they are fighting the Jung wherever they are found. But they lack mobility, they lack resources and support. The EDF was funded by a consortium of Earth nations, Major. Without those nations, there is no support. There is no EDF."

"I know of two ships that prove otherwise, not to mention the hundreds of volunteers who are pouring into the recruitment centers."

"Have you looked at the volunteer rosters?" Nathan asked, looking at the major once more. "Most of them lack any training or experience." Nathan sighed. "I suspect the majority of them are just looking for a warm bunk and regular meals."

"When did you become such a pessimist?" Major Prechitt asked.

Nathan smiled, a small laugh escaping his lips. "Just venting my frustrations, I guess. I wish there was more I could do for my world."

"You liberated it, Captain."

"From prosperous oppression to desolate freedom. Are they truly better off?" Nathan watched as Lieutenant Telles and his squad disembarked from a shuttle below. He reached up and tapped his comm-set. "Comms, have Lieutenant Telles report to my ready room."

* * *

Nathan sat behind his desk in his ready room, watching one of many videos that had been recorded by civilians in Winnipeg and then transmitted out on open frequencies for everyone within range to see.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain," Lieutenant Telles announced from the hatch. He was no longer wearing his combat armor, only the body suit worn underneath the armor that served to protect as well as enhance the abilities of the wearer.

"Lieutenant," Nathan said as he picked up his remote and turned off the video. "Nice work down there. You may have just saved the North American Union."

"Thank you, Captain."

"That was a nice trick, with the EMP blasts. I did not realize they could be so well targeted."

"At their lowest setting, their effective range is extremely limited. Ta'Akar forces have been using them for years, however, with limited success."

"How did you know that they would work?"

"I did not. In fact, they were only partially effective. The Jung saw the diving Talons and anticipated my tactics."

"How do you know?"

"Many of them turned off their weapons and took shelter, just as we did. After the blast, their weapons still worked."

"I see. I thought EMP blasts fried all electronics?"

"It depends on the construction of the device. Most of our weapons and systems are shielded. However, it is common practice to take the extra precaution of powering

down all systems and seeking shelter, when using tactical EMP weapons.”

“I stand corrected. I hope that you did not suffer any losses.”

“Twelve wounded, no fatalities,” the lieutenant stated.

“I wish I could say the same for the NAU security forces, as well as the people of Winnipeg. Casualties are reported to be quite high.”

“The Jung hit them fast and hard, with overwhelming force and firepower, as is typical for the Jung. The NAU had little chance. However, this could have been avoided, Captain.”

“How so?”

“Although your world is not yet capable of anticipating or defending against future Jung attacks, the Ghatazhak can, if given proper resources.”

“What are you proposing, Lieutenant?”

“My men can quell any Jung attack with ease.”

“Over three hundred dead or wounded say otherwise, Lieutenant.”

“Those deaths occurred prior to our arrival, Captain. They occurred because it took us fifteen minutes to get my forces into the engagement area.”

“We’re fresh out of jump shuttles, Lieutenant.”

“You have fabricators. You made mini-jump drives before. Make them again. Install them in the combat shuttles.”

“Those fabricators are needed to repair this ship, Lieutenant.”

“For which you require resources. Raw materials, manpower, infrastructure. Where will this come from? Tanna? Perhaps. However, Tanna is forty-five light years away... a full day’s journey for this ship. There is an entire world below you, with all the resources you need, as well as the motivation to assist.”

“The world below us is in chaos, Lieutenant.”

“Yet the people of your world still line up to volunteer.”

“This ship is the only defense the Earth has.”

"And if order is not restored, there may be little left to defend. Your jump drive is working, as are many of your weapons. You are not defenseless. However, your people are. Give us jump shuttles, and we can defend them, give them a chance to reestablish order and self-governance once again."

Nathan looked at the lieutenant for a moment. "You sound more like a Karuzari than Ghatazhak."

"I will take that as a compliment, Captain. The Karuzari were a worthy adversary."

"As intended." Nathan took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped over his head as he considered the lieutenant's proposal. "I agree that the people of Earth need order, but ninety men cannot bring order to an entire world, not even when those men are Ghatazhak."

"In this you are correct," the lieutenant agreed. "However, if allowed to operate freely, we can make those who seek to take advantage of your world's weakened state think carefully about such actions."

"Now you are starting to worry me, Lieutenant."

"The reason the Ghatazhak were created was to instill fear in the minds of the citizens of an empire that could not, at the time, provide forces large enough to police its entire domain. Our tactics, our methods, our abilities... they all serve that purpose."

"I cannot unleash the Ghatazhak to terrorize the people of Earth into submission," Nathan protested.

"Of course, not, Captain, but you can allow us to deal with the Jung forces that have gone underground, and the Terrans who support them, in such a fashion as to dissuade others from joining their cause."

Nathan leaned forward again, placing his hands on his desk. "Assuming that I decide to provide you with mini-jump drives for the combat shuttles, where will you base them? The Aurora will not always be in orbit over Earth."

“The Jar-Keurog has several hangars. We can use one of them as our base of operations.”

“We’re not even sure that the Jar-Keurog is safe, Lieutenant.”

“Perhaps by the time the mini-jump drives have been fabricated, we will know more.”

Nathan nodded agreement. “Very well, Lieutenant. Draw up a plan. I will speak with the fabrication chief, as well as the cheng, who, I expect will not be happy about losing access to the fabricators.”

CHAPTER THREE

"Nathan, this ship is far from combat ready," Vladimir insisted as he and his friend made their way up the ramp to the command deck. "We still have hull breaches, most of the mini-rail guns are down. Hell, half of them are destroyed, as is our missile launcher, don't forget."

"Based on what we know of the Jung's FTL capabilities, we believe we have four to five months until the Jung reinforcements from Alpha Centauri get here," Nathan said, "six if we're lucky. We won't know for sure until we send the Falcon out to find them."

"I would very much like to have everything working by then," Vladimir continued as they topped the ramp and headed starboard. "To do that, I need the fabricators."

"Regardless of whether or not I decide to fabricate those mini-jump drives now or later, you're still going to be without fabricators. We've only got one set on board."

"Then make more fabricators."

Nathan paused outside the command briefing room entrance at the end of the corridor. "That was the plan, Vlad. Did you even look over the proposed fabrication schedule?"

Vladimir rolled his eyes. "I am a very busy man, Nathan..."

"We start by building five more sets of fabricators. One for us, one for the Celestia, and three for the Jar-Keurog."

"Why do they get three?"

This time it was Nathan who rolled his eyes as he turned and headed into the conference room with Vladimir following behind.

"The Jar-Keurog isn't even operational," Vladimir continued.

"You need to read the fabrication schedule," Nathan insisted.

"Half her decks are still unpressurized."

"A problem easily remedied," Lieutenant Montgomery added from his seat at the conference table.

"If you're going to make five more sets of fabricators, that means I'm going to be..." Vladimir looked up for a moment as he did the math in his head. "...Thirty days without fabricators? How am I supposed to fix anything?"

"Forty-five days," Nathan corrected as he made his way around the command briefing room to his usual seat at the head of the conference table. "You forgot about the mini-jump drives."

"Why can't the Jar-Keurog's fabricators make the drives?" Vladimir wondered.

"They'll be making more fabricators at first. Seriously, you need to read the fabrication schedule."

Vladimir threw up his hands in frustration. "Ah, *chort!*" he exclaimed as he took his seat to the left of Lieutenant Telles, directly across from Garrett Munras and Lieutenant Montgomery.

"You plan to fit the Jar-Keurog with Takaran fabricators?" Lieutenant Montgomery asked.

"Yes," Nathan answered. "I was hoping to use her as an orbital production facility as well as a battle station... Assuming, of course, that our original assessment of the Jar-Keurog's propulsion systems still stands," Nathan said. "There's still no chance of her getting under way again, correct?"

"Not in the required time frame, Captain," Lieutenant Montgomery confirmed. "There is too much damage to her main propulsion for us to repair under the current conditions."

"However, we can use her as an orbital platform, right?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Montgomery assured him. "Once we manage to break the control codes, we should be able to do whatever we like with her."

"And how long will that take?" Nathan wondered.

"It is hard to say," the lieutenant began. "I will need more of my people brought over from the Celestia."

"We will need more translators as well," Garrett insisted. "Jung is not an easy language to translate into English, Captain, even for those fluent in both languages. Perhaps it would be better if my people worked on breaking the control codes directly. It would save time, as they would not be spending time translating what they see on the displays to Lieutenant Montgomery and his team."

Lieutenant Telles raised an eyebrow, then looked at Nathan.

Nathan caught the Lieutenant's expression but did not react. "Can your people break the codes?"

"Many Tannans worked as technicians for the Jung. We are quite familiar with their systems. It should not be a problem."

"Then why have you not done as much in the past?" Lieutenant Telles wondered.

"We have never before had unrestricted access to such systems. The Jung were quite careful about monitoring our interaction with their systems."

"How many people would you need?" Nathan asked.

"The more people, the better," Garrett answered. "How soon do you need control of the ship?"

"The sooner the better," Nathan answered. "At the very least, I need full control of that ship within twenty days."

"Then I will need at least ten of my people."

"That presents a problem," Nathan said, noticing another concerned look from his temporary chief of security.

Garrett looked confused. "I was told that your jump drive is operational once again. Can you not simply return to Tanna and take on as many people as I can find?"

"First of all, the Aurora's jump drive operates differently than the Falcon's. It will take us more than a day to reach Tanna. With the time it will take for you to gather your people and return, we would be gone for three, maybe four

days. Unfortunately, our presence is still needed in orbit, as there are still Jung operatives wreaking havoc on the surface."

"It took young Joshua only minutes to traverse the great distance between our worlds," Garrett noted. "Perhaps he can ferry my people over one at a time?"

"That is a possibility," Nathan admitted, "however, that too will take time. I can't very well ask Josh to make ten trips in a row without some down time. So it may still take a few days to bring your people over."

"I may have a solution for you, Captain," Vladimir said as he tapped his chin with his index finger.

* * *

Ensign Hunt stepped off the cargo ramp of the Corinari shuttle onto the deck of the Aurora's main hangar bay. The interior of the ship felt familiar to him, with many of the same design elements he had seen during his time on the Intrepid.

"This is weird," Ensign Kono mumbled from behind him.

"Tell me about it," Ensign Hunt agreed. "Until a week ago, we all thought this ship had perished."

"Those uniforms," Lieutenant Allison commented as he joined his former shipmates from the second shuttle. "Are we on the right ship?"

"They are definitely not EDF uniforms," Lieutenant Eckert said.

"And look at the spacecraft," Lieutenant Allison said, pointing at several Talon fighters that were pulling into the main hangar deck from the port transfer airlock at the aft end of the hangar bay. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Look, those fighters," Ensign Kono said. She raised her left hand and pointed at four fighters parked along the side of the bay. "Those are ours, aren't they?"

"Not only are they ours, but they're from the Intrepid," Lieutenant Allison said. "Look at the markings."

"Those are from the Intrepid, all right," Ensign Hunt agreed.

Four Ghatazhak soldiers in full combat armor approached from the forward end of the bay, headed aft. All four of them watched as the soldiers walked past on their way to one of the combat shuttles.

"Those are the ones we saw on one of those vids," Ensign Hunt said, "from the Sydney attack. 'Gottashock', I think they called them."

"It is pronounced, Ghatazhak," Lieutenant Telles said as he approached along with Master Sergeant Jahal. "You are from the Intrepid?"

Ensign Hunt swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

"Follow those men, the ones in black," Lieutenant Telles said, pointing toward the two approaching Corinari guards.

"Are they Ghatazhak as well?" Ensign Hunt wondered.

"They are Corinari," the lieutenant corrected as he continued on his way.

"What the hell are Corinari?" Lieutenant Allison whispered.

"What the hell are Ghatazhak?"

"What the hell are we doing here?" Ensign Hunt wondered.

"My name is Sergeant Oliver," one of the Corinari soldiers announced. "You will all follow me to the flight briefing room for your orientation briefing."

"Excuse me, Sergeant," Lieutenant Allison said.

"Yes, Lieutenant," the sergeant answered.

"Who is in command of this ship?"

"Our CO is Captain Nathan Scott," the sergeant answered.

"The NAU president's son?" Lieutenant Eckert asked.

"I cannot speak to that, sir. My orders are to escort all of you to the flight briefing room."

"Who's giving the briefing?" Lieutenant Allison asked.

"Captain Scott," the sergeant answered. "Now, please follow me." The sergeant turned sharply and began walking

back the way he had come, toward the forward end of the hangar bay. All of the volunteers who had come on the two cargo shuttles fell in line to follow the sergeant.

Lieutenant Allison shrugged his shoulders. "You heard the man," he said as he held out his hand, urging them to go first.

Ensign Hunt fell into line, with the other three of his shipmates following him. To his right, he saw two young men. One of them was dressed in a flight suit and was carrying a data pad. The other was dressed in standard EDF issue duty wear and was walking alongside the first man, talking to him. Ensign Hunt watched as the two men walked to an unusual flying wing-body spacecraft, the likes of which the ensign had never seen.

The ensign turned his head back as he walked. "Look at that thing."

"What are they loading into the bays on the underside?" Ensign Kono wondered. "Are those weapons?"

"No way," Lieutenant Allison said. "They look like stasis pods, to be honest."

"Those look like weapons bays to me," Lieutenant Eckert said. "Why the hell would they be loading stasis pods into weapons bays?"

"Maybe it's a medical transport of some sort?" Ensign Kono suggested.

"With a nose turret?" Ensign Hunt said as they followed the line of volunteers through the forward hatch.

* * *

"To be honest, I'm not sure what to say to these people," Nathan admitted to Master Chief Montrose as they descended the ramp from the command deck.

"Just say what comes to mind," the master chief told him. "Talk about whatever you think they need to know. Don't forget, these people have only heard rumors about the return of the Aurora. I'm sure they have many questions."

Nathan looked surprised. "You think I should hold a question and answer session?"

"I should think not," the master chief replied sternly. "You're the captain of the ship. Your job is to inspire and lead. Your job is to let them know what you expect of them."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure none of us were asking questions during our orientation briefing," Nathan said, remembering his first day aboard the Aurora. "Still, they're going to have a lot of questions on their minds. Hell, I know I would."

"Then speak to those questions that you would expect from them in your statements. If they still need answers, they will find them sooner or later. After all, the ship's logs are available for them to view."

"Good point." Nathan stopped at the entrance to the starboard flight briefing room. He looked at Sergeant Weatherly, who shadowed his every move.

"You've got this, sir."

A smile came across his face, washing away his concerns. He patted the sergeant on the shoulder. "Lead the way, Sergeant Weatherly."

The broad-shouldered sergeant returned his captain's smile and stepped through the entrance to the flight briefing room, stepping to the left once inside the door. "Attention on deck!"

Everyone in the briefing room immediately stood and came to attention. Captain Scott entered the room, with Master Chief Montrose one step behind him. He strode confidently down the side aisle toward the front of the room, well aware that every eyeball in the room was following him out of their peripheral vision as they continued to stare straight ahead.

Nathan reached the front of the room and took his place behind the podium. Master Chief Montrose stood off to the side of the room, staring out at the forty men and women standing before them. They were dressed in various forms of civilian attire, but they all had the look and demeanor of properly trained personnel.

"As you were," Nathan stated. He waited a moment to allow everyone to take their seats before speaking. "I am Captain Nathan Scott, commanding officer of the UES Aurora, and acting commander of the Earth Defense Force, such as it is." Nathan peered out at the audience as his words settled into their minds. He could see the look of surprise and confusion in their eyes as they exchanged glances with one another. It suddenly occurred to Nathan that it might not have been the best opening line.

Nathan glanced at the master chief, swallowed, and continued. "One hundred and seventy-six days ago, Captain William Roberts, the original commanding officer of the Aurora, was critically wounded in battle. On his death bed, he passed command to me. What followed was a series of events that, quite frankly, you would all find difficult to believe." Nathan looked at the master chief again, rolling his eyes as he took a breath. He looked back at the audience, placing his hands on either side of the podium. "I'm not going to waste time explaining everything to you. It's all available in the ship's logs for you to read whenever you like. Instead, I'm going to give you the situation in a nutshell." Nathan cleared his throat and took a drink from the glass of water on the podium, knowing that what he was about to tell would elicit the biggest reaction. "The Aurora is equipped with a new, experimental, faster-than-light propulsion system known as the Superluminal Transition System. We call it a jump drive, and it is the reason that we will prevail over the Jung."

Nathan again scanned the eyes of those in attendance. They were full of doubt and confusion, as well as curiosity. "The jump drive allows this ship to travel up to fifteen light years in the blink of an eye." Again, Nathan paused, allowing everyone to exchange further glances and mumble words of shock and disbelief. He waited a full minute before continuing. "The jump drive is why we have the Corinairans and the Takarans as our allies. The jump drive is why one ship was able to defeat an entire fleet of Jung warships. The

jump drive is why the Earth is free from Jung rule, and why she shall remain that way.”

Nathan paused for a moment as he pondered the oddity that an inanimate object was the sole source and inspiration for all their hopes and dreams. He remembered how Abby spoke of her father, and how he had once said that the jump drive would change everything.

Nathan smiled. The doctor could not have been more correct. He looked again on the expressions of the faces of those gathered before him. They had changed to astonishment and disbelief. “But we did not come away unscathed,” he continued. “The Aurora is badly damaged. She is still able to fight, and, more importantly, able to jump. However, she is in need of extensive repair. We are also in need of more crew, as we now have two ships to operate. The Aurora, and the Celestia.”

Again, the murmur began to build in reaction to word of the Celestia’s survival. “That’s right, the Celestia survived. Furthermore, she too is equipped with a jump drive, although hers is incomplete at the moment... a situation that we will soon rectify. We shall repair and rearm both ships, so that we can defend our system against another wave of Jung reinforcements currently en route from Alpha Centauri.”

“And after that?” one of the Intrepid’s crew asked.

“We take the fight to the Jung,” Nathan answered with the utmost confidence.

The room filled with words of approval, some between one another, while others were more vocal. Nathan again looked at the eyes of the men and women sitting before him. In their eyes, he now saw hope.

* * *

Josh dropped his data pad in his lap and rubbed his eyes. He had been sitting on the landing pad, leaning up against the Falcon’s starboard forward gear, for nearly three hours now. Luckily, his data pad contained more than just flight

plans. He had read, he had watched some Earth vids, he had even played some games. When he finally saw a group of Tannan men, obviously dressed for travel, approaching from a distance, he was only too happy to climb back to his feet.

"Took you guys long enough," Josh said as the group approached.

"It took some time to gather the best people for the task," one of Garrett's men explained. "These five men are all experts in Jung computer and control systems, and are knowledgeable in Jung encryption techniques as well. And, of course, they are all fluent in the Jung language."

"That's good to hear," Josh said. "Shall we light her up, then?"

The men exchanged glances, looking confused.

Josh's eyebrow went up. "Something wrong?"

"Your ship," one of the Tannan technicians began, "it appears to only seat two. I have heard that your ship is incredibly fast, but will it not take considerable time to ferry us all back to Earth, one at a time?"

Josh smiled broadly. "Oh, there's more seating than you think." He turned and opened a small panel on the side of the Falcon, punched in a code, then activated the weapons bays. "Well, not exactly seating, I guess," he admitted as the weapons bays on either side of the Falcon's fuselage opened. "But I can still get us all there in a single trip."

Four flattened, three-meter long cylinders lowered slowly from the Falcon's two weapons bays. The five men watched in confusion and disbelief, as the four cylinders came to rest centimeters above the ground, suspended by telescoping hydraulic loading rods at each end.

"What are those?" one of the Tannans asked, his eyes wide.

"Stasis pods," Josh answered cheerfully.

"How long is this journey?" another of the men asked with a suspicious look on his face.

"Oh, about half an hour," Josh said.

"Then why the stasis pods? Cannot the Aurora come and take us all?"

"She's otherwise occupied at the moment," Josh told them. "Besides, it would take her more than a day each way. This way is a lot faster, trust me." He looked at their faces. It was obvious they did not trust him.

"Why not use rescue pods?" another Tannan asked. "If the trip is as short in duration as you claim, it would make more sense, would it not?"

"No one bothered to tell me," Josh said. "I'm just a pilot. My guess is this was the quickest, easiest way to get the job done." Several of the Tannans cast a bewildered look at him. "It happens that way a lot on the Aurora."

One of the men bent over and walked under the Falcon, staring up into her weapons bays. "These are weapons bays, are they not?"

"Well, normally, yes."

"Are they pressurized?"

"Well, no, but the stasis pods are."

"And if they should fail?" another Tannan asked.

"Then you're screwed," Josh admitted. "As is anyone sitting in the cockpit should the canopy take a hit from a micrometeorite or something. Which, I might add, is far more likely. So, which of us is safer, huh?"

The Tannans all turned and looked at Josh.

"Come on, guys. You lie down, the doors close, and you're asleep a minute later. Next thing you know, you're opening your eyes in the Aurora's hangar bay. Not much of a view, I'll grant you, but it is safe."

"But why put us to sleep?"

"Look, I can set the controls to let you stay awake if you like, but it's going to be a bumpy-ass ride on the way up."

The five technicians still looked apprehensive. The man who had brought them uttered something in their native language. Although he did not understand it, Josh was sure he was accusing the others of being scared. Josh bent down and moved to the first pod and activated it. The top half of

the pod raised up slightly, then slid toward the other end, revealing the stasis pod's gleaming white interior. "See, nice and comfy," he said, patting the padded couch inside the pod.

After more words were exchanged in their native tongue, four of the men moved reluctantly toward the pods. Josh moved quickly to open the remaining pods, before the men changed their minds. The four Tannans climbed into the stasis pods and lay down.

"Anyone want to stay awake?" Josh asked. No one answered. Josh activated the controls on each pod one at a time, causing their doors to slide closed over the worried faces of the men inside.

The fifth man laughed and exchanged more unintelligible comments with the man who had brought them, as he climbed up the boarding ladder on the side of the Falcon. Josh pressed more buttons on the side panel, and then climbed up the boarding ladder himself as the four stasis pods rose up into the weapons bays, the doors closing behind them.

"What am I to do with this?" the man asked as Josh handed him a pressure helmet. "I have no pressure suit."

"Good point," Josh admitted. "It won't save your ass if the canopy breaks, but at least you'll be able to hear me apologizing as you suffocate."

The man squinted, a displeased look on his face. "You have an odd sense of humor, young man."

"So I've been told. Besides, the visor will protect your eyes from the jump flashes," he added as he checked the man's restraints. Satisfied that his passenger was secure, Josh moved forward and climbed into his own seat and donned his helmet. He buckled himself in, then began activating the Falcon's engines. A moment later, his helmet comms crackled to life. "Comms check," Josh said. "You hear me back there?"

"Yes, I can hear you," the man answered from the seat behind him.

“Do us both a favor, and just hold onto the hand rails on either side of the canopy bottom,” Josh instructed as the canopy came down and locked closed. “We don’t want you to inadvertently touch something you shouldn’t back there.”

“Of course,” the man answered, placing his hands on the rails as instructed.

“You don’t get sick easily, do you?” Josh asked as the lift turbines powered up and the ship began to lift up slowly off the landing pad.

“Not usually, no. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not known for my gentle piloting style.” Josh smiled, then moved the throttles forward. The Falcon lurched forward and accelerated rapidly. The interceptor began to gain altitude quickly as she quickly began to generate lift. Josh reduced the throttles on the lift turbines as the interceptor began to fly aerodynamically. “Hang on tight,” Josh declared with glee. He pulled back slightly on his flight control stick, then pushed the throttle on his main propulsion all the way forward, sending them rocketing upward. Within seconds, they were nearly vertical and still accelerating. His smile grew bigger as he noticed his passenger was silent. He could imagine the man’s eyes as big as saucers, his knuckles white as he held the railing tight. For a moment, Josh considered kicking in the space drive as well. Then he remembered that the inertial dampening systems in the weapons bays were less than half that of the cockpit, and decided against it. The captain wouldn’t be happy if he delivered four piles of squished human tissue. “How you doin’ back there?” Josh asked.

“Fine,” the man’s voice answered feebly.

A minute later, the sky gave way to the blackness of space. Josh called up the pre-programmed auto-jump sequence for the journey back to Earth. “Your visor will go opaque and stay that way through all forty-five jumps,” he explained. “I suggest that you close your eyes tightly and keep them that way until I tell you it’s okay to open them.”

“Will not the visor protect me?”

“Mostly, but trust me. If you don’t close your eyes, you’re going to be seeing blue around your peripheral vision for hours afterward.”

“Understood.”

“All right, then. Here we go. Jumping in three.....two.....one.....”

* * *

Prince Casimir strolled confidently into the meeting chambers. He did not exchange looks with any of the members of the Takaran Security Council, choosing instead to go directly to his seat at the apex of the massive conference table. He did, however, feel the eyes of every nobleman in the room as they followed him with disdain.

“Gentlemen,” Prince Casimir began as he took his seat. He refused to refer to these men by their noble titles, as he found very little to be noble about them. “I have called you all here to speak of a matter of grave concern to not only Takarans, but to all free people throughout the Pentaurus sector.”

The prince looked around the table at the faces gathered by his beckoning. They were pompous old men, each of them, even if the anti-aging serum still hid their age for a time longer. There were men at the table who were twice his age, even if they looked half it. He himself had not had access to a continuous supply of the serum, and had been forced to ration its use for many years. Eventually, his supply dwindled to nothing, and he had begun aging at a normal rate. At first, it had bothered him greatly. He had spent more than a century in the body of a twenty year-old. To suddenly begin aging again had come as a shock. Over the decades, he had become accustomed to that which was the natural way of humans. He had even come to appreciate the value of growing old along with family. It had made each moment of greater worth to him.

The men gathered here did not understand such things. Wealth, power, status... these were the things the Lords of

Takara held dearest. Freedom, liberty, self-determination; in their minds such rights were reserved for nobility, not for the commons. It was the way of the Ta'Akar, and had been for more than a century. Their lives had been good under the rule of Caius. Now, their futures were uncertain at best, as were their life spans now that the formula for the anti-aging serum had been lost forever. At least Prince Casimir of Takara would be able to watch the nobles he so despised grow old and die. He undoubtedly would go before most, but he would pass knowing that they were not far behind.

"As you are all aware, one of the Aurora's jump shuttles has returned, and they bring us dire news from the Sol sector. The Earth has been captured by the Jung. Captain Scott of the Aurora has requested our assistance."

"To what end?" Lord Dahra asked with one raised eyebrow.

"Captain Scott has located the Celestia, the Aurora's sister ship. He hopes to make her battle ready, and to use her to help liberate the Earth once again. However, to do so he will need our help."

"What kind of help does he ask for?" Lord Tammer asked.

"Anything and everything that we can spare," Prince Casimir said. "Military aid, weapons, munitions, consumables, personnel both skilled and unskilled, and of course, fabricators and the raw materials needed to feed them."

"We have none of these things to give," Lord Dahra stated.

"Takara is a prosperous system," Prince Casimir began to argue.

"Takara was a prosperous system," Lord Dahra interrupted. "The collapse of the empire has changed everything."

"For the better, I would expect," the prince said.

"That is a matter of perspective," Lord Tammer said.

"Does the food not still flow into Takara from the outer worlds? Do not the precious ores, the raw materials, and all

the other things our society needs to maintain itself still continue to pour into our ports each day?"

"At renegotiated prices, yes," Lord Markly exclaimed. "We are paying triple what we paid before."

"We can afford it," Casimir argued.

"Not if these rates continue," Lord Tammer said.

"Under the imperial system, Takara's suppliers were forced to accept insufficient payment for products and services for decades," Casimir explained. "One should not be surprised now that they ask fair market value."

"They ask more than market value, my prince," Lord Dahra said.

"The markets will settle," Casimir insisted. "In time, our vendors will realize that they cannot overcharge their biggest customer forever. Prices will drop to more reasonable levels."

"In the meantime, we are forced to pay ransom for the most basic of needs," Lord Tammer said. "And still they expect what few ships we have to come to their aid when pirates and raiders threaten their well-being."

"Can you truly blame them?" Casimir wondered. "The empire stripped most of them of their defenses, not to mention their young."

"Be that as it may, Takara is in no position to send resources halfway across the galaxy to fight a war that is none of its concern."

"None of its concern?" Prince Casimir exclaimed, shock at the nobleman's words apparent in his tone. "And if the Jung should come our way?"

"They are a thousand light years away," Lord Tammer reminded everyone. "They have no jump drive technology."

"That we know of," Casimir pointed out.

"The likelihood of Jung forces showing up on our doorstep anytime within the next few decades is slim at best," Lord Dahra insisted. "By such time, we shall be more than capable of defending ourselves once again."

“Need I remind you all that Takara is a full member of the Earth-Pentaurus Alliance? It is our responsibility to come to the aid of other members of that alliance.”

“Only in as much as it does not jeopardize the security of Takara,” Lord Dahra pointed out. “Yes, I have read the charter.”

“And how does sending volunteers, raw materials, and fabricators put Takara at risk?” Prince Casimir challenged.

“How do you intend to get them to the Aurora?” Lord Dahra responded. “We have but a handful of jump-capable ships as of yet, and they are quite busy responding to the overwhelming needs of Takara as well as those of the newly liberated systems to which you have promised aid. Shall we suspend aid to our neighbors? And what shall happen to the price of imports should that happen? Do you have plans for that eventuality, my prince?”

“I am not asking you to send a fleet,” Prince Casimir insisted. “A single jump-capable cargo ship, loaded with fabricators and perhaps some volunteers. Maybe some mining equipment so that the crews can gather resources within the Sol sector?”

“The security council shall take the matter under advisement,” Lord Dahra stated. “We shall render a decision when prudent.”

“When prudent?” Casimir responded. “I’m afraid that will not do. Be it a small ship with a few supplies and volunteers, or an entire battle group, it will take time to both organize and complete the journey. We must act immediately.”

“You cannot expect this council to make such commitments without proper considerations, my prince,” Lord Dahra insisted. “Is that not the purpose of any council? To give a measure full and proper thought before making decisions, especially ones that could have catastrophic consequences for the people of Takara?”

“Catastrophic consequences is exactly what we will have if we do not act with great haste,” Casimir exclaimed. “Need I remind you all that the people of Earth did live up to their

responsibilities under the alliance. They liberated the people of the Darvano system, and removed Caius from power, and now, they have delivered on the last of their promises. They have provided us with the entire contents of the Data Ark. All of humanity's science, culture, religion, and history, from the dawn of humankind to the onset of the great plague. Everything that was lost to us. Everything that makes us who we are, has been returned to us."

Lord Dahra rolled his eyes and looked away. "Most of the information in that Ark is ancient history and has little to no bearing on our society. And we have yet to uncover any technology more advanced than our own, I might remind you."

"How can you draw such conclusions?" Casimir challenged. "We haven't even copied ten percent of the data as of yet."

"I base my conclusions on what we have seen thus far," Lord Dahra argued. "Which by your own words demonstrates the need for careful consideration before taking action." Lord Dahra leaned forward, his elbows on the table, and looked Prince Casimir directly in the eyes. "More information is needed. You know this as well as anyone."

"Meanwhile, failing to provide even the slightest aide increases the risk that the Aurora, her jump drive, and her knowledge of the Pentaurus cluster, will fall into the hands of the Jung, an enemy whose numbers we do not know."

"Which clearly demonstrates the need for careful consideration before taking action," Lord Dahra added.

"At least set a deadline," Casimir insisted, "by which a decision, one way or another, must be rendered."

"Very well," Lord Dahra agreed. "Six months."

Casimir leaned back in his chair, exasperated. "You might as well say no this very moment."

"If you insist..."

"Lord Dahra," Casimir began, "You read the intelligence reports from the Aurora. You know full well that Jung reinforcements will arrive in the Sol system in approximately

five months. At that point, it may very well become impossible to wrench the Earth from their grasp.”

“As I understand it, it is but one more world added to an already vast empire. One which at this point likely does not know of our existence.”

“Yet,” Casimir interjected.

Lord Dahra nodded, conceding the point. “Perhaps it is better we do not draw attention to ourselves just yet.”

“I cannot believe that I am hearing this,” Casimir said. “Have you all forgotten what the word nobility means? Or the word honor?”

“We honor more than just an agreement with a distant government—one which no longer legally exists, incidentally—we honor our responsibility to those we represent as well, as should you.” Lord Dahra shifted in his chair. “Prince Casimir, have you considered other alternatives?”

“Such as?”

“Such as sending word to young Captain Scott, suggesting that he retreat, establish a base of operations somewhere he is unlikely to be found. Perhaps build his forces over time and on his own accord. Perhaps, a year, maybe three, we can better afford to send our ships of war in support of his cause.”

“You want me to ask him to wait?” Casimir was dumbfounded. “For years, even?”

“If I am not mistaken, you waited several decades before you started your quest to regain your titles and lands.”

Casimir’s eyes narrowed. “My situation was quite different, and it was never my titles or lands that I was after. It was the murderer of my father, the employer of my would-be assassins, the enslaver of worlds... It was an ill that became too painful to ignore. That is why I know that we must help the people of Earth.”

“No one here denies the pain and sorrow that you must have felt upon the murder of your father and the betrayal by your brother, my prince. However, your actions led to the eventual deaths of millions, if not billions of innocent lives.

Was your cause—is any cause—worthy of such staggering loss?”

“Every one of you here today was alive and in positions of considerable power and influence at the time. Each of you sat by and watched my brother commit atrocious acts of violence upon innocent people, all for the well-being of his empire. Did any of you raise your voice in protest? Did any of you even utter a single dissenting word? Had one or more of you done so, perhaps my actions would not have been necessary.” Casimir looked at the faces of the members of the security council as they considered his words, knowing full well that they had fallen on deaf ears. His father had taught him centuries ago that leaders sometimes had to ignore their moralities for the good of society rather than that of the individual. It was a lesson that had never sat well with him. Not then, and not now.

Lord Dahra looked at Casimir for what seemed an eternity before he finally spoke. He let out a sigh, then said, “Three months. I can offer no better.”

“Lord Dahra...” Casimir pleaded.

Lord Dahra raised his hand. “We will give the matter the priority it deserves, my prince. This I promise. If a decision can be reached earlier, we shall let you know, but I can promise no sooner than three months. To do so would be foolish and irresponsible.”

Casimir looked at Lord Dahra, disdain obvious on his face. “I trust that you will be without objection, should I choose to utilize my own resources to assist Captain Scott and his crew.”

“You may spend your family resources as you see fit, my prince. Just be careful that you do not use any resource belonging to the people of Takara,” Lord Dahra warned with sinister tone. “To do so would be a crime against your own people, and even princes are not immune to such prosecutions.”

“I am well aware of the laws of our people,” Prince Casimir responded as he stared at Lord Dahra.

Lord Dahra smiled. "Then I assume that our business has concluded for now?"

"Yes," Casimir answered, again with disdain in his tone. "More so than you might imagine."

Lord Dahra and the other members of the security council rose and began to file out of the meeting chambers. Lord Dahra, who was last in line to exit, paused as he passed the prince. "Perhaps, if you had not passed power to parliament, you would be in a better position to assist your friends."

Prince Casimir did not answer, instead letting Lord Dahra exit with the last word. He sat there for several minutes, contemplating Lord Dahra's last words. Casimir had chosen to return power to parliament, just as it had been under his father's rule, because it was the right thing to do. It was better for society as a whole. It was proving difficult, but in the long run, it surely would serve the greater good.

It occurred to Prince Casimir that the problem with his father's lesson was that it did not address the scope of the society to be considered. Was it his world, his system, or all of the Pentaurs sector? Perhaps it was the entire galaxy. He wondered if Nathan was wrestling with the very same issues, a thousand light years away.

* * *

"Captain," Lieutenant Telles called from behind.

Nathan stopped in the middle of the corridor and turned to look behind him. "Lieutenant," he answered, turning to continue down the corridor as the lieutenant caught up with him.

"Do you have a moment, sir?"

"I'm on my way down to the utility deck to speak with the fabrication chief. Walk and talk?"

"I have been reviewing the latest intelligence reports from various sources on Earth."

"Such as?"

"We have been receiving data from several of the reformation governments, as well as from several EDF spec-ops units still operating on the surface. There seems to be a disturbing trend developing, especially in some of the more devastated areas."

"And what trend might that be?" Nathan asked as he turned to descend the next ramp.

Lieutenant Telles paused for a moment, noticing that they had bypassed the main elevator at the central B deck junction. "Wouldn't it be faster to use the elevators, sir?"

"Walking about this ship is the only exercise I get."

"You are welcome to join us in our daily physical training, Captain."

"PT with the Ghatazhak?" Nathan chuckled. "That's sure to get me a visit to medical. Thanks, but I'll stick with walking for now."

"Physical condition is the most important tool of the Ghatazhak. It sharpens the reflexes, deepens the self-control, and sharpens the intellect. Walking up and down ramps and corridors is hardly a substitute for proper exercise, sir."

"You should try walking to engineering and back a few times," Nathan suggested. "I think it's about two kilometers round trip."

"One point eight," Lieutenant Telles corrected. "We use the central transport shaft for our daily run. Ten laps."

"You run eighteen kilometers?" Nathan asked in disbelief. "Every day?"

"It's better than nothing."

Nathan shook his head. "You were talking about a disturbing trend?"

"Small dictatorships have begun popping up. They appear to be mostly thugs with guns trying to take advantage of the chaos and establish their own little empires. However, it is possible that some of them are being supported by Jung operatives."

"What areas are we talking about?" Nathan wondered.

"Rural areas, mostly. Small towns that have been forgotten by nearby cities with their own problems in the wake of liberation. Also, in areas just outside the fallout zones of the cities that were nuked. South America, the southern portion of Africa, and the eastern parts of the lower half of North America. At least eleven confirmed thus far. Another twenty on the verge of forming, according to latest reports."

"I see. And the local authorities are aware of these events?"

"What authorities there are. The areas in which this is occurring have little to no authorities to speak of. That is why it is happening. In the case of North America, the NAU has been unable to spread its control much beyond the great lakes. The eastern and southeastern regions suffered much damage. Three of the dictatorships have established themselves in these regions, with several more in the making."

"Understood." Nathan continued walking, waiting for the lieutenant to continue with his report. When the lieutenant failed to do so, Nathan looked at him. "Was that all, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Thank you for your report."

"Did you not want us to do something about this problem?"

"It's not a matter of want, Lieutenant. The EDF is not allowed to interfere with the geopolitics of Earth. It's in the EDF charter."

"I'm not sure they intended it to be applied so literally, Captain. At least not in such circumstances."

"That's not really my call. Are leaders of legitimate governments of Earth requesting our assistance?"

"No, sir. Not as of yet."

"Then we cannot take action."

"Captain, are not the Jung the enemy of all the people of Earth, and not just one or more of its nations?"

"Yes, they are. Do you have evidence that the Jung are behind these dictatorships?"

"No, sir, not as of yet."

"Then we cannot act."

"Captain," the lieutenant objected, moving in front of Nathan to force him to stop walking for a moment. "I do not believe you appreciate the threat these dictatorships pose to the well-being of your world."

Nathan looked at Lieutenant Telles, one eyebrow raised, but said nothing.

"The Jung are still an incredible threat to your world. Your people need to unite under a central leadership in order to prepare to defend themselves. Dictators are generally not good at working together for the common good of anyone but themselves. Your history is replete with examples."

"Show me evidence that the Jung are behind one of these dictatorships, and I will authorize you to take them out. Meanwhile, I cannot send the Ghatazhak down to assassinate every leader that I do not like. For all we know, these dictators may be doing some good for the people they control."

"Captain..."

"Show me the Jung, Lieutenant, and I will authorize a strike. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir." Lieutenant Telles stepped aside.

Nathan continued on his way. After several steps, he stopped and turned back toward the lieutenant. "It is not that I am not concerned, Lieutenant, because I am... greatly. But you yourself said that half the people of Earth wish the Jung were still in charge. If I send the Ghatazhak in without justification, it could be misinterpreted by those very same people. Our job is to protect the people of the Earth from the Jung, not from one another. Granted, it is sometimes a very thin line that separates the two, but the line is there. We just have to recognize it."

"Understood, sir."

"Keep a close eye on them, Lieutenant. If the Jung are there, we'll go after them."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Doctor Chen held the imaging device just above Jessica's left shoulder, observing the images of the internal structures and muscles on the small screen. "These Corinairan medical imagers are amazing devices," she mumbled, shaking her head in mild disbelief. She looked at Jessica and smiled. "I've been using them for nearly five months now, and I still can't get over how useful they truly are."

"Oh, yeah? What does it tell you?" Jessica wondered, feigning mild interest.

"That those nanites are doing a good job of repairing your shoulder wound."

"I would hope so, considering the amount of discomfort they cause."

Doctor Chen frowned. "We still haven't figured out why they don't cause problems for the Corinairans, but they do for most everyone else."

"Maybe they just don't like the way we taste."

"The internal scarring is nearly gone. I suspect your shoulder will be fully repaired within the week."

"The sooner those buggers are out of me the better."

"Only the ones in your shoulder will be out," Doctor Chen reminded her.

"Yeah, I know, but it's a start." Jessica leaned her head back, staring at the ceiling.

"At least the captain started sending you work again."

"Reviewing volunteer background files?" Jessica said, holding up her data pad. "Yeah, it's real challenging stuff, Doc."

"Then I'll leave you to it," the doctor said as she turned to exit, pushing the privacy curtain back against the wall on her way out.

"Would you like some help with those files?" Synda asked from the next bed.

"It would take me longer to teach you what to look for than to do it myself," Jessica said. "Besides, technically, it is my job."

"Just trying to help. You're not the only one who's bored around here."

Jessica laid her data pad down and leaned her head back onto her pillows. "I'm sorry."

"About what?" Synda wondered.

"About being such a lousy roommate, or ward mate, or whatever you call it. I guess I'm not very good at being laid up."

"That's okay. Although, I would have thought you would be used to it by now."

"Why would I be used to it?"

"Surely you must get injured a lot in your line of work?"

"Not really, no." Jessica shrugged. "Now that I think about it, I guess I've been lucky so far."

"I don't think I could do it."

"Do what?"

"What you do," Synda explained. "I used to think that I could, and I really wanted to get the chance. Now, after all that's happened, I'm not so sure."

"I don't know, I think you've held up pretty well so far, all things considered," Jessica said, trying her best to sound encouraging. "I mean, it's not like you had any real training or anything."

"I used to go to the gym and spar every day," Synda defended.

"Trust me, sweetheart, that ain't training. At least not the kind you need."

Synda didn't answer, instead she stared off toward the distant bulkhead. After a minute, she sighed. "I wonder how Tony's doing."

Jessica had to make a conscious effort not to react to her rhetorical question. "I'm sure he's doing fine."

Synda looked at her. "You think? I heard Australia had a pretty heavy Jung presence. I heard some of the wounded who came in a couple days ago were from Sydney. Some kind of Jung attack or something. One of the shuttle pilots was killed, I think. Didn't you say you guys landed in Australia?"

"Yes, we did."

"And you were badly injured."

"Yeah, but we were separated long before the Jung found me. I'm sure he got away clean." Jessica picked up her data pad and pretended to study the files again. She didn't want to look Synda directly in the eyes right now. It was odd, since Jessica had been trained to lie, and in most convincing fashion. Now, however, she found it difficult.

"I hope you're right," Synda sighed. "I know it has only been a week since he left, but I kind of miss him."

"You had only been around him for a week or so, after not seeing him for months."

"I know, but it was nice having someone around that I knew. Someone that shared the same perspective."

"Perspective?" Jessica asked, a smirk on her face.

"Everyone on this ship has training in something. You have jobs to do. You have purpose. I'm a waitress, a barmaid."

"Actually, you were a refugee when I found you," Jessica pointed out.

"Thanks, I forgot."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Look, soon you'll be fully well, and they'll send you back down to the surface. The Jung are all gone, and you can pick up with your life again."

"What life? My home was destroyed, my job is gone, my roommate is dead. I have nothing." Synda looked down, trying not to let her emotions show.

"We'll figure out something," Jessica promised. "I'm not sure what or where, but we'll figure it out. We've got time, right? I mean, you're just as fucked up as I am, so we're

both going to be here for a while, right? So try not to worry about it."

Synda looked at Jessica. "You suck at pep talks, you know that?"

Jessica let out a small laugh. "Yeah, not really my skill set, huh?"

"No, it's not."

"Maybe we can find something for you to do here, on the Aurora."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Jessica said, looking around the room for ideas. "Maybe you can learn to be a med-tech or something."

"I don't know. I'm not good with blood."

"Well, you can always work in the galley."

"I guess it's better than being homeless on Earth," Synda admitted.

"Don't be so sure about that," Jessica warned. "This ship gets shot to hell on a regular basis."

"So I've heard." Synda leaned her head back. "Funny how things work out sometimes."

"What do you mean?" Jessica wondered.

"I got turned down by the EDF recruiters three times, remember? And I wasn't even trying to get into the academy. I would have been happy working as a clerk somewhere. Now, I'm on a spaceship. A warship, no less."

"Yeah, real funny." Jessica picked up her data pad and began looking over the volunteer files again. "You have an odd sense of humor, little girl."

CHAPTER FOUR

Captain Navarro walked the short distance from his lavish stateroom to the Avendahl's command center at his usual brisk pace. The guards at the entrance stepped aside, each outward, making way for their commanding officer.

Captain Navarro entered the short corridor that led down from the entrance onto the central floor of the Avendahl's command center.

"Captain on deck!" the guard announced after he noticed the captain's approach. The junior officers clustered around the tactical command table all stiffened as they turned toward the captain.

"As you were," the captain stated as he approached the table. He quickly glanced around the upper and lower mezzanines that encircled the entire command center. Nearly one hundred officers and senior technicians were stationed along the mezzanines. Some of them sat staring intently at their displays, while their senior officers paced back and forth, checking over the shoulders of their technicians. Per Takaran operating protocols, those working the outer mezzanines did not interrupt their duties to pay respects to the commanding officer of Takara's only surviving capital ship, Lord Suvan Navarro.

"We received an urgent communication via jump drone," Commander Lentaille reported. "The Savoy system is under attack by raiders."

"What of the Corinari?" the captain inquired. "They are but a light year away."

"The Corinari have already dispatched one of their jump-enabled gunships, but they are severely outnumbered and outgunned. They are requesting we respond immediately."

"Has the Tamara returned from patrol?" the captain asked.

"No, sir," the commander answered. "She is not due to return for two more hours."

"A period of time which the Savoyans undoubtedly cannot wait." Captain Navarro sighed. "I grow weary of jumping about, scaring off bands of raiders seeking to take advantage of former imperial worlds." He looked at the commander. "I assume you have already calculated the jump to Savoy?"

"Yes, Captain. We only await your order."

The captain sighed again. "The order is given, Commander. Sound the alert and jump the ship once it is configured for battle."

"Yes, sir." The commander turned to a subordinate and nodded, who in turn began barking orders to junior officers located along the mezzanine rails. Those men in turn passed orders on to the men they supervised.

The lights in the command center dimmed and took on a deep red hue as the alert klaxon sounded, calling the ship to battle readiness. All about the massive capital ship, thousands of men moved in brisk yet orderly fashion to their assigned posts, making ready for combat.

Captain Navarro was the only one who did not seem the slightest bit excited by the sudden call to arms. He knew that there was not a ship within twenty light years that could hope to challenge the Avendahl, especially now that she was equipped with both a jump drive and a zero-point energy device as her main source of power.

Two minutes later, the commander turned back to Captain Navarro. "All stations manned and ready for battle, Captain."

"Execute your jump, Commander."

The commander again began barking orders to subordinates. Seconds later, the Avendahl found itself no longer in her home system of Takara, but rather in the middle of the Savoy system.

"Jump complete," the commander reported. "We are now in the Savoy system, on approach to Ancot, approximately two hundred million kilometers out."

"Contacts!" the sensor officer reported from the upper mezzanine to the captain's right. "Approximately thirty raiders. Vega class."

"Fast and heavily armored," the commander stated.

"But with poor weapons systems," the captain added. "Launch all fighters."

"You do not wish to engage them with our laser turrets?"

"Vega class raiders are too maneuverable for our turrets, Commander." Captain Navarro smiled, attempting to ease the commander's bruised ego. "Even with your outstanding gunnery teams. Better to let Commander Leonca's pilots get some intercept practice."

"As you wish, sir," the commander answered with a nod.

Captain Navarro watched the holographic display over the tactical command table in front of him as symbols representing the Avendahl's fighters began flowing from her launch bays. Within minutes, more than one hundred Takaran interceptors were maneuvering to intercept the raiders as they continued to harass both the Corinari gunship and the planet of Ancot below them. One by one, the symbols representing the raiders disappeared from the holographic display.

"One would think that with the amount they are overcharging us for their grains, the Savoyans would have some defensive capabilities by now," Captain Navarro declared.

"Yes, sir, one would expect so."

"Remaining raiders are retreating," the sensor officer reported from the upper mezzanine rail.

"Shall our fighters pursue?"

"I think not, Commander," the captain said. "Recall half the fighters, and dispatch a fuel tender and tactical command shuttle. They and the remaining fighters will stay on station, in case the raiders try to return after we depart

the area. We will come back for them in twelve hours, well after the Tamara has returned and is capable of defending Takara in our absence."

"Yes, sir," the commander answered. "Shall we slingshot around Ancot, or come hard about, sir?"

"Hard about, Commander. Preferable to expend some propellant than to leave Takara unprotected."

"Of course."

"You may stand down from battle stations," the captain said as he turned to exit the command center. "There was never any real threat here, anyway."

* * *

"Captain," Master Chief Montrose hailed as he approached.

Nathan stepped through the hatch from flight operations into the main corridor. "Master Chief."

"A moment, sir?"

"I'm on my way back to the bridge. Walk and talk?"

"Of course, sir," the master chief answered as he fell in alongside the Aurora's captain.

"Thought you might like to know that the emitter array is fully operational again."

"That's nice," Nathan said as they walked, "but I'm not crazy about jumping about with our bow wide open to space."

"The damage has been cleaned up, so the crews have clean lines to work with. We should have the first sections of the inner hull in place by tomorrow. Then we can start laying in the intermediate panels and work our way out to the exterior. Should be patched up in a few weeks."

"Can't be too soon for me, Master Chief."

"Agreed, sir."

"Any word on the missile deck?" Nathan wondered.

"Still calling it a total loss," the master chief said. "The bay and the elevator platform are both good, but we'd have

to build a whole new launcher from the ground up, and that could take months.”

“Not much use, really,” Nathan said as they turned the corner. “We’ve only got a little over forty missiles left, and I doubt we’ll be seeing more of them coming from Earth in the near future.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“Just clean it up and get it ready. We’ll decide what to do with it later.”

“What about all the missiles still in the missile deck?”

“We’ll find something to do with them. Meanwhile, just keep them to the outboard edges of the missile deck, out of the way of work parties.” Nathan turned into the entrance corridor to the bridge, the master chief still keeping step. “The docking tunnel and mooring arms are working, right?”

“Yes, sir,” the master chief assured him. “We’ve already tested both without any problems. We should be able to hard dock with the Celestia.”

“Captain on deck,” the guard at the bridge hatch announced as Nathan and the master chief stepped onto the bridge.

“Very well,” Nathan said as he looked at the main spherical view screen that encompassed the forward half of the Aurora’s bridge. “Aft view, please, Mister Navashee.”

The image on the main view screen changed to the aft-facing cameras built into the Aurora’s outer hull. The Celestia was closing slowly, filling more than a quarter of the screen.

“Time to docking?” Nathan asked as he moved forward past the unoccupied tactical station.

“Five minutes, twenty seconds,” Mister Navashee answered from the sensor station.

Nathan sat down in the command chair at the center of the bridge, watching the main view screen as the Celestia gradually increased in size as she approached. “I hope we’re recording this,” Nathan said.

“We always are, sir,” Mister Navashee answered.

Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Flight ops, Captain. All our birds in place?"

"Yes, sir. Four Talons with gun cameras," the flight operations officer answered over Nathan's comm-set.

"Very well," Nathan answered, tapping his comm-set to close the connection. "That should satisfy the news media on Earth."

"Surprising, how quickly they recovered," Master Chief Montrose commented.

Nathan looked at the master chief. "I take it the Corinairan military are not terribly fond of their journalists, either?"

"Journalists would be an inaccurate description of Corinairan news media, Captain," the master chief answered, his eyebrows raised in disdain. "Hopefully, President Scott's idea will succeed."

"Footage of the Earth's last two warships, both once thought to be lost, safe in orbit over the world they were built to protect?" Nathan looked back at the approaching Celestia on the main view screen. "You don't think it will invoke a sense of patriotism in the people of Earth?"

"The Earth is a chaotic place at present," the master chief reminded him. "It may take considerably more than two ships returning to port and a bit of flag waving."

"You're probably right," Nathan agreed. "It can't hurt, though."

Cameron stood in front of the command chair on the Celestia's bridge, staring at the main view screen. The image of the Aurora's stern grew larger with each passing moment. A feeling of relief slowly rose within her. Their escape had been a long shot at best, and it had taken them ten long days to get back to Earth, even at full thrust. There was also no reason for her to feel relieved, and she knew that well. They were no safer in orbit over the Earth than they were elsewhere in the Sol system. In fact, they might

have been safer had they remained on a cold-coast trajectory out of the solar system. At least the Jung would have had to look for them. Here, orbiting high above their homeworld, was the first place the Jung would look.

"Whoa," Luis mumbled from the tactical station, his voice hinting disbelief at the image of the Aurora on the main view screen.

Cameron turned to look at the ensign.

Luis looked at Commander Taylor. "She really took a beating, didn't she?"

"I've seen her in worse condition," Cameron told him as she turned back forward.

"Seriously?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"Trust me," Cameron said.

"Two minutes to hard dock," the navigator reported.

"You must be feeling pretty good right now, Lieutenant Commander," Cameron added.

"Me?"

"You have completed your assignment, after all. You kept the ship together and got her back home."

"I only got her to Metis," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic insisted. "You and Captain Scott got her back home."

"We all got her back home," Cameron corrected.

"The Celestia is hailing us, Captain," Naralena announced from the communications station at the back of the Aurora's bridge.

"Put them up," Nathan ordered.

"*Aurora, Celestia Actual*," Cameron's voice called over the loudspeakers.

Nathan smiled. "Celestial Actual, Aurora Actual. Go ahead, Commander."

"*Aurora Actual, Celestial Actual. Request permission to hard dock.*"

"Celestial Actual, Aurora Actual. Permission granted. Welcome home."

The Aurora's mooring arms began to extend slowly from her starboard fore and aft sections as the Celestia crept up alongside. The Celestia fired its forward docking thruster and ended her relative forward motion, coming into position alongside her sister ship, the Aurora. Moments later, the massive starship fired its starboard docking thruster, causing her to drift slowly to port, toward the Aurora's extended mooring arms.

Various thrusters fired intermittently, as the Celestia's helmsman lined the ship up for final docking. One last burn of its port-side docking thrusters stopped the Celestia's sideways drift toward the Aurora, bringing her relative motion to a full stop only a meter away from the ends of the Aurora's mooring arms.

The Aurora's mooring arms continued to extend, the docking clamps on the ends of the mooring arms opening wide as the arms articulated slightly to line up with the Celestia's mooring points. A few seconds later, the Aurora's mooring arms found their marks, and their docking clamps grabbed hold of the Celestia's mooring hardpoints.

"Mooring arms connected," Mister Riley announced from the navigator's chair on the Aurora's bridge.

"Extend the main boarding tunnel," Nathan ordered.

"Extending main boarding tunnel, aye."

Nathan watched the starboard midship camera view on the main view screen as the Aurora's telescoping, two-level boarding tunnel extended toward the Celestia sitting at the end of the Aurora's mooring arms. The tunnel's four sections extended outward, one by one, until the docking skirt made contact with the Celestia's hull. Small panels located on the Celestia's hull around the outside edge of the docking skirt slid open, and clamps unfolded outward to grab hold of the

docking collar. The clamps pulled the collar inward against the Celestia's hull as the skirt inflated.

"Boarding tunnel secure," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's station at the Aurora's helm.

"Boarding deck reports hard dock," Naralena added from the comm station.

"Very well," Nathan began as he rose from the command chair and headed for his ready room. "Let Commander Taylor know that I'll be expecting her and her command staff in the command briefing room in one hour."

"Aye, sir."

"You have the conn, Mister Riley."

* * *

Commander Taylor stepped through the hatch from the boarding tunnel onto the starboard boarding foyer of the Aurora. This ship had been her home for months, and after twelve days it felt good to set foot on familiar decks.

"Celestia, arriving," Naralena's voice called over the loudspeakers.

Cameron looked at Nathan. "Nice touch," she told him, fighting back a smile.

"Thought you'd like it," Nathan said, looking pleased with himself as he turned and started back toward the center of the ship. "How does it feel to be home?"

"You mean, back on the Aurora?"

"Actually, I was talking about Earth."

"I'm not really on Earth, am I?"

"You know what I meant," Nathan said, rolling his eyes.

"Good, I guess."

"Are you settling in on board the Celestia?"

"I don't know that I'd call it that," Cameron disagreed. "We're so understaffed and overworked, everyone's working eighteen-hour days and then passing out. I've even been reading reports in the shower." Cameron looked at Nathan as they turned and headed up the ramp to the next deck. "Did you know data pads are waterproof?"

"No, I didn't," Nathan admitted. "How is your crew holding up?"

"Tired, but they won't admit it. They realize what a lucky break we've just had. You know, I still can't believe that you pulled it off."

"We were lucky."

"No, Nathan, you weren't. I know you like to think you were, but the truth is you came up with a plan and you executed it."

"The plan was to save the Celestia..."

"And you did, along with the Earth as well."

"Not by choice, I'm afraid, and definitely not by intention. At least not directly."

"Perhaps, but you did, nevertheless."

"And the Earth paid a hefty price," Nathan commented solemnly as they started up the next ramp.

"Yeah, we've been watching the broadcasts on our way back. It looks worse than when the Jung first invaded."

"Much worse. When they originally invaded, they wanted to preserve at least some of the infrastructure in order to ease the transition. This time, they wanted to destroy everything... leave us nothing of value."

Cameron sighed. "Has your father managed to get the NAU government back up and running?"

"To some extent, yes. Most of the northern and western provinces have signed back on, but not without protests... some of them violent."

"What about the southern provinces?"

"The eastern and gulf provinces were pretty hard hit. The fallout from Philadelphia and Miami has thrown those areas into complete chaos. Pockets of stability have popped up here and there. Some have even formed their own independent governments and declared themselves sovereign nations. Some of them are legit, others are just thugs with guns looking to become dictators. Telles suspects many of them are Jung supported or at least influenced. He wants to go down and take them out."

Cameron looked at Nathan. "You can't let him do that, Nathan. The EDF charter specifically forbids..."

"Yeah, I know," Nathan interrupted. "I already told Telles we can't act unless we have definitive proof that the Jung are behind them. Don't worry."

"What does the NAU say about all this?" Cameron wondered.

"My father believes that the new independents will eventually rejoin the union, once they realize they don't have the resources needed to maintain their sovereignty."

"The United Earth Republic won't recognize the new nations," Cameron pointed out as they turned to ascend the last ramp. "None of them were part of the original charter."

"The republic no longer exists," Nathan told her. "Only twelve of the original seventy-two nations still exist. And they're barely able to manage their own problems at the moment, let alone trying to reestablish the republic."

Cameron grabbed Nathan's arm, stopping him in the middle of the ramp on their way up to the command deck. "Nathan," she began in hushed tones, looking around to make sure they were not overheard, "if the republic doesn't exist, neither does the EDF."

"What?"

"The Earth Defense Force cannot exist without the republic. It says so in its charter. If the republic ceases to exist, the assets of the Earth Defense Force are to be dismantled."

"That's stupid..."

"It says that for a reason, Nathan," Cameron interrupted. "So that no nation or nations are able to suddenly wield power in space for their own national interests. They wrote that article because of the sector wars of the twenty-third century."

Nathan's eyebrows shot up. "I forgot all about that."

"Some historian you are."

"What are we supposed to do, then?" Nathan asked. "Tell everyone to pack up and get out, the war has been

canceled?”

“Of course not,” Cameron told him, “but we’re going to have to think of something.”

“The EDF is still functioning, Cameron,” Nathan said. “At least it is on the surface. There are still spec-ops units working with the Ghatazhak to weed out Jung cells operating on Earth. They’re even trying to infiltrate groups of known Jung sympathizers in order to gain intelligence.”

“Have any fleet officers turned up yet?”

“No one higher than a lieutenant thus far,” Nathan said. “The EDF was still young, there weren’t a lot of high-ranking officers to go around to begin with. Most of them were killed when their ships were destroyed during the invasion.”

“How many of the Intrepid’s crew have reported in?” Cameron wondered.

“Only forty-eight so far, but it’s still pretty early. The Earth-Net was only restored a few days ago, so word is just starting to get out. The few that have reported in were all hiding out in the Sydney area,” Nathan explained as they began walking up the last ramp again. “Several of them were keeping in touch with one another, albeit discreetly. Oh, and we’re up to ten Eagles now.”

“I find it hard to believe that I’m the only one in the EDF that knows about that clause in the charter,” Cameron stated as they topped the ramp and stepped onto the Aurora’s command deck.

“Maybe they just don’t care,” Nathan answered with one eyebrow raised.

“Perhaps, but don’t you think we owe it to everyone to let them know that they are no longer bound by their oaths?”

“Is that how you feel?” Nathan asked. “Like you’re no longer bound by your oath to serve?”

“I’ve never felt bound by my oath,” Cameron insisted, casting a quick, disapproving glance her captain’s way. “I’m here because this is where I belong, as do you I might add.”

Nathan’s head came back slightly at her words. “Wow.”

"Wow, what?"

"That's probably one of the most supportive things you've ever said to me. What the hell happened to you?"

"Let's just say being in command has opened my eyes a bit... made me realize a few things."

"Like what?"

"Like it isn't always as easy as it looks."

Nathan sneered. "You've got that right." They came to a stop at the intersection next to the aft side of the bridge.

"I'm going to go to my quarters and get completely cleaned up for the first time in days," Cameron said.

"Your stuff is still here?" Nathan wondered, somewhat surprised.

"Most of it, yes. When I took command, I was in such a hurry that I only had time to gather a few things." She looked at Nathan, her head cocked to one side and a suspicious look in her eye. "You didn't give my quarters to anyone, did you?"

"Of course not," Nathan promised. "To be honest, we've been too busy to even think about that sort of thing."

"Great. I can't wait to change into a properly cleaned uniform."

Nathan smiled. "I wasn't going to say anything, honest."

* * *

Master Chief Montrose did not smile very often these days. As the Aurora's 'chief of the boat', his days were spent dealing with one problem after another. Today, however, was different, and a small grin quickly grew into a broad smile as his friend once again graced the Aurora's flight decks. "Marcus," he exclaimed, his arms wide open.

"Ah, for cryin' out loud," Marcus complained as he walked up to the master chief. "Are you going to make a scene?"

"Give me a hug, old friend."

"Jeez, Doran," Marcus said as the master chief embraced him. "Granted, I don't know much about military protocols,

but I'm pretty damned sure hugging isn't part of them."

"It is when you're happy to see someone who you thought might not survive."

"I could say the same about you, Doran, but you don't see me gettin' all mushy about it."

"We must take our pleasures where we can, my friend."

"You seen my boy?" Marcus asked, looking about the commotion of the hangar bay.

"Starboard main elevator," Doran told him. "He will be pleased to see you, but you'd best hurry. They are to depart soon."

Marcus looked nervous. "How's he doing?" he wondered. "I've been hearing rumors 'bout him disobeying orders and such. I can smack his ass down if need be..."

"Josh is a brave young man, and a skilled pilot. Undisciplined at times, yes, but that is part of what makes him good at his job." The master chief noticed the concerned look on his friend's face. He reached out and put both his hands on Marcus's shoulders. "He has saved many lives these past days. He has grown into a fine young man. You should be quite proud of him, Marcus."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

Marcus smiled.

"Go, quickly. We will catch up later."

Marcus looked at his friend and smiled. "Thanks, Doran."

Marcus walked quickly toward the starboard main elevator pad, dodging technicians and deck tractors as he made his way across the hangar. He could see the top of the Falcon's sleek, black fuselage above the activity. As he approached, he could see Loki ascending the boarding ladder. He knew that Josh would be right behind him.

He moved more quickly, bellowing at men to make way as he passed. Finally he came to a stop. "Josh!"

Josh stopped halfway up the boarding ladder and turned to look back toward the caller's voice. He saw Marcus, the closest thing to a father he had ever known, standing there

looking at him. He rolled his eyes and tossed his helmet back down to his crew chief. "I'll be right back," he told him as he came back down the ladder.

The crew chief smiled. "Take your time, Josh."

Josh walked over to Marcus, fighting a smile the entire way. Neither of them had ever been much for shows of affection. "You made it back," he said as he neared Marcus.

"Yup, I sure did," Marcus answered. "I hear you done all right. Saved a few people I hear."

"I suppose."

"Some even called you brave."

"Really?"

Marcus scratched his head. "They might have said stupid. My ears are always ringing, what with the whine of all these damned turbines and such."

"Yeah, they might have," Josh answered, a mischievous grin on his face. He looked down at the deck for a moment. "You doing okay? Things working out for you on the Celestia?"

"They're moving me back here for now."

"Oh, that's good," Josh said. "Right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Maybe we can get some chow later, talk a bit."

"Sure. I gotta go now though, I got a flight and all."

"Where ya headed?"

"Another recon," Josh told him. "We're going looking for the Jung fleet that's supposed to be on the way here from Alpha Centauri."

Marcus nodded. "Maybe when you get back."

"Could be gone a while, but sure."

"All right, then. I'll see you later."

"Sure." Josh turned to head back to the Falcon.

"Don't fuck up, boy!" Marcus called out in his usual tone.

Josh stopped dead in his tracks, smiling again. He turned around and took two steps back to Marcus, and hugged him with all his might. "I'm glad you're back, Marcus," he mumbled into the old man's uniform shirt.

"Me too, boy," Marcus whispered back. "Me too." After a moment, Marcus pushed Josh back. "Now, go do what you're good at."

Josh smiled again as he stepped backwards away from Marcus.

As Josh turned away to head back to the Falcon, Marcus mumbled, "I'm proud of you, Josh."

"I heard that!" Josh said, his right hand shooting up in the air.

* * *

Nathan walked briskly into the command briefing room.

"Attention on deck," the Corinari guard at the entrance called out in the usual Corinairan brogue.

"As you were," Nathan followed before anyone had a chance to stand. He made his way to the head of the conference table and took his seat. To his left were Commander Taylor, her executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Kovacic, Doctor Sorenson, and the Celestia's acting chief engineer, Ensign Tillardi. To Nathan's right were his acting executive officer, Mister Willard, his chief of the boat, Master Chief Montrose, his chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy, and his chief of medical, Doctor Chen.

"I'll skip the pleasantries and get straight to business," Nathan began in pragmatic tone. "We're here to discuss our options going forward. If anyone has any ideas, questions, or concerns at any time during this meeting, do not hesitate to speak up." Nathan paused a moment to glance around the conference table. "Very well. Our original plan had been to distract the Jung while the Celestia made her escape. We had not planned on liberating the Earth at that time, but here we are. All Jung space forces known to be within the Sol sector have been destroyed."

"What about ground forces," Commander Taylor asked.

Nathan looked at Lieutenant Telles.

"Although the major organized units have been eliminated, there are at least a dozen known Jung cells operating on the surface of your world."

"Are they Jung troops who went underground, or are they more specialized units?" Cameron wondered.

"It is impossible to determine with any certainty at this time," Lieutenant Telles answered. "If I were to guess, I would say that it is a mixture of not only standard ground forces gone underground, but also specialized operatives that may have been in place since long before the original invasion. In addition, there appears to be significant local support for the Jung."

"Are you certain?" Cameron asked.

"Quite certain, Commander. Not all of the forces we have faced over the last week have been trained. Many of them were armed only with the typical projectile weapons found on Earth."

"That's disturbing," Cameron mumbled.

"The Jung presence on Earth, although quite destructive at first, did stabilize many geopolitical and economic factors, many of which were aimed at the working classes. By improving the lives of those who felt most betrayed by their leaders, the Jung obviously sought to cultivate support for their continued rule."

"What percentage of the Earth's population do you think prefer Jung rule?" Nathan asked.

"Again, it is impossible to ascertain without more intelligence. I highly doubt it is a significant number. Such levels take years if not decades to cultivate, especially after a rather destructive invasion. However, the fact that they were able to achieve even a slightly measurable level of support in only a few months of occupation suggests the use of psychological conditioning methods."

"You mean they were brainwashing our people?" Cameron asked.

"I believe some level of influence operations has taken place," the lieutenant answered, "although *brainwashing*

might be too strong a term.”

“So there could be spies anywhere,” Nathan surmised, “even among the volunteers.”

“Even among members of the EDF,” Lieutenant Telles pointed out, “although admittedly that *is* less likely.”

Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he considered the implications. “We need those people if we’re going to fully crew two ships.”

“How are we going to tell if they can be trusted?” Cameron wondered.

“There are ways to detect psychological conditioning through passive interrogation,” Doctor Chen said.

Nathan’s eyebrows went up, surprised at the doctor’s statement.

“I was a psych major as an undergrad,” she explained. “The methods are not foolproof. Nothing is when it comes to the human mind.”

“Another indicator would be gaps in the subject’s known movements and presence,” Lieutenant Telles added. “Such gaps would indicate time periods where conditioning could have taken place.”

“What amount of time are we talking about?” Nathan wondered.

“We have no knowledge of the Jung’s methods of psychological conditioning,” the lieutenant warned.

“Are we talking days, weeks, or months?” Nathan asked.

“Most likely weeks,” the lieutenant assured him. “Otherwise, the number of supports would be significantly higher.”

“*Unless they’re sleepers,*” Jessica’s voice chimed in from one of the view screens on the command briefing room wall.

“A possibility, no doubt,” the lieutenant conceded.

“Let’s make sure we do thorough background and activity checks on every volunteer coming aboard,” Nathan insisted.

“*Already on it, Captain,*” Jessica promised over the view screen. “*We’re going to need some boots on the ground for*

field interviews, though. I suggest we use surviving spec-ops personnel. We're trained to resist such conditioning."

"That is still no guarantee..." Cameron began.

"Most, if not all of the special operations forces we have encountered thus far have been underground since the original invasion," Jessica interrupted. "It should be pretty easy to establish whether or not they could have been taken by the Jung, conditioned, and then returned to their outfits. Hell, if one of my people was gone for a few days, and I couldn't verify their whereabouts, I'd probably shoot'em."

"A bit harsh, don't you think?" Nathan commented.

"Tough times, and all that," Jessica answered without skipping a beat.

Nathan sighed again. "I trust you and your men can deal with these cells?" Nathan asked the lieutenant.

"We can," Lieutenant Telles responded confidently, "if given sufficient resources and opportunity. However, innocent civilians are bound to get caught in the crossfire from time to time, especially since the Jung are mixing Terran sympathizers with their own forces. In addition, Ghatazhak tactics are bound to be seen as unduly aggressive by Terran journalists."

"More aggressive than the Jung tactic of nuking cities from orbit?" Jessica questioned.

"It is unlikely that those most affected by our tactics will make that distinction," the lieutenant countered.

"We have to be very careful in the application of EDF forces on the ground, Captain," Cameron cautioned. "We have to be sure that..."

"I am aware of the EDF charter, Commander," Nathan interrupted. He turned back to the lieutenant. "Do you have options to offer me, Lieutenant?"

"Perhaps," Lieutenant Telles responded, one eyebrow raised. "However, such options are bound to be far less effective."

"We don't have time for 'less effective', Lieutenant," Nathan stated coldly.

Cameron looked at him. "Captain..."

"Our world is in chaos, Commander," Nathan said, cutting her off without even looking at her. "Only a handful of the Earth's original nations have managed to restart their governments, and they are still shaky at best. The economy is nonexistent, crime is rampant, industry is at a standstill..." Nathan turned his head to look at Cameron again. "The Earth is as close to complete collapse as it was a thousand years ago. If order is not restored, and soon, there will be little left worth fighting for. The Jung have seen to that." Nathan took a deep breath. "What the people of Earth need right now is unity, and to have that, they need order and purpose."

After a brief moment of silence, Cameron spoke up again. "Just how aggressive are we talking about?"

"Now that your planet-wide network is operating again, it would be best if the people of Earth were warned not to carry a weapon in the presence of the Ghatazhak, as it is likely to result in the immediate application of deadly force."

"Lieutenant, the people of Earth have little to no law enforcement available to protect them," Cameron said. "They are more likely to be armed now than ever. You cannot ask them to lay down their arms now."

"I am not asking them to lay down their arms," the lieutenant corrected. "I am warning them of the consequences of brandishing a weapon in the presence of the Ghatazhak."

"Captain..." Cameron began to protest.

Nathan held up his hand to stop her protest.

"The Ghatazhak are being asked to secure a heavily populated world that is currently under extreme duress," Lieutenant Telles explained. "In addition, an unknown portion of that population support Jung rule. That makes the situation highly dangerous. If my men are not allowed to operate freely without concern for collateral damage, our numbers will dwindle rapidly, and you shall have your complete collapse after all. Then, when the Jung return—and

they shall return—they will take your world with far less concern for the well-being of its inhabitants.”

“Warning will be given, Lieutenant,” Nathan promised. “However, it may take several days. Until then, I would appreciate a little extra caution on behalf of the Ghatazhak when selecting targets.”

“Understood, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

“And when order *is* restored, then what?” Cameron asked.

“Prior to the restoration of order by Earth governments, the Ghatazhak shall only be taking action when ordered to do so. This should only occur when there is sufficient evidence that the targets are indeed Jung forces, or that the situation is beyond the control of local forces. We shall continue to utilize the Ghatazhak in such fashion until such time as the governments of Earth are capable of maintaining order on their own,” Nathan explained. “However, such actions shall require command authorization from either myself, or Commander Taylor in my absence. Is that understood, Lieutenant?”

“Completely, sir,” the lieutenant responded.

“So, we’ve become an occupying force... of our own world?” Cameron was dumbfounded.

“It may not be as bad as you perceive it to be,” Lieutenant Telles said. “Once the last of the Jung cells have been eliminated, and the most violent of the groups sympathetic to the Jung have all but disbanded, order will begin to develop on its own accord. First at the local levels, then regionally and so on. Humans prefer safety. Order provides that safety. Humans are most content when they know that what they have today, they will still have tomorrow.”

“I hope you’re right, Lieutenant,” Commander Taylor said.

“As do I,” the lieutenant responded.

“The Ghatazhak will be operating purely as a reactionary force, Commander,” Nathan assured her, “not an occupying

one. If and when they respond, the response area will already be hot. Anyone still brandishing a weapon upon their arrival would likely be worthy of their aggression.”

“That would be easier for the public to stomach,” Cameron agreed.

“I will make adjustments to our operations accordingly,” Lieutenant Telles promised.

“Thank you, Lieutenant” Cameron said, looking directly at him.

Lieutenant Telles nodded his affirmation to Commander Taylor.

“Enough about the situation on the surface,” Nathan said, attempting to change the topic. “What I really want to talk about is how to best prepare to defend ourselves against the next wave of Jung ships that are currently on their way from Alpha Centauri.”

“Have we confirmed their arrival date?” Commander Taylor wondered.

“The Falcon is out looking for them now,” Major Prechitt said.

“Shouldn’t that have been done a long time ago?” Cameron asked.

“The Falcon was down for several days for repairs,” Master Chief Montrose explained to Commander Taylor. “Since her return to duty, she has been quite busy.”

“What he means to say is that there were higher priority missions for the Falcon to complete. As it may take some time to locate the incoming Jung ships, we decided to wait until after your arrival. After all, they were our chief means of immediate communication with you.”

“Josh and Loki are the only pilots we have for the Falcon right now,” Major Prechitt reminded them. “We cannot fly them all day, every day.”

“Of course not.”

“For the purposes of this meeting, let’s just assume that the Jung will arrive in five months. We should also assume

that the resources of Earth will be unavailable to us, at least for most of that time period."

"That's going to be a problem," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. "Even if both our ships were fully functional, we're going to need consumables, clothing, medical supplies, and all the other little things that we use day in and day out."

"The Aurora was fully stocked for a crew of three hundred before we left the Pentaurus cluster," Master Chief Montrose said, "but we ended up leaving about twenty-five percent of our crew on Corinair."

"And our water is one hundred percent recycled," Nathan added.

"The Celestia's is not," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic warned. "None of our recycling systems have been installed. We're using temporary storage tanks."

"What kind of capacity?" Nathan asked.

"Enough to support a crew of one hundred for about two months. With strict rationing, maybe six," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic answered.

"If we can get the Celestia's jump drive working, that won't be such an issue," Nathan stated. He turned to Abby sitting at the far end of the table. "Doctor Sorenson, how is work progressing on the Celestia's jump drive?"

"We managed to fabricate all of her emitters during the return voyage. It will take us several more weeks to complete the installation and test the array before we can begin jump trials. However, I believe we have a very good chance of getting it to work."

"Any idea how long before she can jump?"

"Operationally, it is impossible to say. I am confident, however, that she will have at least limited jump capability prior to the arrival of the Jung fleet."

"That's good to hear, Doctor," Nathan said. "Okay, let's assume that sometime before the Jung arrive, both our ships will be jump-capable. With that in mind, I have some ideas on how to best prepare each ship." Nathan turned toward

Cameron. "The interior decks of the Celestia are unfinished, and her launch tubes have not even been installed. Since we have so few Talons left, it makes no sense to even bother trying to outfit the Celestia as a carrier vessel."

"What about the Eagles that are showing up?"

"Only ten have checked in," Major Prechitt told her.

"Even ten is a surprise," Nathan said. "I doubt very seriously enough Eagles have survived to justify fielding a second carrier."

"What do you intend to do with us?" Cameron wondered.

"I propose we turn the Celestia into a destroyer."

The room became quiet. Nathan looked at the faces sitting around the table. "Lieutenant Montgomery, how long does it take to build a plasma turret using our fabricators?"

"Using a single set of fabricators, at least a month to fabricate, assemble, install, and test," the lieutenant answered.

"We only have two fabrication sets, Captain," Cameron reminded him. "And the Aurora still needs a lot of repairs."

"That's what I told him," Vladimir added.

Nathan slid his data pad over to Cameron. "Copy this to your data pad for reference."

"What is it?" she asked, looking at the display.

"I had our fabrication officer work up a tentative fabrication plan. One that will give us the greatest capabilities in the shortest time."

"You're going to start by making more fabricators," she realized as she read the plan on Nathan's data pad.

"The Aurora's fabricator set will make five more sets. The Aurora and the Celestia will then have two sets each. The rest will go to the Jar-Keurog, which should be fully under our control by then. She will become our orbital production facility, as well as our space port."

"This is pretty good," Cameron nodded as she continued scanning the fabrication schedule. "You're going to have to promote the fabrication chief."

"We have to give him an official rank before we can promote him," Nathan said. "But that's another conversation."

"What about point-defenses?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered as he looked over Commander Taylor's shoulder at the data pad.

"Just be quick on the jump," Nathan told her.

"Five or six plasma turrets may not be enough," Cameron argued. "Against a frigate, sure, maybe even a cruiser, but certainly not a battleship. We'd need plasma torpedo cannons."

"Captain," Lieutenant Montgomery interrupted, "the most complex part of building plasma cannon turrets is not the cannon, it is the turret. More precisely, it is the targeting system. The cannon itself is a relatively straightforward device. Even the larger cannons that you inaccurately refer to as 'torpedo cannons' are easier to build than the turrets. Same device, really, just on a bigger scale."

"How long does it take to build just the cannon without the turret?"

"Approximately ten days," the lieutenant answered confidently.

"What about the big ones you spoke of?"

"Fifteen days. Only because the larger parts take a little longer to fabricate. However, with more fabricators that time could be cut in half."

"How long does it take to fabricate a fabricator?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"Surprisingly enough, it only takes eight days," Lieutenant Montgomery said. "That is because the only large components are the housings. Smaller components are much faster to fabricate."

"Maybe we should stop everything else and just make more fabricators for now," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic suggested.

"I've considered that," Nathan said, "but we need to get the Celestia jump-capable first, so that she is safe. Until

we're sure about when those Jung ships will arrive, we can't run the risk of her not being able to escape. Besides, we're getting dangerously low on raw materials."

"There are still mining facilities out in the asteroid belt," Major Prechitt stated. "The crews returned to Earth after the Jung were driven away, but all the equipment and the facilities are still there."

"That's right," Nathan said. "The Jung kept them running during the occupation. If we could get some crews back there, we could build up our stock of raw materials."

"What if we just built four plasma cannons," Cameron said. "Four really big ones."

Nathan looked at her.

"We could install them in the Celestia's empty launch tunnels," Cameron continued. "Jump in, fire all four cannons, jump out. From the right range, say, a few hundred kilometers, we'd be too far away for them to reach us with missiles or rail guns, but too close for them to maneuver away from the plasma shots."

"That might work," Nathan admitted. He looked at Lieutenant Montgomery.

The lieutenant nodded. "I believe it would."

"Can we do this all in less than five months?" Commander Taylor wondered.

"If given the raw materials and the manpower, I believe so," Nathan said. "Especially if we can squeeze out at a few more sets of fabricators. Meanwhile, I suggest that we add asteroid miners to our list of needed volunteers."

"I know at least one," Cameron told him. "He's currently running my flight deck."

Nathan smiled. "Of course." He turned to Major Prechitt. "Since the Celestia's no longer going to carry Talons, that means the Aurora will now have what, twelve Talons?"

"Sixteen if we can repair the last four. The problem is that I don't have enough pilots."

"How many are you short?"

"A minimum of four, although I wouldn't mind having twice as many pilots as I have spacecraft."

"I'm sure a few will find their way to us from the surface," Nathan told him.

"Hopefully. Keep in mind, however, that we are still only using the starboard fighter bay."

"Yes, I'm afraid the damaged launch tubes on the port side will have to wait," Nathan told the major.

"With only twelve fighters manned and operational, the single bay will suffice," Major Prechitt assured him. "In fact, most of our flights have been in support of Ghatazhak engagements on the surface, as well as shuttle escort duties. It might be better to discontinue combat flight operations on the Aurora as well. At least for the time being. After all, the battle tactics used by the Aurora make flight operations problematic at best."

"What do you propose to do with the Talons?" Nathan asked.

"My men were originally trained to operate from surface bases. Perhaps we can establish such a base on the surface of your world."

"That's not a bad idea," Nathan agreed.

"It might be better to move them to the Jar-Keurog," Lieutenant Telles suggested. "She has numerous flight decks and ample operational space. There are even some spacecraft aboard, including fighters."

"It takes less fuel for a Talon to drop into the atmosphere for ground support missions than it does for them to climb up into orbit for space operations," Major Prechitt pointed out. "And I would like to take a look at the Jung spacecraft left behind, if for no other reason than to better determine how to defeat them in battle."

"Very well. Once Lieutenant Montgomery and the Tannans have gained complete control over the Jar-Keurog, go over and take a look around, Major."

"Yes, sir."

"If the Talons are moved, that will free up resources on the Aurora," Cameron pointed out. "It would take a load off our resources if the Celestia's crew were assigned quarters on the Aurora."

"It would make ongoing construction on the Celestia much easier," Vladimir added.

"Very well," Nathan agreed, "especially since we're not going anywhere for a few more weeks at least."

"I'll set up a rotation schedule," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said.

"Excellent," Nathan exclaimed with a smile. "We're making progress, people. Commander, put that fabrication schedule up on the view screen if you will, so we can talk about what weapons to build."

* * *

Three Corinairan Kalibri airships streaked over the Winnipeg skyline, changing altitudes at random as they weaved their way around, between, and over the buildings. The three airships flew chaotic patterns, rotating positions as they continued on their course toward the temporary NAU capitol complex.

Nathan looked out his window from his seat in one of the airships, watching the building lights streak by. He thought back to his first day on Corinair. The wild ride had been much the same, only men had died that day. Master Chief Montrose's brother had died that day. Kyle Montrose had died protecting Nathan and his entourage, despite the fact that he had never even met them.

Until he had boarded, Nathan had never laid eyes on the man piloting the airship in which he currently rode. The pilot had served under his command for nearly five months, flying missions on Ancot, Answari, Tanna, and now on Earth. Now, he too was risking his life to protect Nathan's, again, having never met his commanding officer until forty minutes ago, when his airship picked him up from a small field well outside the city.

To Nathan's right was his trusted body guard, Sergeant Weatherly. Across from him, facing aft, was Lieutenant Telles and one of his Ghatazhak warriors. "Is all this really necessary?" Nathan wondered.

"We would not be here were it not, Captain," Lieutenant Telles answered without emotion.

"But there's what, ten of you all together over all three airships?"

"That is correct."

"Seems I remember you saying that one Ghatazhak was equal to ten men," Nathan said. "So that means you brought the equivalent of one hundred men?" Nathan leaned forward to emphasize his point. "I'd call that overkill, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Telles did not react. "Five days ago, the NAU complex was the site of one of the most ferocious attacks on Earth soil since the Ghatazhak defeated the organized Jung forces on your world. NAU security forces have not yet been fully reinforced to their pre-attack levels. If anything, ten Ghatazhak are too little. However, we only had three Kalibri airships available."

"If we came in by shuttle, you could have brought twenty," Nathan commented.

"Shuttles are easy targets, and their descent from orbit would have alerted Jung operatives. These Corinari airships are quite agile. Furthermore, their pilots are trained to be unpredictable in their evasive maneuvers."

"He's right, Captain," Sergeant Weatherly agreed.

"I know he's right," Nathan answered. "He's always right."

Sergeant Weatherly smiled.

"Actually, the 'right' thing to do would have been to persuade you against this visit," Lieutenant Telles said. "However, I understand your need to conduct this meeting with your father face-to-face."

"So, you're a psychologist as well?" Nathan inquired.

“Understanding human psychology allows a Ghatazhak to better predict the behavior of both friend and foe.”

“Of course,” Nathan said as the Kalibri suddenly pitched its nose up sharply to decelerate. Nathan pressed his feet firmly against the non-skid surface of the passenger compartment’s deck as the airship quickly shed its forward momentum, coming to rest gently on the surface a few seconds later.

Lieutenant Telles and his fellow Ghatazhak each slid open their doors on either side of the airship and jumped out, weapons high and ready as they charged off into the dust. Five seconds later, Sergeant Weatherly received word and tapped his captain on the shoulder, signaling him to exit the airship.

Nathan jumped out of the airship and ran in a low crouch through the swirling dust, following Lieutenant Telles and the other Ghatazhak soldier across the field to the small barn thirty meters away. As they approached, the doors to the small barn swung open, revealing four NAU security troops in full combat gear. Nathan followed his men into the dimly lit barn and into one of the stalls at the far end. Much to Nathan’s surprise, there was a staircase in the stall that led down under the surface. He followed the lieutenant down the stairs into the lighted tunnel below. After descending at least fifty meters, the tunnel opened into an underground subway tunnel.

Nathan stopped in his tracks as the NAU security forces leading the way boarded the single subway car. He turned to Lieutenant Telles. “We couldn’t have just landed at the NAU complex and run inside?”

“And if there were Jung operatives monitoring the facility?” the lieutenant posited.

Nathan said nothing, following the two Ghatazhak soldiers before him onto the subway car. He moved inside and took a seat, Sergeant Weatherly sitting one seat behind him as the subway car began to roll. “That was an odd place for a subway station,” Nathan mused.

“The NAU had incorporated several such emergency escape stations into the city’s subway system long before your world even knew of the Jung’s existence,” Lieutenant Telles explained as he took a seat next to Nathan. “I believe it is how your father managed to escape capture during the initial invasion.”

“If the Jung are monitoring air traffic as you suspect, they know about that station now.”

“Perhaps,” the lieutenant conceded, “however, we shall not be using the same station for our departure.”

Twenty minutes later, Nathan found himself walking the corridors of the NAU’s underground command bunker. Soon, he would see his father for the first time since he had been forced to kill Nathan’s brother, Eli. That had been eleven days ago, and although he had spoken to his father on several occasions since, the conversations had been short, over comms, and all business. For weeks after he had discovered that the Earth had been invaded by the Jung, Nathan had wondered if his father, if any of his family, had survived. Not knowing had tortured him to no end, forcing him to put such thoughts to the back of his mind to avoid distraction. Now, every time he so much as thought of his father, he was forced to relive that moment. The look on his brother’s face as the bullet from Nathan’s gun entered Eli’s body. The panic and grief on his father’s face as he held his dying firstborn son. The lack of any acknowledgment on the part of his father of the guilt that Nathan felt over pulling the trigger and ending Eli’s life. These things haunted his dreams and invaded his waking thoughts without notice. He did not know if seeing his father’s face would bring it all fully to the surface. He did not know if he would be able to handle it. One thing he did know—he would rather face another Jung armada than his own father—not after all that had happened.

As they continued through the underground complex, Nathan noticed the stares of staff members and security personnel alike. At first, he was sure they were staring at the Ghatazhak, as their presence was somewhat overpowering when in full combat gear. However, he soon realized that they were staring not at the Ghatazhak, but rather at Nathan himself. The feeling was somewhat unsettling.

The heavily armed guards at the command center's outer security checkpoint raised their weapons and tensed as the Ghatazhak turned the corner and marched confidently toward them.

"Hold your advance!" one of the NAU guards warned.

"Captain Scott of the Aurora to see the president," Lieutenant Telles announced confidently. He showed no concern for the guards who now held their weapons aimed at him and his men.

"Stand down, Sergeant," the officer in charge of the checkpoint ordered. The officer turned to Captain Scott. "It is an honor, Captain; however, we cannot allow your security forces to carry weapons into the command center."

"You do not have a choice," Lieutenant Telles stated in matter-of-fact fashion.

The expression on the face of the officer in charge changed to one of both confusion and concern. "Sir..."

"The only way these men would pose a threat to you or the president would be if you tried to force them to relinquish their weapons," Nathan explained.

"You may check with your superiors, if you prefer," Lieutenant Telles added. "However, Captain Scott is under our protection, and your facility is poorly protected, at best. If we are not allowed to carry our weapons beyond this point, then this point is as far as Captain Scott will go."

The officer looked from the lieutenant back to Nathan, looking even more confused than before.

"Make the call," Nathan told him.

"Yes, sir," the officer in charge answered as he picked up the phone.

Nathan turned away from the officer in charge. "I'm not sure that insulting their security is the best way to win friends," he said to Lieutenant Telles under his breath.

"I am not here to 'win friends', Captain," the lieutenant stated, "and my assessment of their security is accurate, as evidenced by the fact that we were not asked to relinquish our weapons when we first entered the subway system."

"Good point."

"My apologies, Captain," the officer in charge said as he set down the phone handset. "The president has ordered me to grant access to you and your men, and to allow them to retain their weapons."

"Thank you," Nathan said.

"Sergeant Merritt will lead you and your men to the president's office."

Nathan nodded, following the sergeant through the entrance to the command center, Sergeant Weatherly one step behind him.

Lieutenant Telles signaled for two of his men to remain at the security checkpoint, then turned to follow Nathan and Sergeant Weatherly into the command center, the remainder of his men following closely behind.

Two minutes and several turns later, Nathan found himself at the door to his father's underground office. The two Ghatazhak pushed the doors open and walked inside, scanning the room for threats before stepping aside and nodding at Lieutenant Telles.

Lieutenant Telles turned back to Nathan and gestured for him to enter. "Captain."

Nathan straightened his uniform jacket and walked through the doors into his father's office.

"Shall we wait outside?" the lieutenant inquired.

"Yes, please," Nathan mumbled. "Thank you."

Lieutenant Telles said nothing, simply signaling to his men to withdraw.

Nathan looked at his father standing behind his desk on the other side of the relatively small office. He paused for a moment, waiting for the lieutenant to close the doors before speaking. "Mister President," Nathan finally said, nodding in respect to the man's office.

"Captain Scott," the president responded politely. A smile crept across his lips in much the same fashion as it often did on Nathan's face. "Never expected to be saying that," he said with a small laugh.

"I can't say that I expected to hear it, either, sir."

"Shall we dispense with the formalities, Nathan?"

"As you wish, sir."

"You can lose the 'sir', Nathan," his father said as he took his seat. "In private, I'm 'Dad', or 'Pop', remember?" he explained while gesturing for Nathan to sit.

"You're the leader of one of the few surviving national governments of the world that my ship and her crew are sworn to protect," Nathan explained as he sat. "That makes you my commander in chief. 'Sir' seems about right to me."

"Technically, yes," his father agreed. "Still..."

Nathan held up his hand, indicating agreement. "Very well."

"So, what is so important that you couldn't speak with me about it over comms?" the president wondered.

"We have a bit of a legal problem," Nathan told him. "I thought it best not to broadcast it over the air, even over encrypted comms."

"If you're going to tell me that the EDF is no longer a legal entity, I already know," his father said. The president looked at his son. "Don't look so surprised, Nathan. I was on the EDF appropriations committee, remember?"

"No, actually, I don't."

"Of course," his father said. "That wasn't until after you went off to college, and you never talked to us."

"I talked to Mom," Nathan said solemnly. He had already learned of his mother's disappearance. Not from his father, but from Jessica less than a week ago. It was yet another

painful thought he tried to keep locked away in the back of his mind.

"On occasion, yes."

Nathan chose not to argue, suspecting that his mother never admitted to his father how often the two of them talked after he and his father had become estranged. "Odd that you were on that committee, seeing as how you were so opposed to the EDF."

"I was never opposed to the EDF, Nathan," his father corrected.

"You could have fooled me."

"There's a lot you still don't know."

"Then fill me in."

"Now is not the time," his father objected, waving his hand in dismissal. "You came here to talk about the legal status of the EDF, did you not?"

"Yes." *And to see my father*, he thought as well.

"Although the charter does state that if the United Earth Republic disbands that the EDF shall dismantle its forces so that one nation does not use those forces to their own advantage, I'm quite sure that it did not intend for that clause to be followed in this situation."

"Are you sure you have the authority to make that judgment?" Nathan wondered.

His father looked at him, a surprised look on his face. "You're not seriously suggesting that we scrap what little is left of the EDF, are you? You do know that there are more Jung on the way, right?"

"Of course I'm not, and of course I know," Nathan defended. "I'm bringing it up because another nation might as well, and we need to know where we stand."

President Scott leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across the top of his head as he examined his son's face. "And if they should?" he wondered. "Where *do* you stand, Captain Scott?"

"My oath was to the people of Earth," Nathan told him with conviction, "not to the United Earth Republic. I only

swore to obey their orders.”

“And without the republic, whose orders do you obey?”

“Lacking the existence of or the ability to maintain contact with more senior command authority, the captain of a ship shall continue to make command decisions as necessary to protect the well-being of his crew, his ship, his mission, and the welfare of the planet Earth and all its inhabitants,” Nathan quoted.

His father’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “I never imagined you quoting military regulations, Nathan.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted. “Times have sort of forced me to do so.”

“Funny, but I would have thought the opposite.”

Nathan’s eye squinted. “How so?”

“Times like this, I’d think you’d be making it up as you went along.”

Nathan’s left eyebrow shot up as a small smirk came across the corner of his mouth. “That’s pretty much what I’ve been doing so far.”

“And that’s exactly what you should keep doing, Nathan,” the president said, pointing at Nathan.

Nathan squinted again. “Wait a minute. I thought you were always a stickler for the rules. Why the sudden change in heart?”

President Scott shrugged. “Following the rules may be partly to blame for the situation we’re in.”

“What?” Nathan was beginning to look confused again.

“Another long story,” his father said. “Also for another time.” Dayton Scott leaned forward, putting his forearms on the desk in front of him. “Listen, Nathan. You worry about your ships and your crews. For all intents and purposes, for the time being, you *are* the Earth Defense Force. What you say goes. Let me worry about reestablishing your legal authority to operate.”

Nathan looked unsure.

“Listen, if you need a leader to answer to, I’m as good as anyone else in legal power right now. I mean, if it will make

you feel better. But to be honest, I wouldn't know any better what to do with your forces than you do. Hell, from what I've seen, it looks like you've done pretty damn good on your own, so far."

Nathan was back to squinting, his father's compliment catching him off guard. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Captain Scott." His father laughed. "That's going to take some getting used to."

Nathan looked around the small office for a moment. It was the most austere office he had ever seen his father occupy. There was so much more he wanted to speak with him about, but feared opening up a flood of emotions. Instead, he just took in a deep breath and sighed. "Well, I guess that's about it, then. Unless you want to talk about what we're planning on doing in the immediate future?"

"That's all right, Nathan. I'm sure you've got things under control up there. Besides, we're both busy men, and it's probably not a good idea for you to be on the surface these days. At least not until the last of the Jung are flushed out and dealt with."

"I'm sure my security detail would agree with you," Nathan said as he stood. "Mister President. Thank you for your time."

Nathan's father extended his hand. "Captain Scott, it was my pleasure."

Nathan shook his father's hand one time, then turned to exit. He paused after two steps and turned back. "There is one more thing, actually. The other day, on the comms, when you told me that my sisters were all alive and well... it got me thinking. Would it be possible to determine the status of the families of my crew, as well as that of the Celestia? It might be good for morale... or not, depending on the news, I guess."

"Are you sure you want to run the risk?" the president wondered.

"No, but I think I owe it to them."

"I'll see what I can do. It may take some time, though."

"I understand. Thank you, Mister President."

"Captain."

Nathan paused a moment, feeling like there was more to say. This was his father, and he had not seen him in months. He had not spent any quality time with him in years... nor had he wanted to do so. Now, he felt as if he were supposed to want to stay and talk, to tell him everything that had happened over the last six and a half months. But now, after losing his mother, his brother, and nearly his entire world, he couldn't figure out what to say to his own father. He had come to the surface, to his father's office, unsure of what to expect. Would it be a tearful reunion, or a bitter discourse after killing his brother? In fact, it was neither... it was just as it was supposed to be. It was business.

So, Nathan turned and exited the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Come to gloat?" Casimir wondered as his old friend entered the room.

"Now why would I do such a thing?" Max answered.

"I seem to remember, in our youth, that you reveled in every opportunity to show me the error of my ways."

"If it will make you feel better, my prince."

"It might," Casimir admitted as he plopped down in the overstuffed sitting chair next to the massive windows that overlooked the Answari countryside.

"Giving up your powers and leaving the fate of Takara to the hands of parliament, although a noble gesture, was, in fact, a foolish one."

"The people must choose their own fate," Casimir insisted. "It has been chosen by the self-righteous for far too long, and you know it, Max."

"I do not argue that point, only that you should have passed power in bits and pieces, over time, maybe even waited until things in the cluster had stabilized."

"I could not risk being seen as just another dictator seeking power. Too many people gave their lives for the very freedoms I preached to them for so many decades. I had little choice."

Maxwell Dumar sighed, taking a seat on the other side of the window. "I suppose you have a point, Casimir." Max looked out the window as well. "What shall you do?"

"After the attack on Savoy, I have few options left. A threat to their ongoing supply of grains must surely have solidified their position."

"Assuming it was not already so."

Casimir nodded.

"If you commit all your personal resources to helping the people of Earth, you will have little left but your family name. That alone will not put food on your table, or dresses on your daughters."

"A bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?" Casimir argued. "I still have my lands, do I not?"

"Yes, that is true."

"I have people loyal to my family who will remain and work the lands. We will not go hungry."

"It will take far more than what is in your family accounts to help Captain Scott, my prince. You may be forced to sell most of your lands."

"That had occurred to me."

"Without your lands, you will lose your title, royal blood or not. You will no longer rule over parliament."

"I can always return to Haven," Casimir argued. "I can rebuild, perhaps find another wife."

Dumar's eyes widened at the thought.

"I was happy as Redmond Tugwell," Casimir insisted. "Molo farming was a pleasant enough life."

"You are no longer a young man, my prince. None of us are. The loss of the anti-aging serum has condemned us all to a slow but sure deterioration."

"If I could resurrect that serum, the nobles would sell their very souls to defend Earth. Damn Caius for taking the formula and its inventor with him."

"Perhaps it was for the best," Max said. "To not age is an unnatural thing. It takes away the very essence of life... strips it of all meaning."

"My lord," Casimir's aide called from the doorway. "Your pilot reports that your ship is ready for departure."

"Thank you," Casimir answered.

"Going somewhere?" Dumar wondered.

"No. You are."

"I suspect that I will not like this."

"No, you will not," Casimir admitted. "I'm afraid that I must ask more of you than I have rights, my friend."

"What is it you ask of me, my prince?"

"Enough with the 'my prince' crap, Max."

"My apologies."

"I require that you resign your commission, and renounce your Takaran citizenship."

"May I ask why?"

"I have a plan, but it is one that cannot be executed by a Takaran citizen."

"If I am to no longer be a Takaran, what am I to be?"

Casimir smiled.

* * *

"I am happy to report that we now have full control of the Jar-Keurog's systems," Lieutenant Montgomery stated proudly.

"That took only what, five days?" Nathan wondered.

"As promised," Garrett said with a nod.

"I must admit, we could not have done it without them," Lieutenant Montgomery added. "Not even in twice the time. The Jung language is surprisingly complex."

"It is a derivative of many languages," Garrett explained. "Over the centuries, the Jung have taken bits and pieces of the many worlds they have conquered and folded them into the original dialect. It is said that what the Jung speak today could not be understood by their ancestors."

"You have gained control of her weapons systems as well?" Lieutenant Telles asked.

"Yes, all systems," Lieutenant Montgomery said.

"Are these weapons centrally controlled?" Lieutenant Telles wondered.

"Lieutenant?" Nathan chimed in.

"I am concerned with the command control of the Jar-Keurog's weapons, Captain," Lieutenant Telles explained.

"The Jar-Keurog's point-defense weapons are centrally controlled, as are her missile systems," Lieutenant Montgomery explained. "However, her main rail guns are operated by a gun crew of six."

"Hence my concerns," Lieutenant Telles added. "The Jar-Keurog's main rail guns are massive, with considerable range. If someone of ill intent were to gain access to even one of her main guns..."

"The guns are crewed, but the power to those guns is controlled from a central location," Lieutenant Montgomery interrupted, "from the ship's combat command facility, actually."

"Still, it would be best if there were secondary safeguards to prevent their unauthorized use," Lieutenant Telles insisted.

"We don't even know if we're going to leave them intact at this point," Nathan told the lieutenant. "For all we know, we may install them on our own ships, or disassemble them completely."

"Captain, surely you intend to utilize the Jar-Keurog as an orbital weapons platform?" Garrett wondered.

"That is exactly what we are here to discuss, Mister Munras," Nathan explained. He turned back toward Lieutenant Montgomery.

"As you are well aware, the Jar-Keurog is of considerable size, and is heavily armored," the lieutenant began. "She is designed to be operated by a crew of over one thousand men, and has accommodations for sizable expeditionary forces as well."

"How badly is she damaged?" Vladimir asked.

"Her main propulsion systems are beyond our current capability to repair," Lieutenant Montgomery answered. "In addition, only half of her power plants are operational."

"Will they be enough to operate the ship's systems?" Nathan wondered.

"No, they will not. However, if we only operate those decks and systems that we actually need, I suspect they will suffice. Further analysis will be required before we can be sure, of course."

"What about her shields?" Nathan asked. "Any chance we can strip them and use them on our ships?"

"Anything is possible," the lieutenant stated. "However, that will also require further analysis."

"That should be one of our top priorities," Nathan insisted. "I wouldn't mind reducing the amount of damage we suffer every time we get in a fight."

"Da, ya tozhe," Vladimir mumbled.

"I will see to it," the lieutenant promised.

"Captain, my people may be of help," Garrett said. "We are quite familiar with Jung systems, both in their design and operation."

"Surely the Jung did not allow you to work on their combat systems," Lieutenant Telles stated.

"No, they did not," Garrett assured him. "What we know of such systems we learned for the purposes of combating them. Granted, we were never in a position to do so to such an extent. Nevertheless, we can be of help."

Nathan looked at Lieutenant Montgomery, and then Lieutenant Telles.

Garrett noticed the exchanged glances of all three men. "Who were you planning on using as crew on the Jar-Keurog?"

"A mixture of our own crews, and whatever qualified volunteers we get from Earth," Cameron said, looking to Nathan for confirmation.

"Your people do not read Jung," Garrett reminded them.

"You had something else in mind?" Nathan asked Garrett.

"I can provide you with hundreds of volunteers, all of whom read Jung," Garrett stated.

Nathan got another glance from Lieutenant Telles. Despite the lieutenant's ability to conceal his emotions behind nondescript expressions, the timing of his eye contact spoke volumes.

It spoke similarly to Garrett Munras. "You do not trust my people."

"It is not a matter of trust," Nathan assured him, "it is that we have little experience working with your people."

"I see." Garrett did not appear convinced. "Still, it will take considerably longer for your people to learn to read Jung, than it will for you to develop an adequate working relationship with my people in order for you to trust us to operate the Jar-Keurog, will it not?"

"He's got a point," Nathan said, looking at both Cameron and Lieutenant Telles.

"Indeed," the lieutenant admitted.

"Besides people to operate the weapons, you will need technicians to make the various compartments usable once again. You will need people to manage the environmental and waste systems, the power plants, run the hangar bays. My people have been operating in such environments for decades, Captain. Surely it is a more expeditious solution to your manpower challenges."

Nathan looked directly at Lieutenant Telles this time. "Again, he has a valid point." The lieutenant did not respond.

"The Tannans will undoubtedly be of immeasurable assistance in helping us make use of the Jung systems, but also in understanding them so that we may better combat them," Lieutenant Montgomery said.

"If you prefer, you may retain control of the Jar-Keurog's weapons systems," Garrett offered. "We can even assist in the translation of the operational controls for those systems."

"Can your people fly Jung ships as well?" Major Prechitt asked.

Nathan looked at the major, appearing somewhat surprised.

"The ability to pilot Jung spacecraft is not as common, but I should be able to round up ten or twenty pilots," Garrett promised.

"Captain," the major began, "there are still a lot of ships on board the Jar-Keurog. Only a few dozen fighters, but plenty of tactical shuttles, cargo shuttles, and personnel shuttles. What we don't have are pilots for them."

"There are plenty of pilots on Earth," Cameron said.

"Who don't read Jung," Nathan reminded her.

"Surely we can teach them to interpret the controls and informational displays in relatively short order," Cameron argued.

"Perhaps, but it would be easier if we didn't have to," Nathan admitted.

"It is only fair to state that the men I speak of, while qualified pilots, are not combat trained," Garrett warned.

"Doesn't seem fair to put them up against trained Jung fighter pilots," Nathan agreed.

"We can train them to fly Jung fighters as a last resort," Major Prechitt told him. "Or maybe as an infiltration group."

"It's worth considering, I suppose. At the very least, using them to pilot shuttles would be helpful," Cameron agreed.

"There are so many more ways that we can help, Captain," Garrett assured him. "We can provide food, water, clothing, general labor."

"We will need a lot of general laborers," Cameron pointed out.

"The commander is correct," Lieutenant Montgomery added. "The fabricators must be fed a steady stream of processed materials in order to produce the components needed. Mining raw materials and then processing them will take considerable infrastructure."

"Which we possess back on Tanna," Garrett pointed out.

"The Earth will not be able to provide such infrastructure for some time," Cameron said. "Even when they get their infrastructure running again, it will be needed to rebuild society and care for the millions of refugees."

Nathan took a deep breath. "Excuse me for asking, Mister Munras, but what is in it for you and the people of Tanna?"

"I do not understand."

"The last time that we asked for your help, there was a price to pay," Nathan reminded him, "and we were asking

for far less then. So I cannot help but wonder, not only what you will ask for, but also whether or not you have the authority to speak on behalf of all the people of Tanna."

Garrett laughed. "Captain, the last time you asked for help, you were but a ship passing in the night. A stranger with grandiose claims. We were in desperate need, and I took advantage of the situation to help my people. I offer no apology for that action. However, you must understand that now, our motivations are different. With your help, the Jung were driven from our world. But for how long? Granted, we are on the edge of the fringe, but eventually, the Jung will learn of our rebellion, and they will send ships to subdue us once more. Quite possibly, to annihilate us completely. So you see, helping you achieve victory over the Jung helps us, just as much as it helps you."

"We do not seek victory over the Jung, Mister Munras," Nathan explained. "We seek to defend our world from attack. I have no intention of launching an interstellar war against the Jung at this time, not with two ships and limited logistical support. Furthermore, I cannot promise that we will be able to protect your world, should the Jung return as you predict."

"But you would try, would you not?"

"If we are able, of course," Nathan said.

"That is what alliances are for, Captain. We help you, you help us. We all benefit."

"And if your people do not agree with your plans?" Nathan wondered.

"I can provide you with at least one hundred men within a day of setting foot on my world," Garrett stated confidently. "Technicians, engineers, computer specialists, even a few pilots. I only need the agreement of those men, not of my entire world."

"And for the use of your infrastructure as well?" Nathan wondered.

Garrett leaned back in his chair. "Admittedly, that may take additional negotiations with the leaders of my world. I

will not pretend otherwise, Captain."

"Fair enough." Nathan turned to Major Prechitt. "Major, how is the move going?"

"It will take several weeks to move all operations to the Jar-Keurog, once they have completed pressurizing the necessary compartments."

"Well, we can't send the Falcon to bring them over five at a time," Nathan said, "that would take too long. Besides, the Falcon is busy trying to locate the Jung fleet." Nathan sighed. "I guess we'll have to jump over and pick up your people ourselves."

* * *

"Captain," Lieutenant Telles called from behind.

Nathan turned and looked over his shoulder as he turned the corner and headed down the ramp to B deck. "Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Telles quickened his stride, catching up to Nathan as he spoke. "Sir, I have concerns about using the Tannans as crew for the Jar-Keurog."

"I suspected you might. As expressionless as you can be at times, I'm actually learning how to read your 'looks'."

"I'll have to work on that, sir."

"So, you don't like the Tannans?"

"Any personal feelings I might have about the Tannans is irrelevant," Lieutenant Telles explained.

"Then you don't trust them?"

"I have no reason to trust them, therefore I must question the logic of handing over a ship full of rail guns and nuclear weapons to a group of people whom have yet to prove their trustworthiness."

"Do you have cause to distrust them?" Nathan asked as they reached the bottom of the ramp and stepped onto B deck.

"Admittedly, no. However, my point still stands. We have no *reason* to trust them, at least not to the extent you propose."

"You once told me that the Ghatazhak study human psychology in order to better predict the behavior of both friend and foe."

"Yes. Understanding an individual's fears and desires helps you to understand their motivations."

"My father once told me that the art of negotiation is to understand your opponent's motivations. He said that sometimes you have to give him some of the things he claims to need in order to discover what he truly wants."

"A logical approach," the lieutenant agreed.

"The Tannans want to be free of Jung rule."

"A state which we have already helped them achieve," the lieutenant pointed out.

"Yes, but they currently live in fear that the Jung may return and destroy them. They need us to protect them. That is their motivation to help us."

"You told them that you could not guarantee their safety, that you could not promise to come to their aide."

"But I did promise that I would do whatever I could, should the need arise," Nathan pointed out.

"Captain, I understand your point, but have you considered the other possibility?"

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. "What other possibility?"

"That the Tannans wish to take control of the Jar-Keurog."

Nathan stopped walking. "Lieutenant, the Jar-Keurog has no propulsion system. It's basically a space station."

"A heavily armed, armored, and shielded space station," the lieutenant added. "One that is in close proximity to two functioning warships, one of which has a working jump drive."

"Are you suggesting that the Tannans would try to use the Jar-Keurog's weapons to take control of the Aurora?" Nathan asked.

"Although highly improbable, I can give you several scenarios in which it would be possible. Shall I cite examples?"

"I'll take your word for it, Lieutenant." Nathan continued walking forward. "I still think it's more likely that they want to help us strengthen our position against the Jung, as well as the bond between our people. That way, when the time comes, we'll be more motivated to come to their defense."

"I agree with your analysis, Captain. However, I still think it is unwise to give them unrestricted access to the Jar-Keurog."

"Who said anything about unrestricted access?" Nathan said. "Garrett himself suggested that we use our own people for gun crews."

"A recommendation that I agree with, but it is not enough. Their movements should be monitored, and access to sensitive areas, including all weapons systems, should be carefully guarded."

"Then it's a good thing you're moving your forces to the Jar-Keurog, isn't it?"

"It is one of the reasons I suggested the move," the lieutenant admitted.

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. "You really don't trust them, do you?"

"You often quote the phrase, 'Trust, but verify.' I am simply following your advice, Captain."

* * *

Nathan pushed the curtain aside just enough to see Jessica lying in her recovery bed, eyes closed. He stepped quietly through the opening, closing it carefully behind him.

"Did you bring me anything to eat?" she asked while his back was still to her.

Nathan turned around. "They don't give you food in here?"

"Not enough," she complained. "You know what I'm dying for?"

"Maybe you shouldn't use the word 'dying' in here."

"I would kill for a hunk of beef right now," Jessica said. "We're orbiting Earth, right? Can't you send someone down

to pick up some steaks?”

“Probably not appropriate, all things considered.”

Jessica slid herself up in her bed. “What the hell good is it to be the leader of the EDF if you can’t send some underling to fetch you some meat?”

“I see you’re still cranky,” Nathan commented as he sat down next to her bed.

“I may be confined to this bed, but I can still smack you if you piss me off... sir.”

Nathan smiled. “I’ll try to remember that.” Nathan leaned back and put his feet up on the side of her bed. “Nanites still bugging you?”

“Driving me insane would be a more accurate description, but yes. How are things going on the Jung battle-bucket?”

“The Tannans broke the codes. We have full control of the ship. Even test-fired some of her rail guns.”

“I’ll bet Telles is all lit up over the Tannans being behind the controls.”

“How did you know?” Nathan wondered.

“I would be.”

“I don’t get it,” Nathan insisted. “I mean, I understand why he doesn’t trust them, but when you consider everything—their motivations, capabilities, risk versus reward—it’s in their best interest to do everything they can to help us.”

“People don’t always do what makes sense, Nathan. Surely you’ve figured that out by now.” Jessica adjusted herself in bed again. “Especially when those people are men.”

“Not at this level,” Nathan argued. “At this level, you have to think things through. You can’t act on whim or emotion.”

Jessica laughed.

“What?”

“Do you hear yourself? You of all people. I’ve never seen anyone who acts on instinct more than you, Nathan.” She

laughed again. "Think things through... Ha!"

"I'm getting better," he defended.

"Just remember what I said," Jessica told him. "People don't always do what's best for them, or their worlds."

"I'll try to remember that." Nathan tried to peer around the curtain that separated Jessica's cubicle from Synda's next door.

"She's getting scans," Jessica told him.

"You getting many visitors?"

"Cameron came by when she first got back, and Vlad stops by for a few minutes now and then. And of course, Lieutenant Telles reports in regularly, to keep me updated."

"My idea," Nathan told her.

"Thanks, it helps. I get really bored in here. You can only read background checks for so long before your eyes become permanently crossed."

"You could tune your data pad to the local news broadcasts," Nathan suggested.

"Too depressing," she told him. "Makes me think of my family. I still don't know if any of them survived."

"I spoke to my father about that. He's going to try and find everyone's families, although it may take a while. What about Synda? You talk to her much?"

"She won't shut up."

"I thought you liked her?"

"She's a nice kid, but she's so full of questions. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was a spy as well."

"Could she be?" Nathan wondered.

"I highly doubt it."

"How can you be sure?"

"Anything is possible, I suppose," Jessica admitted, "but if you had seen her under fire, you'd see it too. Unless she's a *really* good actor."

"Nevertheless, I hope you're not revealing anything sensitive to her."

Jessica cast him a disapproving glance. "Please." Jessica moved her IV tubing to one side as she shifted in bed again.

"He is right, you know. You shouldn't trust the Tannans any more than you have to."

"Yeah, I know."

"But you're still going to use them, aren't you?"

"I don't really have much choice, do I," Nathan said. "It would take too long to teach our people to read Jung."

"Not to mention the fact that there may be Jung spies or collaborators among our people," Jessica pointed out.

"That thought occurred to me as well."

"Good," she said, "you're starting to think like me."

Nathan rolled his eyes.

"When are we going back to Tanna?" she asked.

"The Falcon is taking Garrett back to Tanna for a few hours, in between recon sweeps along the Sol-Centauri corridor. He'll put the word out to start the recruitment process before returning. We'll head there in two days. That way his people will have three days to round up the best, most trustworthy people they can find."

"The Falcon still hasn't found the Jung fleet?"

"Not yet," Nathan said. "Not for lack of trying, though. They've been flying three missions a day for several days now."

"Where the hell are they?" Jessica wondered.

"I don't know. We started out in the area that we thought they would be in, based on their suspected departure date and their known FTL speeds, but so far we've found nothing."

"How long will it take them to search the entire corridor?"

"We started them on the Centauri side of the halfway point, so it should take them a couple weeks to search all the way back to Centauri space."

"Maybe you should have them search closer to Sol?" Jessica suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing. It doesn't seem likely, considering their FTL speeds, but it might be safer to assume that we're wrong about them."

"Or that someone else left Alpha Centauri earlier than we know."

"That too." Nathan sighed. "I really wish I had more jump ships to use for recon."

"Keep making fabricators, and in a few months you will. Now, go get me some food, will ya?"

* * *

"Jump eighteen, complete," Loki announced. His voice was void of interest or emotion. "Starting scans."

"What's wrong with you, Loki?" Josh wondered from his seat at the front of the Falcon's cockpit. "Is something bothering you, or are you just as bored as I am?"

"Just bored."

"Doubtful. You love this kind of crap."

"What do you mean?" Loki asked, showing the first sign of interest since they left the Aurora over two hours ago. "What crap?"

"You know, playing with all the goodies in this ship."

"Is that what you think I do back here?" Loki asked, irritation creeping into his tone. "You think I play around?"

"That's not what I meant," Josh defended.

"Well, that's what you said..."

"It was just an expression," Josh insisted, cutting Loki off. "Relax."

"You know, I'm a pretty good pilot myself."

"I know you are," Josh agreed.

"Maybe we should change places sometime?"

"Hell no!" Josh objected.

"Why? You think I can't handle this ship as well as you?"

"No, I think I can't handle all those systems back there as good as you can." Josh shifted slightly in his seat, trying to turn and look over his shoulder at his agitated friend. "What the hell, Loki? What's eating at you?"

Loki sighed. "Nothing."

"Nothing my ass," Josh said as he turned around to face forward again.

"I'm just stressed out, that's all. All these patrols, day in and day out. It never stops."

"I hear ya." Josh turned back around toward Loki. "Hey, maybe we can ask the captain for some downtime. Maybe he'll let us go down to Earth, take a look around." Josh turned back forward. "I wouldn't mind visiting some of those beaches we flew over. I've never seen an ocean up close, except for flying over them."

"Earth is a mess right now," Loki said. "Nothing on scans. Preparing jump nineteen."

"Not all of it," Josh disagreed. "There's got to be someplace down there that's safe for us to visit. A guy needs to breathe fresh air every once in a while, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

Their visors turned opaque as the Falcon was engulfed in the blue-white jump flash.

"Jump nineteen complete," Loki announced as his visor cleared. "Starting scans."

"Whattaya think?" Josh asked.

"Never happen."

"Why not?"

"Who is going to fly these missions?" Loki asked.

"You were training Talon pilots to fly this thing, weren't you?" Josh said. "Get two of them to fly a few missions."

"Both teams we trained were killed in action, Josh, remember?"

"That was them?"

"Yeah, that was them."

"Huh." Josh checked the display on his console as he thought. "What are the odds?" There was a long silence. Finally, Josh spoke again. "So, it's just you and me, huh?"

"Yup."

"Still, it won't hurt to ask."

"No, Josh, I suppose it won't."

Josh turned and looked over his shoulder at Loki again. "Well, if the captain says yes, I'm not going to take you with me unless you cheer up."

"Scans are negative. Preparing the next jump."

Josh turned around to face forward again, realizing it was useless.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

Despite his visor turning opaque a split second before the jump field flashed, Josh still instinctively closed his eyes tightly every time the cockpit began to glow.

"Jump twenty complete," Loki announced. "Starting scans."

"So how many jumps are we doing again?"

"If we get through all of them, eighty-seven, not including the jumps back to Earth."

"What do you mean, 'if we get through all of them'?" Josh asked.

"I mean, if we get through all the jumps without locating the Jung fleet."

"So we're *not* going to jump forever until we find them?"

"Weren't you paying attention during the mission briefing?" Loki wondered.

"Are you kidding me? Major Prechitt bores the hell out of me. I mean, who can talk that long about waypoints, fuel loads, rules of engagement... Seriously, what is the point? Fill her up, load her up, and point me where to go."

"He's just covering all the bases, Josh. It's called *mission planning*."

"It's called *over-planning*, that's what it's called."

"You would see it that way." Loki turned off the Falcon's sensory suite and started plotting the next jump. "Still nothing. Plotting jump twenty-one."

"Come on, Loki. When did any of our flights actually go by the so-called *mission profile*?" Josh waited several seconds for a response before offering one himself. "Never, that's when. He could've saved us at least a half an hour by saying, 'Jump to here and start a search along this course. Come back when you find the fleet, get low on fuel, or get too tired to fly any longer. Oh, and try not to get shot at

while you're at it.'" Josh turned and looked over his shoulder again. "That would've done it."

"What does it matter?" Loki wondered. "It was only thirty minutes." Loki activated the jump system. "Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

"Thirty minutes that I could have been sleeping," Josh argued as the jump flash washed over the cockpit yet again. "Or thirty minutes I could've been hanging out with Kaylah."

"Kaylah's too busy to hang out with you these days," Loki jeered as he turned the Falcon's sensor suite back on and started another scan. "Scanning."

It was the first time Loki had shown any signs of a sense of humor in days. "Yeah, you're probably right," Josh admitted with a small chuckle. "She's really digging her new position. I could've hung out with you, though. Hell, you need me more than she does."

"And risk becoming depressed yourself?"

Josh twisted around in his seat again, his flight harness straining against his pressure suit. "See! I knew it! I knew there's something wrong with you!"

"For the last time, there is nothing wrong with me, Josh!"

"I should tell the captain," Josh threatened. "He'd ground you and me along with you. Then we'd get a vacation!"

"Or he'd put Mister Willard back here instead of me," Loki said.

"Screw that," Josh declared. "That guy is about as much fun as a *wallak*."

"A what?"

"A *wallak*. You know, those ugly, six-legged, brown furry things that were always getting into the garbage back on Haven?"

"I thought those were called *racars*."

"I don't know, maybe. I always called them *wallaks*. Look, Loki, you've got to snap out of it. I mean, what do you have to be depressed about? We've got the coolest job in the world, right? Other than this mission, of course." Josh thought for a second. "Or the one this morning. Or the ones

we flew yesterday. Come to think of it, all of the missions we've flown lately have pretty much sucked." Josh sighed. "Damn, now I'm getting depressed."

Josh didn't see it, but Loki smiled just a bit.

"Look, I know it sucked seeing Jessica die right in front of you and all, but she's gonna be all right. She's Jessica. She's indestructible, remember."

"You didn't see her face, Josh."

"No, I did not."

"You don't know what it's like," Loki explained.

"I just said I didn't..."

"...No, I mean watching your friends linger on death's door for days on end. It's terrible."

Josh thought for a moment, the pieces finally falling into place. "You're talking about me, not Jessica, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm talking about you. I didn't think you were going to make it. None of us did. Except for Marcus, of course. 'That kid's too stubborn to die,'" Loki added, imitating Marcus.

"Come on..."

"What was I supposed to do if you died?" Loki asked. "You're the only friend I've got."

"Wow, you're choking me up, Loki," Josh teased. "I didn't know you cared." Josh started sniffing, pretending to hold back tears.

"Don't be such an ass."

"Look, Loki, if I die, I'm probably taking you with me, so relax."

Loki shook his head. "Thanks. I feel so much better now... really." Loki checked his console and shut off the sensors again. "Negative sweep. Plotting the next jump."

* * *

"We have managed to install temporary exterior hull plating over the largest holes in our forward section," Vladimir reported.

Nathan looked up from the view screen on his ready room desk. "Where did you get the plating?"

Vladimir shifted in his seat, looking pleased with himself. "We took it from the portion of the Jar-Keurog that jumped with us."

"That was good thinking," Nathan praised. "Was it difficult to salvage?"

"Not really. We used cargo shuttles to reach the wreckage. It is not far away. In fact, much of it *is* usable," Vladimir said. "At the very least, the scrap is a good source of already refined materials for the fabricators."

"Really?" Nathan leaned back in his chair. "I expected that we'd take materials from the Jar-Keurog. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I never thought about salvaging the chunk that jumped with us."

"Actually, there is a lot of usable material floating around in our system right now. Several of the Jung ships you destroyed were broken up into sizable pieces. One of them is mostly intact, although completely inoperable. If we were to put together a few salvage teams, we could probably recover enough material to keep the fabricators running for several weeks at least."

"How would you get the material back to us?" Nathan wondered.

"Just jump out there and load the salvage up," Vladimir told him.

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Of course."

"We will need to dedicate a couple of cargo shuttles to the operation, to provide a sort of operational platform."

"Talk to Marcus," Nathan suggested. "See if he has any ideas. He's good at making something from nothing."

"*Da, da, da,*" Vladimir agreed.

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena's voice called over the intercom.

Nathan tapped the intercom control built into his desk. "Go ahead."

"*Incoming call from President Scott.*"

"Put him on my main view screen."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan and Vladimir both turned to face the main view screen that covered the entire bulkhead above the couch. The view screen lit up, revealing Nathan's father, sitting in his office in the underground command center of the North American Union's temporary complex beneath Winnipeg's capitol building.

"Mister President," Nathan greeted.

"Captain," his father responded.

"Mister President, this is my chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy."

"Lieutenant Commander," the president greeted.

"An honor, Mister President," Vladimir returned with a nod.

"The honor is mine, Lieutenant Commander. Your ability to keep the Aurora in operation is quite impressive."

"Thank you, Mister President, but I had plenty of help."

"Of course." The president turned his eyes back to Nathan. "I managed to conduct a virtual meeting with at least four other legitimate national leaders. Australia, China, Russia, and the European Union, such as they are."

"I was not aware that they had managed to reform," Nathan told him.

"They are much as we are," the president admitted, "partially reformed, but still in a state of barely controlled chaos. The European Union is in the worst shape, as you might imagine, since the Jung were so well entrenched in that part of the world."

"Understandable," Nathan agreed.

"The long and short of it is that while they all recognize the need to work together, they are all so overburdened with the immediate needs of their people that they cannot provide any support to your operations short of volunteers."

"I understand that they cannot provide any industrial capacity at this time," Nathan said, "but surely they can spare some basic supplies, like food, water, etc..."

"You have to understand, Captain, that all of us are struggling just to stay in control. The only reason that we have even managed to reform our respective governments is because the people are scared and need to feel like someone is working to take care of them, to protect them."

"That's exactly what we're trying to do," Nathan argued, "protect them."

"I'm talking about protecting them from themselves," the president explained. "People are struggling to survive down here, Nathan. In many areas, people are killing one another over a loaf of bread or a liter of water. It's that bad."

"I didn't realize."

"We've been able to gain some control over the net, at least on our own continent. Because of that, we've managed to prevent the more discouraging reports from reaching the masses."

"Doesn't that directly violate the NAU's constitution?"

"Only if we force them to filter their content," the president explained. "Not if they volunteer to do so."

"That's a pretty fine line, sir," Nathan said.

"Yes, it is."

"Surely the truth gets out eventually. We've seen plenty of civilian videos being broadcast over the air."

"Yes, but you're in orbit and can pick up everything. Down here, such devices have a very short range. Fortunately, the majority of the people are still more likely to believe the mainstream media than the random person with a camera. Unfortunately, that won't last for long. I suspect that is one of the reasons that the other leaders are hesitant to divide their internal efforts. If their citizens feel they are not expending every effort to provide for them, they fear they will lose what little support they have managed to muster thus far."

"Unbelievable," Vladimir muttered.

"Surely they realize that their efforts will all be in vain if we are unable to turn back the next wave of Jung ships," Nathan stated.

"It's not a matter of what they believe, Nathan, it's a matter of what they can do. You can't build a house before you build a foundation."

Nathan sighed. "So, we're on our own, then."

"I'm afraid so," the president said, "Perhaps, in a few months, things will be different. For the time being, though, you're going to have to operate in a rather gray legal standing."

"Yeah, I'm sort of used to that by now."

"I thought you might be. At least you can take solace in the knowledge that there is no one left who can oppose you, at least none that we know of."

"What about Admiral Galiardi?" Nathan wondered. "I thought he woke up."

"Yes, but he's still in bad shape. To be honest, he may never completely recover. At this point, it is doubtful that he'll ever be able to assume command again."

Nathan leaned forward onto his desk and rubbed his right hand across his head as he considered the situation. "At the very least, we're going to need food and water," he told his father over the view screen. "We've only got a few months' worth left, less if we're going to take on more personnel."

"I haven't given up yet," his father promised. "Although the other nations could not offer cooperation at this point, they did agree to continue the virtual meetings. The next one is in a few days."

"So there is still hope," Vladimir reminded Nathan.

"There is always hope," the president agreed. "What about your allies in the Pentaurus cluster? Have you heard from them yet?"

"Not yet," Nathan answered. "We don't even know if our shuttle made it back in one piece."

"I don't have to remind you of the consequences if those data cores are lost," the president said.

"No, you don't," Nathan answered. "Then again, I didn't have much choice at the time."

The president nodded. *"Listen, in regards to your other request, the one to find the families of your crew. I thought you'd like to know that I've added another person to my staff to handle only that task."*

"I'm sure my crew will appreciate it."

"I thought it was important that they know that the people of Earth have not abandoned them, even if they cannot provide what they need at this time. She is here now, if you'd like to meet her."

"Sure, why not."

The president gestured to someone standing off camera. Nathan could see a shadow move as the person approached his father on the view screen. Then his sister appeared on the screen standing next to their father.

"Miri," Nathan exclaimed.

Vladimir could see the joy on his friend's face, as well as the tears welling up in his eyes. *"I'll speak with you later, Captain,"* he told Nathan as he quietly slipped out.

"Hi there, little brother," she said, her eyes welling up as well as her father slipped out of the camera's view. *"Looks like you've been stirring up trouble, as usual."*

"Miri," Nathan repeated as he fought to regain his composure.

"I know," she answered in hushed tones.

"I'm so happy to see you," he said as he wiped his eyes. *"You don't know."*

"Yes, I do."

"How are you?" Nathan asked. *"How are the kids?"*

"They're fine."

"I heard about Lee. I'm so sorry. Are you sure..."

"We're all fine, Nathan, really," Miri insisted. *"All of us are here now, the whole family, except Mom, of course."*

Nathan's head dropped. *"And Eli."*

Miri's head also dropped a bit. *"Eli made his choices. You didn't have any."*

"Yes, I did."

"No, you didn't, Nathan. You did what you had to do, and I'm proud of you for it."

Nathan wiped his eyes again. "I'm pretty sure Dad doesn't feel the same way."

Miri looked off camera to ensure that their father was no longer in earshot. *"He will,"* she assured him in a whisper. *"Just give him time. He's dealing with a lot right now. We all are."*

Nathan swallowed hard, wiping his eyes one last time. He sighed. "There's so much I want to tell. So much has happened. I'm not the same person I was when I left, Miri."

"I know. Pop's already told me so much about what you've accomplished. It's all so amazing, sometimes I find it hard to believe."

"I know the feeling, trust me," Nathan said with a small laugh.

"He is proud of you, you know."

"No, I don't know."

"Come on, Nathan. You defeated the Jung and liberated the Earth. What father wouldn't be proud? Hell, I'm proud of you too, little brother."

"Thanks," Nathan said, "but it wouldn't hurt to hear it from him for once."

"You know how he is."

"Yeah, I know." Nathan took a deep breath, finally regaining his composure.

"Listen, I've already got the ball rolling here. We're going to find the families of your crew. Alive or dead, we're going to find them."

Nathan looked at his sister on the view screen. "I know you will, Miri. I know you will."

* * *

"I have to admit, I'm a little nervous about leaving the system," Nathan told the master chief as they entered the transfer airlock that led to the Aurora's bridge.

"The Celestia does have a plasma cannon, Captain," Master Chief Montrose reminded him.

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard announced as the captain and the chief of the boat moved past him.

"I'd rather she make a run for it than face the Jung fleet on her own with a single cannon, Master Chief."

"We've completed the fuel transfer, so the Celestia has more than enough fuel to get away, assuming that the Jung do not detect her departure."

"I'd feel better if we could wait for her jump drive to be operational," Nathan said as he stepped up next to the main communications console.

"We all would, sir."

Nathan turned to Naralena sitting behind the main communications console. "Has Lieutenant Telles reported in?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena reported. "The lieutenant reports that the Ghatazhak have moved all their equipment and personnel onto the Jar-Keurog, and their command center is fully operational."

"And the CAG?"

"The last of the Eagles are launching now."

"How many are we up to?" Nathan asked the master chief.

"Twelve as of yesterday," the chief answered.

"Half a squadron," Nathan commented. "That's more than I thought we'd have."

"I'd love to have a few dozen more, Captain."

"As would Major Prechitt, I'm sure." Nathan turned and headed forward, passing the tactical station. "Still no sign of the Jung?"

"No, sir," the tactical officer reported. "The Falcon has covered nearly ninety percent of the primary search area and still hasn't detected any ships in FTL."

"We may have to rethink our search areas," Nathan commented as he sat down in his command chair. "Are they away as well?"

"The Falcon jumped out ten minutes ago, sir," the tactical officer reported. "They'll operate from the Celestia's flight deck while we are away."

"If you're that worried about the safety of the Celestia and the Earth while we are away, we can always postpone this trip until later," the master chief suggested.

"We need the Tannans to get the Jar-Keurog up and working," Nathan said. "Besides, we're also going to need to strike a deal with them for consumables as well. Troops don't march on an empty stomach, Master Chief."

"They surely do not, Captain."

"Flight deck reports the last of the Eagles have launched, and the Celestia's shuttles are now on board," Naralena reported.

"How many did the Celestia keep?" Nathan wondered.

"Two," the chief of the boat answered.

"Flight deck reports ready for red," the tactical officer reported.

"Red deck," Nathan ordered.

"Boarding tunnel is retracted and secure," Naralena reported. "All compartments report ready to get under way."

"Comms, notify the Celestia and the Jar-Keurog that the Aurora is departing."

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Riley, you may release the mooring clamps."

"Releasing mooring clamps, aye," Mister Riley answered.

Nathan watched the main view screen, which currently showed the view along the Aurora's starboard side, from aft to forward. All four of the Aurora's massive clamps released their hold on the Celestia's hardpoints simultaneously and began retracting into the Aurora's hull.

"Mooring clamps released. Retracting mooring arms," the navigator reported.

Nathan looked at the master chief standing next to him and raised his eyebrows. "Here we go."

"Mooring arms secured."

"Forward thrust, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered. "Take us out smartly."

"Forward thrust, aye," Mister Chiles answered from the Aurora's helm.

Nathan watched the main view screen as the Celestia began to slide aft at an increasing rate. Within a minute, she had slid completely out of view.

"Switching to forward view," the tactical officer announced as the view on the main view screen changed to its standard configuration. Nathan could see the Jar-Keurog as it passed to port. "That really is a big ship," he commented.

"Yes, it is," the master chief agreed.

Nathan sighed. "Which is why we need the Tannans. The sooner we get all her systems, especially her weapons, all working, the better I'll feel."

"We're clear to maneuver," Mister Riley reported. "First jump to Tanna is plotted and ready, Captain."

"Execute the first jump," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered. "Jumping in five seconds. Three.....two.....one.....jump."

The Aurora's main view screen dimmed as the blue-white light of the Aurora's jump field flashed brightly, filling the bridge for a moment.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Variance?"

"Twenty-seven meters," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"Not bad," Nathan said.

"We can do better," the master chief insisted.

Nathan looked at the master chief out of the corner of his eye. "I'm pretty sure that on a galactic scale, twenty-seven meters is an acceptable margin, Master Chief."

"Seven hours, thirty minutes to next jump," Mister Riley reported.

"Very well," Nathan said as he rose. "You have the conn, Master Chief."

"Aye, Captain," the master chief answered as the captain disappeared through the hatch to his ready room.

* * *

"Jump complete," the shuttle's pilot reported.

Max Dumar leaned forward in his seat behind the shuttle's flight crew and looked out the forward windows of Prince Casimir's private jump shuttle. Before them, the massive asteroid quickly grew in size as its gravity pulled the small shuttle towards it. "There should be an approach trench..."

"We have been here before, sir," the copilot assured him.

"Of course," Max answered. He leaned back in his seat and waited patiently.

The shuttle fired its thrusters to slow its descent, eventually settling into a wide trench on the surface of the asteroid. They followed the trench for several kilometers, finally reaching an overhang along the left wall of the trench. As they turned toward the overhang, Max could see the opening to a tunnel tucked away neatly under the rocky outcropping. His eyes squinted as he examined the opening. "That opening is not big enough to accommodate a ship. Are you sure this is the correct asteroid?"

"Yes, sir," the copilot answered. "There have been some changes to the asteroid over the last few months. This is one of several smaller access tunnels that have been created."

"I see." Max continued to watch as the shuttle approached the dark tunnel. As they closed on the darkness, a light appeared at the center of the dark tunnel. The light quickly became a line that stretched the height of the tunnel. The line grew in width, revealing the lit interior of the tunnel on the other side of the massive doors as they split apart, disappearing into the rocky walls.

"Auto-flight engaged," the copilot reported.

The pilot took his hands off the controls and relaxed.

"Control, Shuttle Two Four Seven. Auto-flight is active."

“Shuttle Two Four Seven, Control has you. Touchdown in two minutes, bay four. State the reason of your visit.”

The copilot turned to look at Dumar.

“Royal envoy from Prince Casimir,” Dumar told him. “Tell them I will need to speak to the director of the facility.”

The copilot nodded, then turned forward again. “Control, Shuttle Two Four Seven. We are carrying the royal envoy of Prince Casimir, who is requesting to speak to the facility director upon arrival.”

“Shuttle Two Four Seven, Control copies. We shall notify the director.”

Dumar continued to watch as the shuttle passed through another set of doors and continued the length of the tunnel. Ahead of them, a final set of doors parted to either side, revealing a large hangar bay built deep into the asteroid. “I had been expecting a much bigger facility. Is this also a new addition?”

“Yes, sir. There are four of these bays, each with four tunnels connecting them to the outside of the asteroid.”

“Interesting,” Max said as the shuttle touched down on the hangar deck. He unfastened his seatbelt, stood and headed aft as the shuttle’s engines began to shut down.

Four security guards met Max Dumar as he stepped down from the shuttle’s boarding hatch onto the deck of the number four hangar bay. The guard in charge of the detail stepped forward and extended his hand. “Welcome to Karuzara, sir. I have been instructed to escort you to the director’s office, as requested.”

“Thank you,” Max said as he shook the officer’s hand.

The officer turned and headed toward the exit. Dumar followed him, with the remaining guards falling in behind him. Dumar looked about the hangar bay as they traversed the expansive deck. It was obvious that the hangar had only recently been completed. The rock walls had been recently fused, and the deck itself lacked the usual scarring found in areas where spacecraft came and went. There were several shuttles in the bay, each of differing makes. Two of them he

recognized as of Corinairan design. The third appeared to be from Ancot, as evidenced by the stark, utilitarian design for which the people of the Savoy system were well known.

They exited the bay and traveled a short distance to a transport door. The door opened and they stepped inside, each taking a seat on the padded bench that encircled the small chamber. The door closed, and a computer voice spoke. "*State destination.*"

"Administration. Command level alpha."

"*Clearance?*" the computer voice asked.

"One seven, one seven four, two four."

"*Last name?*"

"Portensa."

"*Clearance confirmed.*"

The small chamber began to vibrate slightly as it began to move from the boarding chamber out into the main transport tube. A moment later, they were accelerating toward their destination.

"The system is quite smooth," Dumar stated.

"It is newly installed," the officer stated, "and not a moment too soon. It used to take nearly half an hour to walk from the outer areas to the core."

"Useful, to be sure," Max agreed. Moments later, the doors opened, and they rose from their seats and exited the chamber into the command center foyer. The guard checked in with the security desk and then led Dumar inside, leaving the other three guards behind.

A minute later, Dumar entered the director's office. A balding man rose from behind the desk and spoke in a Corinairan brogue. "I am Director Tavach," he said politely as he extended his hand.

"I am Maxwell Dumar," Max answered as he shook the director's hand.

"I understand you are an envoy of Prince Casimir?"

"In a manner of speaking yes," Dumar said as he handed a small chip to the director.

The director inserted the chip into a data reader. His eyes widened as he read the contents. "I do not understand."

"Quite simple, really," Dumar told him. "Prince Casimir feels he is no longer capable of serving as the leader of the Karuzari nation, as his responsibilities as leader of Takara require his full attention. He has therefore placed me in charge of all operations as of this moment forward."

The director looked dumbfounded. "I see," he answered. "What is it you plan to do with us?"

"You will all be offered gainful employ under Karuzaran law."

"I was not aware that such a thing as 'Karuzaran law' existed."

"It was only recently written," Dumar admitted. "By Casimir himself," he added in a bold-faced lie. "You will be provided a copy."

"Of course," the director said. "May I ask what those of us already here shall be doing?"

"For the most part, the same duties which you already perform. The care and maintenance of this facility, as well as its expansion and upgrading."

"We were under the assumption that the upgrades were nearly completed," the director said.

"For the most part, yes," Dumar agreed. "We shall require additional personnel."

"What type of personnel?"

"We'll start with miners, Mister Tavach."

"We have no rights to any of the other asteroids in this system, as they belong to the Corinairans, and this asteroid is already more than sixty percent excavated."

"Then there is still plenty of ore to be extracted," Dumar said. "We will need the resources the ores will provide to feed fabricators," he explained, "as well as to generate the revenues that shall be needed to complete our goal."

"I do not understand, Mister Dumar."

"Please, refer to me as Commander Dumar."

"Of course, Commander. Are we to cannibalize the very asteroid we have been caring for, all for the sake of profit?"

"Only to the extent needed to sufficiently reduce her mass for our purposes," Dumar explained. "My engineers have assured me that she can withstand a bit more excavation."

Director Tavach shook his head. "But, hiring more personnel, obtaining mining equipment, that will all require considerable funding."

"And a class three cargo ship equipped with a jump drive," Dumar added.

"Class three? There are no more than a handful of them in the entire cluster. Even if we could reach one, they are bound to be quite expensive to hire."

"I am well prepared for the expense, Mister Tavach, so please, see to the hiring as soon as possible. I would like to know that things are under way here before I depart on my next assignment."

"You will not be staying, Commander?"

"No. I must travel to the Palee system on another matter."

"The Palee system. That will take months."

"My shuttle is equipped with a jump drive. The journey shall take less than an hour. I expect to be back within a few days, once my business on Palee has been completed."

"Of course," Mister Tavach said. "I am still not accustomed to the idea of instantaneous interstellar travel."

"Indeed," Dumar agreed. "Indeed."

CHAPTER SIX

"Jump five, complete," Mister Riley reported from the Aurora's navigator's chair. "We are five minutes from Tanna's fifth moon."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Threat board?"

"All clear, sir," the tactical officer answered. "Only some light cargo traffic."

"Go ahead and rendezvous with the fuel depot, Mister Chiles. I want to replace our propellant as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

Nathan turned his command chair to face aft. "Comms, hail the fuel depot. Let them know we're coming. Also, make contact with Garrett's people on Tanna. Let them know the clock's ticking. I want to be on our way home within twelve hours."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"That would be twenty-nine thirty, Tannan Mean Time," Mister Navashee reported.

"Make sure Mister Munras knows that as well," Nathan instructed Naralena.

"Yes, sir, I will," Naralena assured him.

Nathan looked at the master chief. "It's going to feel awfully good to know that both ships are fully loaded with propellant, Master Chief."

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Fuel depot is standing by to receive us, Captain," Naralena reported.

"Very well."

"Two minutes to rendezvous," Mister Riley reported.

"We're going to want full security sweeps on everyone coming aboard, Master Chief," Nathan reminded him.

"We're going to unload the shuttles in the transfer airlocks, per Lieutenant Commander Nash's instructions. They will all be thoroughly searched before the inner doors are opened."

"Very well."

"You're not seriously expecting the Tannans to try anything, are you, sir?" the master chief asked.

"No, I'm not, but without the Ghatazhak on board, we're down to only a dozen security personnel. Don't forget, there are at least a hundred of them coming aboard. Better not to take chances."

"Agreed."

"Any thought where we're going to keep them, Master Chief?" Nathan inquired.

"I thought we'd keep them in the flight operations areas for now, Captain," the master chief explained. "With the entire wing off ship, there's plenty of room in the flight briefing rooms for them to relax and ride out the trip back. There are even showers and heads in the pilots' locker rooms for them."

"You want them to sit there for thirty hours?"

"Those chairs are quite comfortable, sir," the master chief argued, "and they will be free to move about the deck, as long as they stay within the flight ops area of B deck, that is."

"We're going to have to feed them at least three times on the way back."

"Already handled, sir. We're going to feed them emergency food rations from the escape pods."

"That's mean," Nathan said.

"We'll heat them up, add some seasonings, maybe a few treats. We've got lots of *kala* bread on hand. Besides, it's only for a day. Once they get to the Jar-Keurog, they'll have all the food they need. That ship's loaded with consumables, you know."

"Actually, I didn't. That is good news, though. That stuff will help us out a lot."

"Lieutenant Commander Kovacic has people inventorying everything on the Jar-Keurog as we speak," the master chief told him. "He's planning on setting up a central supply depot near one of the cargo hangars, so that supplies can be easily distributed to both ships as needed."

"I guess we got lucky scoring a supply officer, huh, Master Chief?" Nathan said.

"They say it's an art, sir." Master Chief Montrose smiled.

"Approaching the fuel depot," Mister Riley reported.

"Reduce forward speed and prepare to rendezvous," Nathan ordered.

"Reducing speed and preparing to rendezvous," Mister Chiles answered.

"Captain, I've managed to make contact with someone claiming to be an associate of Garrett's," Naralena reported. "He used the identification codes we gave to Garrett. He says they are still gathering up the last of the volunteers."

"Did you make him aware of our departure time?"

"Yes, sir, I did. He assured me that they will be ready in time."

"Very well."

"Rendezvous complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "We're in synchronous orbit alongside the fuel depot, standing off at fifty meters."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Comms, let them know we're ready to receive the transfer boom."

* * *

"Those last two decks should be pressurized within a few days," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said.

"Good," Cameron answered. "There are at least another thirty twin quarters in there, and we're going to need every one of them."

"Not to mention the galley."

"I forgot about the galley," Cameron admitted. "Does it have all its equipment installed?"

"No, but it is all crated up and stored down in the cargo holds. Shouldn't take more than a day or two to unpack and install them."

"Let's put that on the back burner," Cameron told him, "no pun intended. Until we're ready to get under way again, all our meals are going to come from either the Aurora or the Jar-Keurog anyway. What about the environmental systems? Are we ready for the additional loads?"

"Ensign Oswalt assures me that it won't be a problem. Did you know that every deck has its own environmental system? Air, temperature control, humidity, water, sewage... the whole thing."

"Actually, I did. This is the Aurora's sister ship, remember."

"Makes for a hell of a redundancy, doesn't it."

"Yes it does. How are things coming with the jump drive array?"

"All the emitters are in place. They're working on the power distribution and control lines now. That's all done from the inside, via crawl spaces. Luckily, all but a few of them are pressurized, so most of the spacewalks are over for now."

"That should speed things up a bit," Cameron said. "Did Doctor Sorenson give us an estimate for completion?"

"She's been awfully hard to pin down on that topic," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. "Truth be told, she's seemed a bit off lately."

"What do you mean, 'off'?"

"I don't know. Depressed, maybe? I don't know her that well, so it's hard for me to judge her mental state. She just doesn't seem as focused as she was when she first came on board."

"Maybe it's just fatigue," Cameron said. "Everyone's been working long days, Abby included."

"Maybe," the lieutenant commander agreed. "Like I said, I don't know her that well."

"Neither do I, to be honest."

"You served on the same ship for what, six months?"

"We never really talked much, I guess. She's always kept to herself for the most part."

"Well, maybe it's nothing, then."

"How's the inventory of the Jar-Keurog going?" Cameron asked, changing the subject.

"Moving along. There are a lot of supplies on that ship."

"She's a big ship that had a big crew," Cameron said, "and she was designed to operate for years on end. So it's no surprise that she's heavily loaded."

"Anyway, she's going to keep us going for years."

"That'll make Captain Scott happy," Cameron said. "The last time he spoke with President Scott, he was told not to expect any support from Earth for a while."

"Then it's damned lucky that we bagged that ship intact," the lieutenant commander said. "There are enough supplies on board to keep two full crews going for several years, and then some."

* * *

"How much time left?" Nathan asked as he stood behind his tactical officer.

"Thirty-two minutes, sir."

"They should have been here by now," Nathan said. He turned around to face Naralena. "Still no word?"

"No, sir."

"It won't hurt us to stay behind the twelve-hour deadline, Captain," the master chief reminded him.

"I know, Master Chief," Nathan said. "I just don't want to be away from Earth any longer than necessary. Hell, I would have left an hour ago when we finished transferring the last of the propellant."

"Then why did you pick twelve hours as the deadline?"

"Last time we topped off here, it took nearly a day and a half. Now they have three working booms instead of one. So I figured about twelve hours."

"We were completely empty then," the master chief said.

"Yeah, I guess that's why we finished an hour earlier than I expected."

"Contacts," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "They're our shuttles, Captain. Both of them."

"Finally," Nathan said, breathing a sigh of relief. "They couldn't have called to let us know they were loading up?"

"They came across the horizon from the far side of Tanna, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "The Tannans still haven't reestablished their comm-sat network."

"Those shuttles can only hold twenty men each," the master chief said. "They're going to have to make at least two more runs if we're picking up one hundred volunteers this time around. That'll take another hour, at least."

"At least we know what's going on, now," Nathan told the master chief. "Let's get those men through security and cycle those shuttles out as quickly as possible, Master Chief. We've still got a thirty-hour journey to get home again."

* * *

"The transfer buses will handle the loads," Abby insisted.

"Not according to the specs, Doctor," Ensign Tillardi argued.

"The specs are wrong, Ensign. Trust me on this. I had the same argument with Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy, who, at the time, was an ensign. He insisted the buses could handle the load as well, and I didn't believe him because I was quoting the same specs as you are. I lost that argument."

"So they held?" Ensign Tillardi asked.

"They're still in service after God only knows how many jumps."

Ensign Tillardi shook his head. "But how did he know they would hold?"

"To this day I still have no idea. I have no idea how the lieutenant commander knows half the stuff he knows. I just accept that he's right most of the time."

"And when he's not right?"

"Then he's the one who has to fix it," she told him. "Just use the buses as they are, please."

"Yes, ma'am," the ensign promised.

"Thank you." Abby wiped her forehead before raising her data pad to enter data.

"Doctor?" Cameron called as she entered the compartment.

Abby turned around. "Commander. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you in the jump field generator rooms before, not even on the Aurora."

"I suppose not," she admitted. "Do you have a minute?"

"Of course, Commander. How may I help you?"

"I was just wondering how you're doing."

"Actually, I think we're a little ahead of schedule, as unbelievable as that seems."

Cameron took the doctor by the arm and led her off to the side of the compartment, away from the other technicians. "Actually, Abby, I was wondering how *you* are doing."

"Me? I'm fine, Commander. Exhausted, of course, but who isn't?"

"Have you been sleeping well? Eating? Taking in fluids?"

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"My XO expressed some concern about your well-being."

"Lieutenant Commander Kovacic? I hardly know the man. I've only spoken with him a few times since I've been on board."

"He said as much. It was just a passing observation."

"I'm fine," she assured the commander.

"You know, you can take a break any time you like. We all can." Cameron chuckled. "We all should, to be honest."

"That's all right, Commander. I'll be happy to take a few days off *after* the Celestia's jump drive is operational."

"That could be weeks, Abby, maybe even months. You said so yourself. Maybe it would be best if your entire team took at least a day off."

"Please, Commander. We need to keep working. This needs to get done. Captain Scott was correct when he said that the Earth has a much better chance of surviving with two jump-capable warships protecting her. So you see, I have to keep working. It's the only way that I can protect my family, assuming they're still alive."

Cameron sighed. "We'll find them, Abby. The captain's got people on it."

"I know," Abby said, looking down at the floor. "But it's the NAU that's looking for them. They can barely find people on their own continent, let alone in Europe where things are much worse." Abby put her hand up over her mouth, then her eyes, trying to hide her emotions from the commander. "I try not to think about them, Commander, but it just doesn't work. Sometimes I even think it would be easier if I knew they were..." Abby looked down, tears welling up in her eyes. She looked back up at Cameron. "That's bad, isn't it? Wishing they were dead just so you could get on with life?"

"No, it's not, Abby," Cameron assured her, putting her hand on Abby's shoulder. "I've felt the same way from time to time. I have family in Europe as well. I have no idea what's happened to them."

"How do you keep your mind off them?"

"I don't."

Abby looked confused.

"Seriously, I don't even try. I couldn't stop myself from thinking of them anymore than you could."

"How do you function?"

"I just do," Cameron told her. "Just like you have been. What other choice is there? If they are alive, they need me to keep doing my job. If they're dead, then it doesn't matter because there is nothing that I can do to bring them back."

And there are still others down there who need us to keep doing our jobs."

"But what if they are alive?" Abby wondered. "Are they wondering what happened to me as well?"

"Undoubtedly."

"God, I don't think I can bear the thought." Abby wiped her eyes. "What if they are alive, and I never make it back to them? They won't even know what happened to me."

"They'll know, Abby. Someday, maybe not soon, but someday, they'll know."

* * *

"Good morning, Captain," Luis greeted from the Celestia's tactical console.

"Good morning, Mister Delaveaga," Cameron answered as she entered the bridge. "How are we looking?"

"Work parties are about to get started. First task is an EVA to patch the holes along the starboard side, midship area."

"When are they going to get to the long-range sensor array?" Cameron asked.

"Tilly said they need to rebuild the entire array."

"So they will need fabricator time," Cameron said, looking disappointed.

"Looks like it."

"I guess the array will have to wait then. The jump drive has highest priority right now. Any word from the Aurora?"

"No, sir," Luis answered. "She's not due back for another couple of hours, yet."

"Where's the XO?" Cameron wondered.

"He's on the cargo deck, Captain. He should be up shortly."

"Very well. I'll be waiting for him in my ready room," Cameron said, looking somewhat tentative.

Luis smiled. "Coffee was delivered twenty minutes ago."

"Bless you, Ensign," she said, looking relieved.

"Bless the guy who scored the coffee beans, Captain."

Cameron smiled, rolling her eyes as she turned and headed for her ready room.

"Captain!" Ensign Souza called from the comm station. "Flash traffic from the Jar-Keurog. Two ships just dropped out of FTL just beyond the orbit of Jupiter." Ensign Souza looked at Cameron. "They're Jung frigates."

Cameron looked at Ensign Schenker at the sensor station. "Anything on passive?"

"Nothing yet, Captain."

"Call the XO to the bridge, and cancel the EVA," Cameron ordered.

"Shall we set general quarters?" Luis asked.

"The Jar-Keurog is calling again, Captain," Ensign Souza interrupted. "Mister Munras is asking to speak with you."

"Not yet," Cameron told Luis. She turned to Ensign Souza. "Are they using optical or radio?"

"Optical, sir."

"Put him on."

"*Commander,*" Garrett called over the comms.

"Go ahead, Mister Munras."

"*Do not go active with your sensors, Commander.*"

"Our long-range array is still down, Mister Munras, we couldn't go active if we wanted to."

"*Good. You should see them on passive any moment now. Do not set general quarters. Do nothing to alert them, or make them suspicious.*"

Cameron squinted. "I don't follow."

"*They probably arrived nearly an hour ago. Their light is only reaching us now.*"

"So they are seeing us as we were forty to fifty minutes ago," Cameron realized.

"*That is correct.*"

"We were pretty much asleep, then," Luis said. "Work parties hadn't even started yet."

"They still haven't," Cameron said. "So we still look like nothing is going on. Mister Munras, what speed are they traveling?"

"Only half light," Garrett answered.

"I've got them on passive now," Ensign Schenker announced. "Transferring tracks to tactical."

"Their speed is a good sign," Garrett explained. *"It indicates that they were not expecting anything unusual. Perhaps they do not yet know what has transpired on your world?"*

"If not, I expect they'll figure it out soon enough," Cameron said.

"Confirmed, two Jung frigates, on course for Earth at half light and decelerating," Luis reported. "Captain, I don't think they came from Alpha Centauri. Their trajectory is all wrong."

"How long until they get here?" Cameron asked.

"At their current rate of deceleration, assuming that they intend to settle into orbit, at least a few hours. Four, maybe five."

"Is it four or five, Ensign?"

"It is neither," Garrett said over the comms. *"It is standard practice for the Jung to come out of FTL mid-system, observe the destination, then go back into FTL to close the distance more quickly."*

"So they could jump in at any moment," Cameron realized.

"Correct."

"Then why haven't they?" Cameron wondered, a pensive look on her face. "If they're monitoring Earth transmissions—which is exactly what we would be doing in their position—then surely they've figured out that the Jung are no longer in control."

"The presence of the Jar-Keurog may be confusing them. Perhaps they are unsure of the situation and are gathering as much information as possible before they commit to a course of action."

"Then we have time to prepare?" Cameron asked hopefully.

"Doubtful," Garrett said. "Remember, they have already been in the system, watching us, for nearly an hour."

"What are the odds that they will just continue to decelerate normally, and not jump the last forty minutes?"

"Quite slim, I'm afraid. They have already lost considerable tactical advantage by waiting this long. They will not want to waste their ability to close the remaining gap and come to weapons range, unannounced."

Cameron turned to Ensign Souza and gestured for him to mute the channel.

"Muted," the ensign reported.

"Contact Lieutenant Telles on the Ghatazhak's secure channel and update him on the situation."

"Yes, sir."

"Un-mute," she told him. "What do you have in mind, Mister Munras?"

"I am working on an idea. I will get back to you shortly. Meanwhile, do nothing to appear to be anything other than a captured ship."

"Understood..." Cameron agreed as she indicated to Ensign Souza to kill the channel. "...I think."

"Lieutenant Telles has been informed, Captain. He is on his way to the Jar-Keurog's command center now."

"Captain, are we going to just sit here?" Luis wondered.

"Do we have any other options at this point?" Cameron said.

"We can fight. We have a weapon..."

"One plasma cannon?"

"It worked before."

"Only because they weren't expecting it."

"Neither are these guys," Luis pointed out.

"True enough," she admitted, "but it's not going to work on both of them, and we can't use rapid-fire mode until Lieutenant Montgomery's team solves the overheat problem on the weapon."

"Can we outrun them?" Ensign Schenker asked.

"No way," Luis said. "They'd just jump ahead of us and pick us off."

"Captain, if we moved around to the far side of Earth, and then made a run for it, they wouldn't see our course."

"They'd see us move in about forty minutes," Cameron said. "Then they'd jump in, weapons hot. That's not enough burn time for us to get any real distance. Even if we shut down early and went cold again, their search cone would be small enough that they'd find us with their active sensors in a few hours."

"But it might be long enough for the Aurora to get back. She can take them both out," Luis said.

"Contacts!" Ensign Schenker announced, a hint of panic in his voice. "Two of them. One million kilometers."

Luis looked at his console. "It's the frigates. They jumped."

"How long?"

"Five minutes," Luis answered.

Cameron's brow furrowed as she pondered the situation. "Comms. Tell all personnel to report to the port fighter bay for evacuation. If this goes bad, we might be able to get some of our people to the surface before it's too late."

"Yes, sir," Ensign Souza acknowledged.

"And tell Ensign Tillardi to set the detonators on the antimatter containment systems again," she added calmly. "We may need them."

* * *

"They have not yet raised their shields," the Takaran scientist at the sensor station reported.

"Are their weapons active?" Garrett asked.

"No, they are not. They are still in their retracted positions."

"Then there is hope," Garrett said, a smile forming on his face. He turned to one of the Tannans and barked a command in their native language. The Tannan man

immediately went to one of the communication consoles and went to work.

“What are you doing?” Lieutenant Montgomery asked.

“Saving both ships,” Garrett answered.

The Tannan man at the communication console turned and nodded at Garrett.

Garrett began speaking Jung in a loud, authoritative voice. Lieutenant Montgomery looked confused, glancing back and forth between Garrett and the Tannan man at the communications console.

“What is he saying?” the Takaran scientist at the sensor station wondered.

Lieutenant Montgomery shrugged.

Garrett paused, waiting for a response over the comms, but none came. After a minute, he repeated his words, this time with greater fervor.

Lieutenant Telles entered the Jar-Keurog’s command center at a brisk pace, immediately sizing up the situation. He turned to Lieutenant Montgomery. “Who is he speaking with? What is he saying?”

“I do not know,” Lieutenant Montgomery admitted. “The only word I recognized was ‘Jar-Keurog’.”

Lieutenant Telles turned to his sergeant. “Notify Major Prechitt. Tell him to ready his squadron to fly, but do not launch. Set all Ghatazhak on alert, ready to deploy at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant answered.

A Jung voice began to crackle through the overhead comm speakers in response to Garrett’s hails. Garrett immediately turned to Lieutenant Telles. “Tell the major to stand down,” he urged, “your Ghatazhak as well.”

“Why?”

Garrett ignored the lieutenant’s question, again barking commands in Jung over the comms to the incoming frigates. “You must trust me,” he told the lieutenant in between his exchanges with the frigate’s communications officer.

"What are you telling them?" Lieutenant Telles demanded to know.

Garrett turned to another of his men, barking orders to them in Tannan this time. In response, two of the men ran out of the command center.

"Where are they going?" the lieutenant demanded.

"To the topside, forward main guns," Garrett told him.

"Sergeant!" Lieutenant Telles bellowed. The sergeant immediately keyed his mic to dispatch Ghatazhak to the guns as well.

"Tell me what you are doing, Mister Munras," Lieutenant Telles demanded. "I will not ask again."

"I have told them that there was a massive battle recently, and that we destroyed the Aurora and captured the Celestia, but we have many wounded and require assistance," Garrett explained. "I am trying to draw them in closer and without their shields..."

"You cannot possibly hope to..."

"I can, and I will. But we must appear to be as I have reported."

The Jung officer's voice again crackled over the loudspeakers, suspicion in his tone. Garrett responded. Lieutenant Telles listened, hearing the name Bacca being spoken by both the Jung and Garrett. He stepped toward the Takaran at the sensor station. "What is their range?"

"Four hundred thousand kilometers and closing."

"How long?"

"Two minutes. They have weapons range on us, Lieutenant."

"Have they armed their weapons or raised their shields?"

"No, sir, they have not. However, many of their rail gun turrets are pointed our direction. It would take but a moment for them to power up and fire."

"Are they pointed our way with intent, or by happenstance?"

"I believe they are in their standard positions, but I cannot state this as fact."

Lieutenant Telles turned to Garrett. "Is it working? Is he believing you?"

Garrett ignored him, continuing his exchange with the Jung officer over the comms. Lieutenant Telles turned away, retreating into a corner as he tapped his comm-set. "Celestia Actual, Telles."

"*Go for Celestia Actual,*" Cameron answered over the lieutenant's comm-set.

"Garrett claims to be attempting to lure the frigates into a trap, bring them in close so that he can destroy them with the Jar-Keurog's main rail guns."

"*Is it working?*"

"I cannot say. Do you have other options?"

"*None,*" she admitted. "*I'm afraid his play is our best option at the moment.*"

"Understood. Telles out."

Garrett's voice continued to grow louder and more demanding as the exchange with the Jung communications officer became more heated. Everyone in the command center watched nervously as Garrett continued his attempts at deception. Finally, the exchange stopped.

Lieutenant Telles's eyes danced back and forth across the room, from Garrett to the Takaran at the sensor console and back. "Well?" he finally asked Garrett. "Did it work?"

"I would appreciate it if you would send some of your men to join my men at the topside, forward main guns," Garrett said. A smile came across his face. "It takes at least three men to operate each weapon, and time is short."

Lieutenant Telles looked at his sergeant.

"I'm on it, sir."

"Range?" Cameron asked.

"Two hundred thousand kilometers and still closing," Luis answered.

"Track?"

"Best guess, a rendezvous course. Same orbit, either leading or at a slightly higher altitude."

"Posture?"

"They still haven't raised shields. Weapons are powered up, though."

"Have they taken aim?"

"Rail guns on the Jar-Keurog, missile launchers appear neutral. They're deployed, but aligned fore and aft."

"Any chance we could sneak the power up on our plasma cannon without them noticing?" Luis asked.

"I'm afraid not," Cameron answered. "They've got to have every sensor they have on us right now. If we so much as turn on a light, they'll know."

"More contacts," Ensign Schenker reported. "Four of them, two from each frigate."

"They're shuttles," Luis commented, his eyes wide. "They're falling for it."

Cameron didn't comment, but continued watching the tactical display on the main view screen.

"Frigates are slowing," Luis reported. "Looks like they're settling in above and short. They should settle into orbit in one minute, about fifty thousand kilometers out."

Cameron sighed. "That's when we'll know."

Garrett, Lieutenant Telles, and Lieutenant Montgomery all hovered over the sensor operator's shoulder, staring at his display.

"Four shuttles approach," the sensor operator reported.

"They are sending aide, as requested," Garrett stated confidently.

"Or boarding parties," Lieutenant Telles said.

"If so, they surely will not get past your Ghatazhak," Garrett said, one eyebrow raised.

"Of this you can be certain," the lieutenant responded confidently.

"We shall wait for their shuttles to reach us and enter our bays. This will keep them off guard until our guns are ready to fire," Garrett told them. "Tell your men to be ready, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Telles looked at Garrett out of the corner of his eye. "They are ready. They are always ready."

Cameron watched the main view screen as the four Jung shuttles entered one of the Jar-Keurog's landing bays. "They're in," she mumbled. She continued watching, expecting the Jar-Keurog's two forward topside main guns to open fire on the two frigates waiting in the distance, well beyond their visual range. "What are they waiting for?" she wondered aloud. She turned to her tactical officer. "Anything?"

"No change in posture in either the frigates or the Jar-Keurog," Luis reported.

"Come on," Cameron muttered to herself.

"Teams report shuttles are on board, but no one has come out," Master Sergeant Jahal reported.

"Our teams are hidden?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. They remain undetected."

"Guns report ready to fire," the Tannan technician reported to Garrett.

Garrett looked at Lieutenant Telles.

"It was your idea, Mister Munras," the lieutenant told him.

Garrett turned back to the technician. "Tell them each to target a different ship, and to commence firing."

The technician nodded, then passed on the orders over comms to the gun teams. They watched the sensor operator's display, waiting for something to happen.

"Main guns are firing!" the technician reported.

All eyes locked on the sensor display.

"Direct hits, both frigates," the Takaran operating the sensors reported. "Both ships are maneuvering."

"Continue firing!" Garrett ordered.

"Teams report troops coming out of the shuttles," Master Sergeant Jahal reported. "Fully armored, Jung regulars."

"All teams to the landing bay," Lieutenant Telles ordered.

"More shuttles are launching from both frigates," the sensor operator reported. "Six in total."

"Tell the major to launch all fighters," Garrett ordered.

"Prechitt, Telles. Six shuttles inbound, launch all fighters."

"Telles, Prechitt. Understood."

"They're raising shields," the sensor operator reported.

A large bright circle appeared on the sensor screen.

"What was that?" Garrett asked.

"One of the frigates took a direct hit from our guns!" the sensor operator reported. "She is destroyed. Second frigate is opening fire!"

"The second frigate is maneuvering at full power!" Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station.

"Helm! Bring the mains online! Go to full power as soon as possible! I want some maneuvering room!"

"Mains going hot!" the helmsman answered. "Full power in thirty seconds!"

"Jar-Keurog is launching fighters," Luis reported.

"Charge the plasma cannon," Cameron ordered.

"Charging plasma cannon," Luis answered. "Two minutes to full charge."

"Comms. Notify the NAU of the situation, secure channel only."

"Yes, sir."

"The Jar-Keurog just lost one of her main guns," Ensign Schenker reported from the sensor station. "She's taking a lot of rail gun fire."

"They're bringing their missile launchers online!" Luis reported. "We're being targeted!"

"Mains coming up," the helmsman announced as the ship lurched forward. "Course?"

"Hard to starboard and roll us onto our starboard side," Cameron ordered. "There's no way we can survive a missile strike on our topside."

"Can we survive one on our underside?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered.

Cameron shrugged as the Celestia rolled and started her turn to starboard.

"Missile launches!" Ensign Schenker reported.

"Are they at us?"

"No, sir! They're firing four at the Jar-Keurog."

"Comms, make sure Garrett knows he's got inbound missiles!" Cameron ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Mains at thirty percent and rising!" the helmsman reported.

"Keep our belly toward that frigate, Mister Donahue."

"Aye, sir!"

"How many Talons have been launched?"

"Eight," Luis answered. "They're going after the inbound shuttles!"

"Another missile launch!" Ensign Schenker reported. "Four more! They're shooting at us this time!"

"Mains at forty percent."

"I need full power, now!" Cameron exclaimed.

"We've only got one reactor online so far, and it's only running at fifty percent," the navigator reported.

"We can't outrun those missiles without full power on the mains," Cameron said. She looked at Luis. "How long on the plasma cannon?"

"One minute."

"And the missiles?"

"Fifty seconds."

The Jar-Keurog's starboard lower landing bay flashed repeatedly as Ghatazhak lasers and Jung energy weapons bounced back and forth across the bay. Jung soldiers advanced slowly, dropping to one knee from time to time, firing repeatedly before rising and continuing forward. Ghatazhak troops, tucked behind various equipment and storage containers, popped up and returned fire intermittently, occasionally striking one of the advancing Jung soldiers. As the advancing Jung troops reached the halfway point between their shuttles and their adversaries, twenty additional Ghatazhak came charging into the massive bay from either side, moving in slightly behind and beside the surprised Jung troops. The Ghatazhak charged confidently forward, an energy weapon in each hand, firing with precision. One shot, one kill. It was the way of the Ghatazhak.

The Ghatazhak soldiers who had set the trap now stood confidently, moving from behind their cover so as to join their comrades in the slaughter. Within seconds, it was over. Not a single Jung soldier drew breath.

"Missile impact! Starboard side! Deck four, section two thirty-eight and two thirty-nine are open to space!"

"Seal off all of deck four, fore and aft of those sections," Garrett ordered.

"I believe it has already happened, automatically," the Tannan technician answered.

"There are four missiles headed for the Celestia," the Takaran sensor operator announced.

"What about our point-defenses?" Lieutenant Telles asked.

"We have not figured out how to work that system yet," Lieutenant Montgomery admitted.

"Prechitt, Telles," Lieutenant Telles called over his comm-set. "Vector all Talons to intercept missiles targeting the Celestia."

"What about those shuttles?" Major Prechitt wondered.

"If they land, my men can handle them. Just protect the Celestia."

"Understood."

"We just lost our second gun," the Tannan technician announced, his face turning pale. "We are defenseless."

"Can we not bring another of the guns online?" Lieutenant Montgomery asked.

"It is a big ship," Garrett said. "It will take several minutes just to get the crews to another gun."

"Talons are moving to engage the missiles," Luis reported.

"Time to impact?"

"Thirty seconds!"

"Mains at fifty percent!" the helmsman reported.

"Damn! What I wouldn't give for a working jump drive right now!"

"One missile down!" Luis reported. "Thirty seconds until the plasma cannon is ready to fire!"

"Set it to rapid-fire mode," Cameron ordered.

"It won't take the heat buildup," Luis warned.

"That ship has still got shields up," Cameron told him. "One shot may not be enough to get through."

"Two missiles down!" Luis reported.

"And two shots may fry our only weapon," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic reminded her.

"Three missiles down! Ten seconds!"

"Rapid-fire mode. Three shot salvo, Mister Delaveaga," Cameron ordered.

"Last missile is down!" Luis announced with glee. "They got them all! Weapon is coming online. Targeting the frigate."

"Fire when ready!" Cameron ordered.

"She's firing more missiles!" Ensign Schenker reported.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" Cameron repeated.

* * *

"Jump five complete," Mister Riley reported. "We're back in the Sol system."

"Captain! I'm picking up a lot of debris," Mister Navashee reported.

"Yeah, it was there when we left," Nathan said.

"No, sir. This is different. Different location, different make. I've even got some large pieces of hull, all about fifty to sixty thousand kilometers from the Jar-Keurog."

"Threat board?" Nathan said, rising to his feet.

"Board is clear, sir," the tactical officer reported.

"What about the Celestia and the Jar-Keurog?" Nathan wondered.

"They're both right where we left them, sir. In orbit over Earth."

"Captain, I'm reading damage to both ships."

"What kind of damage?"

"The Jar-Keurog has a lot of hull damage, Captain. It looks like from both missiles and rail gun hits."

"What about the Celestia?"

"Her plasma cannon is a mess, but other than that, she appears intact."

"Comms?"

"I have the Celestia, sir," Naralena reported.

"Put them on."

"Channel open."

"Celestia Actual, Aurora Actual."

"*Aurora, Celestia, stand by for Actual,*" Ensign Souza answered.

A moment later, Cameron's voice came over the comms.
"*Celestia Actual. Go ahead.*"

"Are you guys okay?" Nathan asked.

"*We're fine here, Captain,*" Cameron answered.

"Something happen I should know about, Commander?"

"*We had a few surprise guests drop in unannounced while you were gone, sir. I'll tell you all about it later, after*

you make hard dock again."

"I can't wait. Aurora Actual, out." Nathan turned and looked at Naralena. "This ought to be good."

* * *

"All I'm saying is that we'd all be better off if we returned to the Pentaurus cluster." Josh argued from his seat at the front of the Falcon's cockpit. "Get both ships fixed up. Get more crew. Load them up with Talons, plasma cannons, plasma torpedoes. Maybe get a couple hundred KKV's put together. Then we come back, and bam, bam, bam, we erase the Jung from the core."

"And if the Jung return to Earth while we're gone?" Loki wondered as he continued his scans.

"They're not due back for what, five months? That's plenty of time. A month there and a month back. That leaves us three months. Can you imagine what the Takaran shipyards can do to the Aurora and the Celestia in three months?"

"And what if they arrive in four months instead of five?" Loki asked.

"The Jung travel at ten times light, right? They left Alpha Centauri a month ago. We saw them leave. Do the math." Josh laughed. "Look who I'm talking to about math."

"What about those two frigates that showed up unannounced?"

"That was a fluke, and you know it, Loki," Josh insisted. "What are the chances of that happening again?"

"This sector is clear as well," Loki said. "Plotting jump to the next sector."

"I still think it makes more sense," Josh continued. "I mean, how much can they do here?"

"Don't you think the captain has thought of all this?"

"I think the captain is so bent on protecting Earth that he's not seeing clearly."

"That's awfully funny, coming from you, Josh. Activate auto-nav."

"Auto-nav engaged," Josh acknowledged. "What do you mean?"

"You're the most emotionally driven person I know. Jumping in three....."

"What?"

"Two....."

"You're crazy."

"One.....jump."

"I'm crazy?" Loki laughed. "Jump complete."

"God, how many more of these sectors do we have to search?"

"At least as far as the first sector we originally searched," Loki told him, "the one that started at the halfway point between Sol and Alpha Centauri."

"At least then maybe the captain will realize that there are no more Jung any closer to Earth than four to five months, just like I said."

"Shut up, Josh."

"Maybe then he'll..."

"Shut up!"

"What the..."

"I've got something!" Loki exclaimed as he adjusted his scanning equipment.

"Loki, we're too close. There's no way the Jung have come this far so quickly."

"I'm picking up a lot of red-shifted images. Ten, eleven, fourteen. Oh, my God, Josh, there's twenty of them. Twenty red-shifted targets."

"What? Are you kidding me?"

"Wait, there's something wrong. The red-shift is all wrong. The frequency. They must be doing at least twenty times light."

"That can't be. Loki, that means they're only a couple months away!"

"Come about, Josh. I'll plot a jump series back to Sol."

* * *

Max looked out across the vast graveyard of old, decaying ships, as the shuttle he rode in cruised overhead at a leisurely pace. Planes, hovercraft, shuttles, even old military spacecraft from long before the Ta'Akar Empire had decimated the forces of the Palee Protectorate. "I had no idea your inventory was so vast," Max exclaimed to his host.

"If it flies, we have it," the salesman said. "And this is just the stuff that can land. The big stuff is parked in orbit over Tuntsi."

"How big?" Max wondered.

"Everything from alpha class planetary runners, all the way up to the big boys, the delta class interstellar haulers. Slow, I'll admit, especially now that the jump drive has been invented, but there's still going to be a place for linear FTL ships for quite some time, I suspect."

"Any box carts?" Max asked.

"Box carts? Yeah, we have box carts, but why would you want them?"

"I like their versatility."

"They're your credits, but you might want to replace the drives on those things. They were always iffy at best."

"I intend to," Max told him. A familiar sight caught his eye. "Are those four oh twos over there?"

"Sure are."

"How many of them do you have?"

"Are you kidding? We must have over a hundred of them, maybe even two hundred. We can't give them away."

"I might be interested in them, at the right price."

"They're nowhere near space-worthy. You know that, right?"

"That's all right. I've got people who can fix them up and put them to good use."

"Great," the salesman exclaimed. "How many of them are you interested in buying?"

"How many of them did you say you have?"

The salesman smiled. "Like I said, we've got a lot of them. Most of them are missing a few parts, but you should

be able to get most of them to fly again, with a little work. If you don't mind my asking, how are you planning on hauling them all out of here?"

"I've already arranged transportation."

"Excellent," the salesman said, smelling the commission he was sure to get. "Shall we head back to the office and talk numbers?"

* * *

Nathan sat in his ready room, staring at the view screen built into the forward bulkhead. Images from four different news feeds played in the four corners of the screen, each showing the suffering and panic caused by the recent arrival of the two Jung frigates only two days earlier.

"Captain?" Sergeant Weatherly called from the hatch. "Mister Hayes and Mister Sheehan are here to see you, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Send them in," Nathan said as he switched off the view screen.

Nathan picked up his data pad and looked over the reports from the Falcon's most recent recon flight once more, as Josh and Loki entered his ready room and stood before his desk. He looked up from his data pad, across his desk at the two young pilots. "I wish these scans were a mistake, to be honest." Nathan set the data pad down and sighed. "I don't suppose there's any chance of that though, is there."

"No, sir, I'm afraid not," Loki assured him.

"That is a lot of ships, and sixty days is *not* a lot of time."

"Yes, sir, we figured as much," Josh said.

"I know I've been asking a lot of you two over the last few weeks, and I do appreciate all of your hard work. However, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask even more of you."

Josh's eyes squinted in concern as he cast a sidelong glance at Loki to his right. "Sir?"

"The fact that those ships are doing twenty times light sort of changes things. It's becoming more and more

apparent that our intelligence on the Jung—both their capabilities and their numbers—is seriously lacking. Unfortunately, it's going to be up to you guys to fill in those gaps."

"Understood, sir," Loki responded.

Josh cast another glance at Loki.

"To start with, I'm going to need you to return to the Alpha Centauri system. I need to know if that battle platform is still there. If she's not, and she is also capable of such speeds, then we could be in for a lot more trouble than we thought."

"Understood, sir," Loki said again.

"How soon can you depart?"

"The chief wanted to take her down for a few hours for maintenance, Captain. Nothing major, just preventative stuff. I can ask him to postpone it, if you'd like?"

"No, that's all right," Nathan told him. "Just tell him to get it done by morning. Meanwhile, you guys get some rest. You've both earned it."

"But, no vacation time," Josh said.

Loki rolled his eyes.

"I'm afraid not, Josh," Nathan said, "not yet."

Josh sighed and hung his head downward.

"Problem, Mister Hayes?" Nathan inquired.

Josh straightened up. "No sir, no problem."

"Good." Nathan smirked. "Hang in there, gentlemen. Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir," Loki said as they turned to exit.

"*Captain, comms,*" Naralena's voice called over the desk intercom.

"Go ahead."

"*Incoming call from President Scott, sir.*"

"Put him on my screen."

"*Yes, sir.*"

A second later, Nathan's father appeared on the large view screen. "*Captain Scott.*"

"Mister President."

"I thought you might like to know that the leaders of the newly reformed nations of Earth have agreed, in principal, of the necessity to band together to support the EDF in its efforts to protect the Earth."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Nathan wondered, dubious of his father's carefully chosen words.

"It means exactly what it sounds like. They agree that it needs to happen, and want to make it happen, but are still unwilling to make any formal commitment."

"So, is that progress?"

"I know it doesn't seem like it," the president admitted, "but it is. Their attitude seems completely different since those two frigates showed up. To be honest, their arrival was a blessing."

"Not from where we sit." Nathan thought for a moment. "It was you, wasn't it?" he exclaimed. "You're the one who leaked the news about the Jung frigates, aren't you?"

"That is correct," the president admitted unabashedly.

"You realize that you put innocent lives at risk, right? The way the news reported things, they must have thought it was all over, that the Jung were coming to glass the planet."

"I cannot help it if the news tends to blow things out of proportion from time to time," the president defended.

"People committed suicide, for Christ's sake," Nathan exclaimed. "Don't you feel any remorse over that?"

"Of course I do, Nathan," his father responded, becoming irritated. "This isn't a campaign for office, you know. We're trying to save our world, here. Nothing less. If I have to sacrifice a few innocent lives to save billions, then that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"What makes you think you have the right to make such decisions?" Nathan challenged.

"The fact that I'm their leader!" the president asserted. "Duly elected and charged with the welfare of everyone. Not just a few, but everyone. I am the one who has to make such decisions, and I am the one who has to live with them. Men like you and I don't have the luxury of having someone

else to blame when things go wrong. We can't always afford to follow our moral compass. Sometimes, we have to do something bad in order to serve the greater good. The fact that we are willing to make those decisions, and to accept the consequences of our actions, gives us the right to make them. Can you stand there and tell me that you haven't sent anyone into battle knowing full well that they would not survive?"

"It's not the same, and you know it," Nathan argued.

"I don't have to justify my actions to you, Captain. I did what had to be done, and the result is that the people are crying out for action. The result is that their governments are responding, and are interested in further discussions on how to best unify and support you and your people. While I regret that a handful of weak soles decided to lie down and die rather than stand up and fight, I cannot allow myself the pleasure of mourning their deaths. Quite frankly, I haven't the time."

Nathan sat staring at his father's face for nearly a minute. As much as he hated his father's position, he knew he was right. Nathan had made similar decisions. Ones that had resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people, both on his world and on Corinair. The difference was that his father had probably thought it all through with due consideration. Nathan, on the other hand, acted on instinct, only stopping to consider the consequences after they had already been realized.

Nathan let out a small sigh. "I have another piece of news that might help your cause."

"Our cause, Captain. Let us not forget that."

"Yes, Mister President," Nathan agreed reluctantly. "We have determined the location of the Jung fleet."

"That's good news."

"Not really," Nathan warned. "They are traveling at twice the speed we originally thought to be their maximum. Twenty times the speed of light."

The president's expression changed to one of concern.
"How long?"

"Sixty-two days," Nathan said. *"Maybe less."*

Nathan watched as his father leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across the top of his head, just as Nathan always did. He could almost see his father's confidence for their future fade from his expression.

"How many ships?"

"Twenty."

The president's hands dropped to his sides and his head hung low. *"What are our chances?"*

"Slim."

"I assume you have a plan?"

"I had a plan. I'm afraid it's going to require a bit of reworking, though. We could really use some help up here."

"You know, even if they agree, none of us have the infrastructure, the industrial capacity..."

"We have fabricators," Nathan said. *"We can make whatever we need. What we can't make are the materials needed to feed those fabricators."*

"I'll continue the talks and see what I can do. At least this news should get them to commit to something."

"Thank you, Mister President."

"Hold on, Nathan. Miri wants to speak with you."

Nathan's father stepped out of the view of the camera and Nathan's sister Miri stepped into the shot to replace him. *"Hi, Nathan."*

"Hi, Miri."

"Listen, I've made some headway on finding the families of your crew."

"Already? It's only been a week."

"Six days, actually. I've been getting a lot of cooperation from everyone I contact. This is just the type of thing people want to help with. In fact, there are already several networks set up that are dedicated to reuniting family members who have lost contact with one another. One of them has even been running since the first invasion."

"How many have you found?" Nathan wondered.

"I'm sending you the list," she said as she picked up her data pad and tapped the controls.

The list appeared a moment later on the right side of Nathan's view screen and began to slowly scroll from top to bottom. "That's got to be more than half the crew, Miri," he exclaimed as he read the list. "You know, a lot of the people on this list have been dead for months."

"I know. I just figured that I should find their families anyway, so that they could be properly notified. They need to know too."

"I hadn't thought of that," Nathan admitted as he continued to read the list. His eyes suddenly widened as he recognized a name. "Oh, my God, Miri. I need you to do something for me."

* * *

Loki stood in the middle of the Aurora's recovery unit, staring at the curtain that separated Jessica's bed from the rest of the room. He had been there for at least five minutes when one of the medical staff approached him.

"She's awake, you know. You can go in and see her," the woman said in a typical Corinairan brogue.

The woman's words startled Loki, snapping him out of his thoughts. He looked at her. "I know. I just..." He looked down again.

"It's all right, Mister Sheehan," the nurse told him as she placed a hand on his arm. "Whenever you're ready."

Loki looked at her. She had been one of the nurses who had cared for him during his own recovery. "Thanks," he told her, barely forcing a smile.

He stood there for several more minutes, staring at the curtain. In his mind, he could still see her face only centimeters from his own... pale, ashen, desperate, with blue lips and bloodshot eyes... grasping at his helmet, pleading for help that he could not give.

"Are you going to stand there all day, Loki?" Jessica called from behind the curtain.

Loki was again startled. He felt cold and clammy. His heart was racing. His hands were wet.

Loki wiped his hands on his uniform shirt and moved slowly toward the curtain. He paused in front of it, reaching out but afraid to pull it open.

"That's it, open the curtain," Jessica beckoned from the other side.

Loki felt nervous, unsure if he was in a dream, or a nightmare. His vision was becoming blurry around the edges. Finally he pulled the curtain open slowly.

"Boo!" Jessica suddenly snapped.

Loki jumped. For a moment, he thought his heart had stopped.

Jessica began to laugh. "Holy shit, Loki! You should see your face!"

"That's not funny," he exclaimed, clutching his chest with his right hand. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Oh, man," she said as she continued to laugh. "Thanks. That's like the only laugh I've had in weeks!"

Loki stepped inside the curtain, pulling it closed behind him, feeling every pair of eyes in the room on him, laughing. "You've got a mean streak in you, Lieutenant Commander, you know that?"

"So I've been told," she said as she repositioned herself on her bed, sitting up straighter than before. "So what took you so long?"

Loki looked confused, "You mean..." he said as he pointed back beyond the curtain.

"I mean what took you so long to come and visit me?"

"Uh, I've been busy. You know, flying recon missions and such."

"Bullshit. Josh has been in a dozen times."

Loki rolled his eyes and sighed. "Probably why he falls asleep on missions."

"I'm just teasing you, Loki," Jessica admitted. "I understand why you haven't been by. It had to be a hard thing to go through. Watching me die in your lap, face-to-face that way." Jessica looked down for a second. Then her eyes came up to meet Loki's again, a small smirk on her lips. "Sorry about that."

"You're apologizing to me?" he wondered. "If anything, I should be apologizing to you. If I had been thinking, I could have given you my oxygen hose when we got in."

"There was no pressure left in the cockpit, Loki. Sucking on an air hose wouldn't have kept me alive. Besides, you didn't know the cockpit was going to decompress."

"But..."

"If anything, I should have ordered you both to stay clear and not land. But I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yeah." She looked down again. "You weren't there. You didn't see the major eat his gun." She sighed, then looked at Loki again. "It fucks with your head, seeing someone do that. Even if you understand why. It still fucks with you."

"So, you were afraid of dying?"

"No, I was afraid of failing. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do what the major did."

"I can't believe *you* were afraid," Loki said in disbelief. "I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

"My daddy used to say I was too stupid to be afraid. My brothers said I was too stubborn. My mom said I was too competitive. Truth is, I'm afraid all the time." Jessica looked hard at Loki. "Everyone gets afraid, Loki. You, me, the captain, Telles. Well, maybe not Telles. There's nothing wrong with fear. It's normal. As long as you don't let it cripple you, cause you to make bad decisions. That's what happened to me down there. I made a bad decision. Because of that, now you're fucked up as well, and that's my fault. For that, I'm truly sorry, Loki."

Loki smiled. "That's all right. I'll get over it. In... fifty or sixty years, maybe."

"Yeah."

"You know, the captain said that maybe he subconsciously sent us down because he knew that we'd disobey orders and try to save you."

"Yeah, Josh told me. I'm pretty sure it was a conscious decision, though. Nathan doesn't make unconscious ones. He just likes to pretend that he does. It's a trick he plays on himself so he doesn't feel guilty."

"I'll have to remember that one."

"Well, at least you finally came in to see me. That's a big step, you know."

"Yeah, well, I'll try to come by more often in the future."

"You do that, Loki."

"I gotta go," Loki said, feeling awkward. "Captain says we've got a lot of missions ahead of us, and he gave us the night off to get some rest. I think I'm going to ask the doctor for something to knock me out for eight hours while I have the chance."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Josh?"

"Yeah, he was in here an hour ago. Don't count on him being well rested tomorrow, though."

Loki smiled. "I never do." He waved at Jessica. "See ya later, Jessica."

"Sure."

Loki turned to exit.

"Loki?"

Loki turned back around to face her. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for saving my life."

Loki smiled. "Anytime, Jess."

* * *

Sergeant Weatherly stood, as always, outside the captain's ready room, facing the middle of the Aurora's bridge. He had been acting as the captain's personal body guard since they had returned home and found the Jung had invaded Earth, and realized they were in a state of war.

Before that, he had done the same during the Alliance war against the Ta'Akar Empire, short-lived as it was.

If the captain left the ready room, the sergeant followed. If the captain went to the head, the sergeant followed. The only time he wasn't standing near his captain was when the captain was in his quarters. Even then, a relief guard was posted in his place while the sergeant rested.

"Sergeant Weatherly?" Naralena called, looking to him from her chair at the main communications console.

"Yes, ma'am?" the sergeant answered.

"The captain would like to see you in his ready room, Sergeant."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." The sergeant turned around and pushed the normally opened hatch inward, stepping inside. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Nathan responded. "You've been following me around, keeping an eye on me, for months now. Although at times, I admit, your presence can be annoying, I just wanted you to know that I appreciate your diligence. Knowing that you are looking out for my safety does free my mind up to think of other things."

"Thank you, Captain, but I'm just doing my job."

"I know, Sergeant. I know. I've been working on something. More accurately, my sister has been working on something for me. I haven't told anyone about it just yet, mostly because I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up until I knew that it was going to work out. Fortunately, it seems to be working out better than expected, and I wanted run it past you, see what you thought of it, before I got the entire crew involved."

"Sir?" the sergeant asked, confused.

"You have a call, Sergeant," Nathan said, smiling, "from Earth." Nathan picked up the remote from his desk and activated his view screen. On it appeared an elderly woman with a worrisome look.

Sergeant Weatherly's eyes widened and his mouth fell open.

"Ma'am, I apologize for the delay. My name is Captain Nathan Scott. I'm the commanding officer of the Aurora. Your son serves under my command. I just wanted to let you know, that we're all very proud of him."

The woman's eyes lit up as she realized the truth. Her worrisome expression changed to a smile so full of love that it could warm the entire ship. *"Oh, thank you, Captain,"* the woman said, tears welling up in her eyes. *"Is he there? Can I see him? Can I speak with him?"*

"Yes, ma'am, he's right here," Nathan assured her. "Sergeant?" he said, gesturing for him to step forward into the view of the camera.

Sergeant Weatherly stepped slowly forward. His eyes were also welling up, and he sniffled. "Mamma?" he said, trying with all his might not to cry. "Is it really you?"

"Oh, my Lord!" his mother cried out, nearly falling out of her chair. *"Jerome! Oh, my Lord! Jerome! I was sure your captain was going to tell me you were dead! Oh, dear Lord, my baby!"*

"Mamma," the sergeant repeated.

Nathan noticed his sergeant's guard coming down for the first time since he had first met the young marine.

"Everyone! Come here, quick!" she hollered to the next room. *"It's Jerome! He's alive! Oh, my God! Sweet Jesus, my baby's alive!"*

Nathan quietly slipped past the sergeant, patting him on the back as he passed. As he slipped away, the view screen filled with the sergeant's relatives. Everyone was yelling and crying, even the mighty Sergeant Jerome Weatherly, the captain's bodyguard, and friend.

Nathan stepped out of the ready room, closing the hatch quietly behind him. He turned to exit the bridge, pausing by the main communications console. "Give him as much time as he needs."

Naralena smiled. "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nathan looked at his staff gathered around the command briefing room conference table. "As you all know, we have confirmed that the Jung are only sixty-two days away."

"Assuming that twenty times light is in fact their maximum rate of travel," Lieutenant Telles pointed out.

"Is there any reason to assume it isn't?" Cameron asked.

"'Is there any reason to assume it is?' might be a better question," the lieutenant pointed out. "Just because one observes a ship traveling at a certain speed does not mean that is, indeed, that ship's maximum speed."

"He's got a point," Vladimir said.

"I know," Nathan said.

"That being said, I see no reason to assume that it is not their maximum speed," Lieutenant Telles admitted.

Nathan looked at the lieutenant.

"One can logically assume that if the purpose of moving a fleet of ships is to secure a strategically and politically important target, then one would move those ships with maximum haste, would they not?"

"Then why did you bring it up, Lieutenant?"

"To make sure that the possibility was being considered," the lieutenant explained. "Why else?"

"For the purpose of this meeting, we shall assume that twenty times light *is* the maximum speed at which this particular group of ships can travel," Nathan stated. "Our goal is to make our ships as combat ready as possible before their arrival."

"Are we sure we want to let the battle come to Sol again?" Cameron wondered.

"I'm not crazy about the idea, no," Nathan said. "However, considering the amount of work we still have to

do just to become combat ready, I don't see as we have much choice."

"All of our efforts are still focused on getting our jump drive working," Cameron reminded Nathan.

"Perhaps we should consider bugging out now, while we have plenty of time to make a standard sub-light run out of the system?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic suggested.

"We are very close to having the jump drive ready for testing, Captain," Abby insisted. "If we depart now, we will be deprived of the additional resources being in proximity to the Aurora provides us."

"In other words, you work faster here, than when under way," Nathan said.

"Isn't that what I said?"

"How close are you?"

Abby shrugged. "Three weeks?"

"You look unconvinced," Nathan commented, "which is abnormal for you, Doctor."

"I've been working long hours, Captain. We all have."

"At full power, the Celestia can be out of the system in two weeks," Cameron said. "We can afford to wait a bit longer before we cut and run, sir."

"But the sooner you go, the less likely the Jung are to witness your route," Nathan pointed out.

"So we cruise out to the far side of the sun, and do our burn from the opposite side. They won't see a thing."

"It wouldn't be difficult to figure out your general direction of travel, Commander," Lieutenant Yosef said. "All they have to do is make small FTL jumps wide of your possible course cone and look for old light from your burn. Eventually, they will determine your course."

"We can make multiple course changes, combined with periods of cold-coasting to throw them off," Cameron argued.

"Most likely, the jump drive would be operational by then anyway," Nathan concluded.

"And if it's not?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered.

"Then we're screwed," Cameron said. "Even with a few plasma cannons and plasma torpedoes, we can't stand up to twenty ships without a jump drive."

"So, no matter what, the Celestia's best chance for survival is her jump drive," Abby pointed out.

"Agreed. The Celestia should stay put for now," Nathan decided. "Commander, have your people work up a sub-light escape route, just in case. Include a last chance, go-no-go date. If the jump drive isn't working by then, you can still make a run for it."

"Yes, sir."

"I had Lieutenant Montgomery and the fabrication officer rework the fabrication schedule a bit. We won't get as many energy weapons as we'd hoped, and we certainly won't have the time to figure out how to adapt the Jar-Keurog's shields to our ships, so we'll just have to fight the same way we've been fighting. Jump in, strike hard, then jump away quickly before they can strike back."

"It doesn't look much different," Cameron said, looking at the revised fabrication schedule on her data pad.

"A few changes of note," Lieutenant Montgomery said. "The bad news is that Celestia will be forced to use her fabricators for the production of a replacement plasma cannon, instead of for completing her interior build out. The good news is that we should be able to solve the heat problem that prevented the cannon from being used in rapid-fire mode."

"Really," Cameron said.

"Indeed. During production, we were forced to use inferior substitute materials for several key components. At the time, the weapon was being used as an experiment. It was never intended to be used in combat without rigorous testing and modifications."

"Aren't you limited to the same materials this time as well?" Nathan wondered, appearing confused.

"It turns out that the material we were lacking is used quite widely in the construction of the Jar-Keurog. We should have an abundant supply."

"Does that mean you can fix our plasma cannons as well?" Nathan asked.

"I cannot fix them," the lieutenant said, "not without replacing the entire discharge chamber. To be honest, it would be easier to replace the entire cannon. Unfortunately, there is not enough time in the fabrication schedule to accommodate the additional plasma torpedo cannons. However, the schedule does allow for the installation of two new plasma cannons. They are to be placed in your last two forward tubes."

"That will be of tremendous help," Nathan said. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"My pleasure."

"You're going to give us two of your quad guns?" Cameron said with surprise as she read her data pad. "Those things are huge. How the hell are you going to move them?"

"It will not be difficult," Vladimir boasted.

Nathan looked at him.

"Okay, maybe it will be a little difficult. They are modular in their design. Much like the antimatter reactors, they were designed to be swapped out for maintenance as one piece. The Celestia already has her ammo bays for her quads. Her tunnels and tracks as well. Just no guns. Her doors do not operate yet, but we will just install them as fixed turrets at the top of her transfer tunnels."

"How are you going to move them from the Aurora over to the Celestia?" Nathan wondered.

Vladimir grimaced. "That is the part that is not so easy," he admitted. "We may be in microgravity, but the guns still have plenty of mass. However, do not worry, we will make it happen."

"I hope so," Cameron said. "I'll take all the guns I can get."

"All weapons aside, let's not forget that the jump drives are the reason that we can stand up to the Jung ships," Nathan reminded them. "They have shields, they have long range missiles, and their battleships have long-range rail guns with highly accurate targeting systems. If restricted to sub-light, we wouldn't stand a chance against half their number." He looked at Abby. "I hate to put pressure on you, Doctor Sorenson, but in the end, the Celestia's survival comes down to you and your team. The Celestia's jump drive must work."

"I understand, Captain."

"Very well. We've all got a lot of work ahead of us, and nowhere near enough time to do it in. However, it's already late, so let's all get some sleep, and we'll go hard at it in the morning. Dismissed."

Nathan waited for everyone to stand before speaking again. "Doctor Sorenson, if you would remain a moment?"

Abby sat back down. Nathan could tell that she was not herself. She looked haggard and worn out, like she was running on autopilot. He waited for everyone to make their exit before speaking. "Abby, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Captain," she told him.

Nathan could tell she was lying. "Pardon my saying so, but you don't look fine. Have you been sleeping?"

"Not as well as I'd like, but probably no less than anyone else, I imagine."

"Maybe you need a break?"

"We all need a break, sir. Why should I be any different than everyone else?"

"Because everyone else can't build a jump drive," Nathan told her.

"Actually, there are several people on board right now who could do just that, now that they have the specifications. The last few minis were built without me."

"Are you saying you want to leave?"

Abby sighed, looking down at the table. "I know that you need me, Nathan. I know I'm the only one who really

understands the jump drive, at least, I understand it more than anyone else. But hearing about how other members of the crew have made contact with their families... it's hard. It's very hard."

"Look, Abby..."

"I know, sir. Europe was hardest hit. Everything is in chaos. Finding them will be more difficult. I understand all of that. It still doesn't make it easier."

"Captain?" Sergeant Weatherly signaled from the aft entrance to the command briefing room.

Nathan nodded at the sergeant.

"Abby, we discovered that the EDF were holding many families in protective custody at various locations. It took time for them all to report in, especially the ones who were protecting families of people involved in highly classified research, such as yourself."

"What are you saying?" Abby wondered, confused.

"What I'm saying is..."

"*Moder!*" a child's voice called out from the doorway.

Abby's eyes opened wide and her mouth fell open.

"*Moder!*" another child yelled in delight.

Abby fell from her seat, landing on her knees in front of her two onrushing children. The little boy and girl leapt into their mother's arms, tears of joy streaming from their little eyes as they held their mother tightly. Abby cried like a little girl as well as she squeezed her children. Her swollen eyes looked at Nathan with immense gratitude. Then she saw her husband standing in the doorway, his eyes moist and swollen as well. She reached out for him, and he responded without haste, coming to kneel in front of her, their children happily trapped between them.

Nathan rose from his seat and exited through the aft exit.

"Nicely done, sir," Sergeant Weatherly said.

"Yeah," Nathan sighed. "Sometimes this job has its perks, eh, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant agreed. "By the way, my mom wanted me to tell you, 'thank you,' and 'God bless.'"

"Tell her it was my pleasure, Sergeant."

"Where to, sir?"

"I think I'll call it a night as well, Sergeant."

* * *

Nathan opened his door to find Vladimir standing in the corridor outside, holding a small bottle.

"Look what I got from one of the Intrepid's crew," Vladimir said. "Armenian cognac."

"I didn't know there were any Armenians on the Intrepid's crew," Nathan said as he stood aside and allowed Vladimir to enter his quarters.

"There are not. He won it in a poker game."

"I thought gambling on board ship was against regs?"

"It is, but who said it was a poker game on board a ship?"

"Who'd you get it from?"

Vladimir thought for a second. "It doesn't matter. Do you require a glass, or are you a man?" he challenged as he opened the bottle. He sniffed the open bottle. "Oh, *da*. It smells heavenly." Vladimir lifted the bottle to take a drink.

"What are we drinking to?" Nathan asked.

"Does it matter?"

"I'm the captain. You're the chief engineer. IS it appropriate for us to get drunk just for the hell of it?"

"From this little bottle? Don't be silly. This would not get my *babushka* drunk. However, if you require a reason to take a celebratory drink, then how about we drink to the fact that we have this wonderful bottle of Armenian cognac? They make the best cognac, you know."

"That's not a reason," Nathan said, plopping down on the sofa. "How about we drink to Abby's reunion with her family. That's a good reason."

"*Da!* To Abby's reunion with her family!" Vladimir agreed as he took a drink. "That was very nice, by the way, bringing

them here," he said as he passed the bottle to Nathan.

Nathan took a tentative sip. "Not bad." He took another drink. "What else can we drink to? I know, to Sergeant Weatherly and his mother." Nathan took another drink.

"To the sergeant and his mother," Vladimir agreed as he took the bottle from him and took another long drink.

"I know! I heard the Falcon returned. The battle platform is still in the Centauri system. That's good news, right?"

"Are you kidding me? That is wonderful news," Vladimir agreed as he drank again.

Nathan took the bottle back and took another drink. "Of course, we still have to face twenty ships, you know."

"No problem," Vladimir said as he took the bottle back from Nathan and took another drink.

"Is that you or the cognac talking?"

"Both," Vladimir said. "Not to worry, my friend. Cruisers and frigates are no match for the Aurora."

"Maybe not, but there are two battleships coming as well," Nathan said.

"So what? You already defeated one battleship. What is two more?"

"We got lucky with the Jar-Keurog," Nathan admitted. "If our jump hadn't taken a hunk out of her, and if the Ghatazhak hadn't reacted so quickly to board her, we might not be having this conversation."

"Luck, fate, divine intervention... believe whatever you like. I believe that you did it once, and you will do it again, and again, and again." Vladimir took another drink.

Nathan looked at his friend. "I wish I had your confidence."

"Drink more of this, you soon will."

* * *

"How's Mister Willard coming along?" Nathan asked the master chief.

"Fine, sir. He is well versed in his duties in combat command. He has also been spending quite a bit of time in

the simulator with the Intrepid's crew."

Nathan looked across his desk at the master chief. "Do you think he's qualified for tactical command, yet?"

"No, sir, not yet. Not until he has logged actual time in command on the bridge. He knows what to do, he just needs to do it a few times to build confidence. The simulator chief says he's second-guessing himself too often."

"Perhaps we should have him take charge for the trip to Tanna today?"

"I think that would be an excellent idea, Captain."

"Let's throw some ship-wide drills at him along the way, during recharge layovers."

"I'll work some up, sir," the master chief said with a grin.

"Go easy on him, Master Chief," Nathan said, smiling. "Don't throw him to the wolves just yet."

"It worked for you, sir," the master chief said.

"*Captain, intelligence,*" a voice on the intercom called.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"*Jameson, sir. I have something here you need to see.*"

"On my way, Mister Jameson," Nathan answered. "Walk with me, Master Chief." Nathan and the master chief rose and headed out of the ready room.

"How are his management skills coming along?"

"Could be better," Master Chief Montrose said. "I think it's because he doesn't really know the ship as well as he should, nor the various crew positions and their duties. However, because of that, he's good at knowing when to leave the department heads alone and let them do their jobs without trying to micromanage them."

"That's a plus, I'd say," Nathan said as they turned the corner and stepped into the intelligence office. "That one took me a while to get the hang of."

"Don't worry, sir," the master chief said. "Command is a life-long learning experience. You'll get the hang of it, eventually."

Nathan paused and looked at the master chief, who smiled, looking quite pleased with himself. He turned and

looked around the compartment which was crammed with workstations. There were large view screens along every vertical surface, each displaying some form of data analysis or visual image. He spotted Mister Jameson on the far side, staring at an image on one of the view screens in front of him. "What have you got for us, Mister Jameson," Nathan said as they approached.

The young analyst looked weary, as if he hadn't slept for days. "We may have a problem, Captain."

Nathan noticed the dour expression on the young man's face. "What is it?"

"The images on the left were taken during our pass along the outer edge of the Alpha Centauri system, fifty-three days ago," he explained pointing to the view screen on their left. "The ones on the right were taken yesterday by the Falcon. Both show a Jung battle platform."

"Okay," Nathan said, waiting for the problem.

"The question is, are the images of the same platform?"

"I'm guessing you're going to tell me that they are not," the captain said.

"No, sir, they are not. They look very much the same, and although we cannot see any identification markings, we can see some minor differences. For example, her maneuvering thrusters, here, here, and here," Mister Jameson explained, pointing to the spots on the image. "Now look at those same thrusters on the one from yesterday."

"There are more of them," the master chief realized.

"Correct," Mister Jameson said. "The one on the right has clusters of six, the one on the left has clusters of four."

"Could they just have added more thrusters?" Nathan wondered.

"I thought of that," Mister Jameson admitted. "Then I saw this." He changed the images on both screens and then magnified them both.

"Are those landing bays?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir," Mister Jameson said. "The one on the left has four along the same level. The one on the right has a single, massive bay."

"How big is that bay?" the master chief wondered.

Mister Jameson zoomed in further on the image on the right view screen, revealing the tail end of a frigate inside the massive bay.

"That's not a landing bay," Nathan said, dread in his voice. "That's an internal port. A zero-gravity internal spaceport."

"Big enough to hold a frigate, at least."

"No way they could have rebuilt *that* in just fifty-three days," Nathan said.

"How big is that damned ship?" the master chief asked.

"Nearly thirty kilometers in diameter, and more than five tall; nearly ten including the central structures."

"Jesus," Nathan exclaimed. "And now there are two of them." Nathan sighed. "Is the one on the left the same size?"

"Dimensionally close, but the second one is fatter, more mass. Probably to accommodate the internal spaceport."

"They're floating fortresses," the master chief exclaimed, "the size of small cities."

"Makes you wonder what all they have in there," Nathan said. He looked at Mister Jameson. "Yup, I'd call that a problem."

"If the battle platform currently stationed in the Alpha Centauri system is not the one we witnessed arriving fifty-three days ago, then you have to wonder..."

"Where did it go," Nathan finished for him. "When the Falcon took those images, they skipped over the area between Alpha Centauri and the halfway point between us on their way there, right?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Jameson answered.

"Then get them back out there, Mister Jameson," Nathan ordered. "I want to know where that battle platform went, or more accurately, that it is *not* on its way here, we hope."

"Yes, sir," Mister Jameson answered.

Nathan turned to Master Chief Montrose. "If there is a battle platform on its way here, we're going to need a lot more help from the Tannans than we thought."

"No worries, Captain," the master chief said. "We'll deal with them. We'll deal with all of them. That's what we do."

"Yes, Master Chief," Nathan agreed as he stared at the images. "That's what we do."

* * *

"Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy said they would start pulling the two quads from the Aurora as soon as they got back," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic reported. "He estimates it will take about two weeks to complete the transfer, then another week to move half the slugs they're carrying over to our ammo hoppers."

Cameron nodded as she chewed her salad. "I can't wait. I feel defenseless since I melted down our one and only weapon."

"Not like you had much choice."

"You sure you don't want to try this?" she asked.

"No thanks," the lieutenant commander said. "I'm not a big vegetable guy."

"I heard four more Eagles reported in. How many are we up to now?"

"That makes twenty-one so far."

"Unbelievable. That's practically an entire squadron. How's the Falcon doing on her search?"

"They've covered the entire route from the halfway point back to Centauri space. They still haven't found anything."

"Have them widen their search corridor," Cameron instructed. "There's a good chance that the battle platform is slower, and probably took a parallel route to reduce FTL collision risks."

"Makes sense. I'll pass the word to the CAG. I'm sure Josh and Loki will be thrilled."

"Ensign Kyle has some interesting ideas on how to utilize the Aurora's remaining missiles."

"Really?"

"Three separate ideas, actually. The first is to create a mobile launcher using a deck tractor. It could be fitted with two launch rails that would use hydraulics to raise them to firing attitude. They could be loaded in the hangar bay, then driven onto the forward pads and raised up to their topside launch positions. There, the tractor can turn to point in any direction before firing. Since the missiles are self-guided and able to maneuver, they only have to be aimed in the general direction."

"Not as fast as a regular missile launcher, but not a bad idea," Cameron said. "What's the next idea?"

"Break them up and combine several warheads onto a single, beefed up missile that could be launched through a fighter launch tube. Just before intercept, the warheads could separate and possibly slip past the enemy's point-defenses."

"And the third idea?"

"A variation of the second, actually, and my favorite," the lieutenant commander said. "Put micro-jump drives on the missiles and jump them toward the target as soon as they clear the tubes, hopefully before the enemy sees them. They jump in close and deploy multiple warheads. Might even be possible to program the delivery vehicle to alter course at the last second just enough to jump clear to be recovered later for reuse."

"Now *that* idea I like," Cameron said, "although I don't know if the Takarans can get the jump drives any smaller than they already are."

"It's worth running past them, I think."

"Yes, it is," Cameron agreed.

* * *

Nathan walked down the streets of Klondell, a small city a few hundred kilometers from the capital of Tanna. The

streets were poorly maintained and suffered from obvious neglect and indifference by the local government. The buildings were somewhat densely packed, and were mixed in tightly with a forest of old-growth trees the likes of which Nathan had never seen. The trees sported leaves of deep, vibrant colors that were a stark contrast to the ashen color of their trunks and lower branches.

Nathan was escorted by Sergeant Weatherly and a team of four Ghatazhak, which Lieutenant Telles had insisted on sending along on the voyage to Tanna, since he knew that the captain would be going to the surface. Nathan was sure that when he returned to Earth and the lieutenant learned of his little side trip, the Ghatazhak leader would be less than pleased.

"Afternoon," Nathan said to a youngman walking by him.

The young man stared at Nathan, confused by his strange language, and even more confused by the armed men escorting him. Nathan nodded politely, then returned his attention to the map on his data pad.

He continued walking, making several turns before finally arriving at his destination.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Sergeant Weatherly asked.

"The numbers on the building match," Nathan answered, "as does the street name carved into the sidewalk over there."

"Doesn't look like much," the sergeant commented. "You'd better let us check it out first, sir."

"You sure that's necessary, Sergeant? He's an old man, after all."

"My mother told me to take good care of you, Captain. You don't want me to get in trouble with my mother, do you, sir?"

Nathan smiled. "Of course not."

Sergeant Weatherly stepped up to the doorway and knocked several times. Shortly after, the door opened, slowly at first, then all the way.

"Sergeant Weatherly, right?" the old man inside said.

"Captain Dubnyk," the sergeant greeted.

"It's just Mister Dubnyk these days. I see you brought friends," he said, pointing at the Ghatazhak.

"I need to search your premises, Mister Dubnyk, before I can allow the captain to enter."

Nathan leaned out from behind the wall of Ghatazhak before him. "Hello, Mister Dubnyk."

"Captain Scott?" Mister Dubnyk relaxed a bit. "What a relief."

"Sir?"

"I saw all these armed men, and I thought I was about to be arrested for something."

"Why, are you guilty of something?" Sergeant Weatherly wondered as the Ghatazhak entered the premises and began their search.

"Not that I know of," Mister Dubnyk said, "but who can tell these days. I was unfamiliar with Tannan law to begin with, and they keep changing it. You just never know."

"The residence is clear, Sergeant," one of the Ghatazhak reported. "We will take up positions on all four sides of the building."

"We're good, Captain," the sergeant said.

"Good for what?" Mister Dubnyk wondered.

"I was wondering if I might come in and visit a while, Mister Dubnyk?"

"I suppose so." Mister Dubnyk turned and headed back inside, leaving the door open for the captain.

Nathan followed the old man inside, pausing a moment just inside the door to allow his eyes to adjust to the reduced lighting. The room was small, but not cramped. The decorations were sparse, with minimal furniture, none of which seemed to match.

"What brings you to my corner of the universe, Captain?"

"I had a meeting at the capital. I thought I might see how you were faring before I returned to my ship," Nathan explained.

"Forgive my sparse living conditions, Captain," Mister Dubnyk apologized as he took his seat. "I haven't had much time to accumulate many possessions."

"How are you getting by?" Nathan wondered.

"Not as well as on your ship, I imagine, but I seem to be managing. You'd be surprised at the appetite these people have for stories of old Earth and the days before the great plague."

"Is that how you are earning a living?"

"I don't know that I'd call it earning a living. Someone brings me something of value, such as a chair, or a plate, or some clothing, and I tell them stories. Luckily, they tend to bring food and drink more often than not. I even managed to trade ten hours of stories for some medical care from a local physician."

"I'm sorry that we could not set you up in better accommodations, Mister Dubnyk," Nathan apologized, "but trust me, you're much better off here than on the Aurora."

"Am I, Captain?" Mister Dubnyk questioned. "I heard that you managed to drive the Jung off the Earth as well. Is that true?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"I imagine the casualties must have been quite high."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Is that why you met with the leaders of Tanna, to request humanitarian aid?"

"Not exactly."

Mister Dubnyk thought for a moment, looking off to one side as he considered his words. "Did not the people of Earth bear the brunt of the Jung's wrath?"

"The people of Earth will survive, Mister Dubnyk. The assistance I sought today was of a more technical nature. However, I did not come here to discuss such things."

"Really. Then what did you come to discuss, Captain?" Mister Dubnyk looked at Nathan, one eyebrow raised in speculation.

"I'm not sure, really. I guess I just wanted to make sure you were behaving yourself," Nathan said in jest, hoping to ease the tension that he sensed in the old man.

"Now, Captain, what possible trouble could a feeble old man like myself cause?"

"You are a persuasive fellow in your own right, Mister Dubnyk."

"Perhaps."

"Besides, we never did establish your true identity."

Mister Dubnyk raised his hand, index finger extended. "Ah, but we did agree that my true identity was most likely irrelevant, given the amount of time passed, did we not?"

"So, you tell stories from Earth history from before the plague," Nathan said, changing the subject.

"Not just Earth history, Captain, but of all the core worlds. So much of it was lost. Everything was digital. I have been told that great efforts were made to commit to paper all that was deemed important to preserve before the electronic worlds that we had created began to crumble and fail. Unfortunately, the bulk of those efforts were committed to the preservation of records of wealth, assets, and political controls and the like. History, art, science, religion, they all fell by the wayside in less than a single generation. Knowledge was passed down from father to son. Over the generations, that knowledge was diluted and twisted to the point of being unrecognizable. A pity, really, that humanity's greatest inventions were also the primary facilitators of its destruction."

"It seems that you are learning a bit of history from your clients as well," Nathan said.

"Yes, yes. There have been many exchanges of information over the weeks. The Tannans do love to converse. They have elevated it to an art form in their culture, you know."

"I did not. I believe it was much the same on Earth during the first few centuries."

"Yes, I imagine it was," Mister Dubnyk observed. "So, Captain, what trouble are you leading the Tannans into this time?"

"Leading them into?" Nathan asked.

"You have already made them a target for destruction. Should the Jung discover their insolence, their destruction is all but guaranteed."

"We will see to their protection, until such time as they can protect themselves," Nathan promised.

"Do you really believe you are capable of defending this world against an empire as vast as the Jung?" Mister Dubnyk laughed. "Come, now, Captain. Let us remain within the realm of the possible."

"I thought I was."

The old man squinted, leaning forward to better look into the eyes of his guest. "Do you have even the slightest inkling of the size and strength of your adversary?"

"We expect their numbers to be in the hundreds, perhaps as much as a thousand ships."

"Based on what?" Mister Dubnyk wondered. "Hard intelligence? I think not."

"Based on the numbers of ships they have used in the few actions we have witnessed, we can extrapolate a rough estimate..."

"Based on your own military strategies and tactics, no doubt." Mister Dubnyk smiled. "Tsk, tsk, Captain. Apples and oranges."

"We are not necessarily trying to defeat them, Mister Dubnyk," Nathan said. "We're only trying to keep them out of our own system."

"And this one, I should hope."

"And this one. The point is, we would settle for a truce that ensures the freedom of both Earth and Tanna."

"Surely you are not so naive, Captain. You have assisted in the liberation of worlds controlled by the Jung. Do you believe the Jung will not consider this an act of war? Do not deceive yourself, my young captain. A war is what you have

started, and a war is what you shall have to fight. A war that will likely be as destructive as the great plague itself, in the end."

"My intention was never to start a war, Mister Dubnyk, but if the Jung insist on fighting one, I am prepared to accommodate them. An unwilling participant I shall be, but a participant nonetheless."

Mister Dubnyk laughed again. "You would carry yourself well among the great conversationalists of this world, my dear captain. Quite well indeed!" He leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I only hope this world will survive long enough for you to do so. It would be quite entertaining."

"You are quite the pessimist, Mister Dubnyk," Nathan observed.

"On the contrary, Captain. I consider myself a realist, and a man of faith. I have complete faith that humankind will destroy itself again, and again. It is who we are, what we do. You, as a student of history, should be well aware of this tendency. Across the centuries, from the discovery of fire to the invention of your jump drive, the one thing that evolution has yet to erase from our DNA is the very thing that ensures our survival, and that is our ability to kill one another over the most inconsequential of matters."

"You paint a rather bleak picture of humanity."

"Humanity paints itself with these colors, the favorite of which is the color of blood. Just look at our scientific and technological history. Do you realize that the primary driving force behind human technological advancement has always been the desire to efficiently kill other humans?"

"You have a knack for seeing only that which you want to see, Mister Dubnyk," Nathan laughed.

"Perhaps, as this too is another one of humanity's flaws—the ability to convince ourselves that the untrue is, in fact, true."

"I'll give you that one," Nathan agreed. He looked at his watch. "I'm afraid my time is somewhat limited, Mister

Dubnyk," he said as he stood. "I am happy that you are surviving in relative comfort."

"I have lived far worse in my days," Mister Dubnyk said as he rose from his chair.

"If there is anything I can do for you, I'd be more than happy to..."

"There is one thing you can do for me, Captain," Mister Dubnyk said as he took the captain's hand to bid him farewell. He pulled the captain in closer to him without warning, looking him closely in the eyes. "Be careful as you wander through the universe, slaying windmills and tipping over castles..."

"...Windmills?" Nathan wondered, a puzzled look on his face as the old man continued to speak.

"...No man has the right to play God with the lives of trillions, Captain, no matter how righteous his cause. The worlds you disrupt are not your own, and the people you cause to suffer are not the ones to whom you answer. Remember that."

Nathan looked at the old man for a long moment, finally pulling his hand away. "Good luck to you, Mister Dubnyk. It is unlikely that our paths will cross again."

The old man watched the captain leave. "The universe is smaller than you know, Captain."

* * *

Lieutenant Telles climbed quickly up the boarding steps into the combat shuttle. He ducked and stepped through the hatch and turned aft. Before him were five of his men, all in full combat gear. The men were packed in tightly, shoulder to shoulder, with their primary weapons held against their chests. The converted utility shuttles had little interior space, due to the additional armor and the energy weapons turret installed topside.

The lieutenant grabbed the overhead rail and swung himself around, taking the last empty seat next to Master Sergeant Jahal.

"Philadelphia?" the master sergeant asked.

"Yes," the lieutenant answered.

"Combat One, cleared for departure," the controller's voice crackled over their helmet comms.

"I knew it," the master sergeant said as the shuttle's crew chief closed the hatch and the shuttle began to roll.

"Combat One, rolling out," the copilot's voice responded.

"All the signs were there," the master sergeant continued. "Just yesterday, I said Philadelphia would be next, did I not?"

"You did." The lieutenant felt the artificial gravity generated by the Jar-Keurog's deck fade away as the shuttle exited the transfer airlock and rolled out onto the ramp.

"What's the situation, Lieutenant?" one of the other soldiers asked.

"Fifty, all with energy weapons."

"Combat One, departing ramp four," the copilot announced.

"Jung regulars?" the soldier asked as the shuttle fired its thrusters and lifted up from the deck.

"Philadelphia militia reports attackers are highly coordinated and very accurate in their fire. So, yes, the probability that they are Jung regulars is quite high this time."

The shuttle thrust forward, pitching down as it accelerated away from the Jar-Keurog, causing its occupants to sway in their seats in unison.

"What's our force strength going to be?" the master sergeant asked.

"Six and six," the lieutenant stated, "with ten on standby in a cargo shuttle overhead."

"Why not go in full force, scare the life out of them?" the soldier asked.

"Atmosphere in ten seconds, hang on," the copilot said over their helmet comms.

"It may be a diversion," the lieutenant explained, "to draw forces to one side of the planet."

The shuttle began a series of gentle bounces as it began to penetrate the upper layers of the Earth's atmosphere.

"You're worried about Europe, aren't you?" the master sergeant said, paying no mind to the increasing turbulence.

"It is most unstable," the lieutenant said. "Easy prey. If the Jung were to recapture Europe and recondition even a fraction of its population, we would be facing a global civil war." The lieutenant looked at the master sergeant. "A scenario I wish to avoid, if possible."

"If these Terrans would learn to fight, this would already be over," one of the Ghatazhak soldiers stated.

The shuttle was now in constant vibration, bouncing up and down, and shifting from side to side as it plunged through the steadily thickening atmosphere. The interior of the shuttle took on an orange hue as the plasma wake formed along the shuttle's exterior thermal shields.

"They know how to fight," the lieutenant disagreed. "They just need to be pushed to the brink before they will act."

"They are like *gabbas*," another soldier said with disdain. "They blindly follow one another all the way to their graves."

"Their spirit has been broken, that is all," the master sergeant said.

"The Terrans are far stronger than you think," the lieutenant said. "Never have I seen a people so determined to control their own destiny."

"Freedom is a myth," the soldier argued as the turbulence faded into a more intermittent bounce and sway. "It comes in bits and pieces for which you must succumb to the will of those in charge. They are unwilling to bear the sacrifices that true freedom requires."

The lieutenant looked at his soldier. "No man chooses to make the sacrifices of which you speak without necessity. Prove such necessity, and they shall join ranks and follow, all the way to the grave, as you so eloquently stated, with pride and passion. You shall see."

"I hope you are correct, sir," the soldier stated. "It would be nice to know that these Terrans are worthy of our lives."

"Were they not, Casimir would not have bound us to them," the lieutenant said.

"*Two minutes,*" the copilot called out over their helmet comms.

Lieutenant Telles reached up and flipped down the view screen built into the overhead. On the screen, he could see the scans of the target area. "Pilot, put us down on the southeast corner, near the park," he ordered.

"Copy that," the pilot answered.

"Two Leader, One Leader. Insert between the militia headquarters and the city hall building, northwest of the park. We will attempt to drive the hostiles into the park, where there is little cover."

"Two copies," the leader of the second Ghatazhak unit answered from the other shuttle.

"*One minute,*" the copilot called out.

"Gentlemen," the lieutenant said, as he calmly checked his weapon, then activated its power cell. He touched the control on the side of his helmet, causing his visor to drop down. The inside of the visor lit up with the various tactical data readouts that displayed along either side of the visor. He briefly scanned the display. All his systems were ready, all except for the laser turret stored in the right upper side of his combat pack, which would be deployed later.

"*Thirty seconds,*" the copilot announced.

The lieutenant's visor began to display details of the landing area below them. One by one, icons representing both friendlies and hostiles began appearing. They were clustered rather tightly together, as the shuttle was still more than a kilometer away, but they were beginning to separate as they grew closer.

"Stand ready," the shuttle's crew chief ordered as the walls on either side of the shuttle's passenger compartment slid aft.

The outside air came rushing in with great force as the shuttle's engines screamed. The lieutenant could feel the heat, smell the exhaust, as the combat shuttle came to a hover ten meters above the streets of Philadelphia. The targets on his visor were now separated and easily distinguishable. The shuttle rocked violently as two Jung energy bolts slammed into its armored sides. "Sinnott, Arguar, to the east. Lewis, Daly, to the west," the lieutenant instructed as another Jung energy blast came through the starboard opening and slammed into the ceiling of their shuttle, sending sparks and pieces of molten metal in all directions. "Go!" the lieutenant ordered.

Two Ghatazhak soldiers jumped out of either side of the hovering shuttle, weapons firing as they fell the ten meters to the ground. Lieutenant Telles followed his master sergeant out the starboard side of the shuttle next. He felt the tubules in his undergarment squeeze around his ankles, knees, hips, and lower back as he landed in a crouch on the street below. Master Sergeant Jahal's laser turret had already deployed and was firing at targets to their left as the master sergeant fired his primary weapon to his right. The lieutenant spun around, first left then right, allowing his tactical systems to display all the targets in the area on the inside of his visor for his brain to register. "Concentrate your fire there," he ordered the master sergeant, pointing to a group of four Jung soldiers hiding inside a store front. "Leave them no walls to hide behind. I will take the targets to our left. All units, slave your turrets to your primary gun sights. ID targets as hostile before you terminate."

Master Sergeant Jahal's laser turret blasted away at the store front, reducing its face to a pile of rubble. The Jung inside, now with no protection, were easy prey to the master sergeant's primary weapon, which he unleashed without hesitation.

Lieutenant Telles did much the same in the opposite direction, as several energy bolts slammed into his left thigh

and left chest armor. Although he could feel the heat of the energy, the armor did its job.

"Are you noticing a distinct shortage of red icons in the area?" the master sergeant wondered.

"Indeed," the lieutenant agreed as he charged forward, both his primary weapon and laser turret still firing.

"Lewis is down!" Sergeant Daly's voice called over the lieutenant's helmet comms. "He's not moving!"

"Sinnott, Arguar, move to support," Lieutenant Telles ordered.

"Negative, Lieutenant," Daly said. *"He's dead. I'll rendezvous with Sinnott and Arguar."*

"Copy that," the lieutenant responded.

"Lieutenant, I'm losing targets all over the place," the master sergeant exclaimed. "Are we kicking ass, or is my system malfunctioning?"

"Two Leader, One. What's your kill count?" the lieutenant asked over the comms.

"One, Two, kill count is six, now seven."

"We have nine," the lieutenant answered, a puzzled look on his face. "All units, hold fire one!"

Master Sergeant Jahal ceased fire, ducking down behind a damaged vehicle in the street.

Lieutenant Telles watched his data display as he slowly panned his head from left to right. One by one, the red icons that indicated enemy targets were disappearing from his display.

"What the hell, lieutenant?" the master sergeant exclaimed. "Are they jamming our sensors or something?"

"Is that even possible?" the lieutenant wondered.

"One Leader, One Three. Two Jung just dropped down through a hole in the street. Believe they have gone underground. Shall we pursue?"

The lieutenant looked down at the street around him, noticing a heavy iron disk in the road. "Negative, do not pursue."

"They're getting away, sir!"

"All units, One Leader. Do not pursue targets escaping underground. It is a trap. Secure the area and remain vigilant." Lieutenant Telles turned toward his sergeant. "Jahal, round up some locals and put them to work. I want every one of these holes covered with something heavy so that the enemy cannot surface again and take us by surprise."

"Yes, sir."

"Three Leader, One Leader. Put down in the park and secure a one kilometer area," the lieutenant ordered. "I want sensors in the underground sewer system."

"One, Three copies. Descending now."

"Daly, evac Lewis's body on the cargo shuttle."

"This was a wasted effort," Master Sergeant Jahal said.

"Indeed it was," the lieutenant agreed. "They know how long it takes us to respond. They will continue these hit and run tactics, making us appear useless to the Terrans. They will twist this and use it as propaganda for their recruitment efforts."

"And more of us will fall in the process, until there are too few of us left to matter," the master sergeant added.

"No," the lieutenant disagreed. "Eventually, we shall have our jump drives, and we shall appear without warning, catching them off guard." The lieutenant sighed. "Meanwhile, find me someone in authority so that we can see that the fool restricts access to these underground passages."

* * *

"My people are installing encoded transponders on all of the captured Jung shuttles and fighters, so that we can tell them apart from actual Jung forces in the future," Garrett explained.

"How many pilots did you end up with?" Nathan asked from his chair at the head of the command briefing room's massive conference table.

"Twenty-seven in total. However, none of them have any combat training. They are mostly shuttle pilots, with a few of them having experience in larger interplanetary cargo ships as well."

"That's barely enough to utilize the shuttles on the Jar-Keurog," Major Prechitt pointed out.

"There was only enough time to draw from the cities near the spaceport," Garrett said. "A call has gone out across my homeworld for more specialized volunteers, including additional pilots. I expect the next group should provide you with the pilots you need to get all the captured Jung spacecraft into operation."

"Captain, one of the factors limiting the number of volunteers we've been able to take on from Earth is the lack of accommodations," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic explained. "If the Tannan pilots can get the Jung shuttles in operation, we could use them to ferry workers to and from the surface in shifts, allowing them to be quartered and fed on the surface instead of on board."

"We already have the food on the Jar-Keurog," Nathan reminded him. "You yourself said that they were stocked to support a crew of well over a thousand for years on end."

"That's true."

"The same cannot be said on the surface," Nathan reminded him. "Food and water are in short supply down there."

"It still would be easier to move the supplies to the surface so that we can feed and quarter them there."

"Do not forget, captain, that much of the Jar-Keurog still must have pressure restored. We currently are only able to quarter about four hundred at best."

"What about propellant usage?" Cameron wondered.

"The Jar-Keurog has ample supply," Garrett assured her. "It will not be a problem."

"Very well," Nathan agreed. "We'll make arrangements to set up a temporary base of operations on the surface."

Nathan turned to Lieutenant Montgomery. "How are things going in fabrication, Lieutenant?"

"The Aurora and the Celestia now have two sets of fabricators each. In two days, the Aurora's fabricators will complete the third and fourth fabricator sets for the Jar-Keurog."

"When will we be able to access our fabricators?" Vladimir wondered.

"In two days, we shall start production of the mini-jump drives to be used by the Ghatazhak combat shuttles," Lieutenant Montgomery explained. "That will take an additional two weeks to complete."

Vladimir rolled his eyes and sighed.

"We are using the fabricators on the Celestia to speed up the completion of the jump field generators," Abby explained. "I am confident that we will be able to make our first jump test in approximately two weeks' time."

Nathan smiled. "That's excellent news, Doctor." Abby nodded, smiling as well. It was the first time that Nathan had seen her smile since they had first learned that the Jung had invaded Earth. "How long until the Earth gets their fabricators?" Nathan asked, turning his attention back to the lieutenant.

"In approximately twenty days," the lieutenant answered. "That is also when we shall begin production of the various energy weapons to be installed in the Aurora and the Celestia."

"Will we have enough time to install them?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered.

"The laser turrets use approximately the same amount of power as the mini-rail guns," Vladimir explained, "so the power distribution system is already in place, as are all of the elevation and retraction systems and bay doors on both ships. It should not take long to install and test fire the weapons as they are produced."

"How are we doing on resources for the fabricators?" Nathan asked.

"We have sufficient supplies for a few weeks," Lieutenant Montgomery said, "but we will need to increase our salvage operations if we are to keep up with demand as the number of fabricators in operation increases."

"Captain, on your next trip to Tanna, perhaps you can make room in your hangar bay for a few of our large cargo shuttles," Garret suggested. "Their design would make salvage of the Jung wreckage scattered about your system much easier, and my people have vast experience in their operation."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mister Munras," Nathan agreed.

"Captain, if I may?" Lieutenant Telles interrupted.

Nathan looked at the lieutenant.

"All these plans of weapons and logistics are all well and good, and obviously quite necessary. However, I believe you are overlooking a critical deficit in your preparations."

"That is?"

Lieutenant Telles looked at the captain, a puzzled look on his face. "Intelligence, or more precisely your grave lack thereof. You possess shockingly little of it, and that which you do possess is inaccurate at best."

"He's right," Jessica's voice said from her bed in recovery over the view screen on the wall. "The gunboats we encountered on our first jump had antimatter reactors. Every gunboat we've seen since had fusion reactors. We've seen Jung ships both with and without shields. We've seen energy weapons on their troops, and then on their fighters, but not on any of their ships. What if their battle platforms do have them? And now we learn that they have ships that can go twenty times the speed of light, when all along we thought they could only do ten? Lieutenant Telles is right, Captain. We don't know squat about the Jung. And if we don't know their capabilities, how are we supposed to prepare ourselves to fight them?"

"What would you have us do, Lieutenant Commander?" Nathan wondered. "We only have one jump ship at the

moment, and one crew to fly her, and they're doing so practically around the clock."

"Trying to find the dreaded battle platform," Lieutenant Telles said. "And when they do, suppose they are headed this direction as well. Will knowing this significantly change your plans? You already know that you must be prepared to defend your system at a moment's notice. Perhaps you might be better served having the Falcon determine the location of the Jung homeworld?"

"To what end?" Nathan asked.

"To deliver a stern message in the form of massive destruction," Lieutenant Telles insisted. "To show them that the threat of retaliation exists, and should be greatly feared. Unless you do so, they will continue to send forces, and in ever increasing numbers. Eventually, you will be forced to retreat. Most likely, all the way back to Takara, where you will draw all the people of the Pentaurus cluster into your war, the result of which will be suffering on a scale you cannot begin to imagine." Lieutenant Telles leaned forward. "The reason that wars cause so much death and destruction is that the men who command over such wars are generally unwilling to commit all their might to the complete destruction of their enemy. Caius knew this. It is the reason that the Ghatazhak exist."

"So, you suggest that we glass the Jung homeworld," Nathan said. "And what of the hundreds of ships still out there? Will they suddenly surrender, or will they seek revenge?"

"I do not suggest that you destroy only their homeworld, Captain. I suggest you systematically destroy every Jung stronghold you can find, and as quickly as possible. Bring them to their knees with such rapidity as to cause them to beg for mercy."

"And become as bad as the Jung?" Nathan wondered. "Is that what you would have us do?"

"If you are unwilling to cross that line, then you have already lost," Lieutenant Telles insisted, "for the Jung live on

that side of the line.”

Nathan looked around the room at the faces of his staff. He could see the shock on some of their faces at Lieutenant Telles’s words. He could also see a glimmer of agreement with his sediments. “I appreciate your candor, Lieutenant. However, I think we should focus our attention on more immediate matters. We can debate the merits of genocide at a later date.”

“Of course, Captain,” the lieutenant agreed calmly.

“Lieutenant Commander Nash, I would appreciate recommendations on ways to improve both the accuracy and the level of our intelligence about the Jung and their capabilities. Give me something that I can actually put into motion, and I shall do so.” Nathan looked at the time display on the wall. “That will have to do for now, everyone. I have a meeting on the surface in less than an hour.”

* * *

Commander Dumar stood by and watched as the old Palean fighters were unloaded from the Takaran jump-enabled cargo ship now docked within the Karuzara asteroid facility.

“Are you kidding me?” the newly hired Corinairan mechanic exclaimed. “These things are ancient.”

“They are a sound design,” Commander Dumar insisted.

“They look like they’ve been sitting in the desert for a hundred years!” the mechanic said in his Corinairan brogue.

“That is because they have been,” the commander told him.

The mechanic looked at the commander, unsure of how to respond.

“How many of them did they stick you with?”

“One hundred and seven vessels.”

“And how many of them are complete?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“I sure hope you didn’t pay much for them,” the mechanic said. “They won’t be worth much as scrap, I can

tell you that much right now.”

Commander Dumar turned toward the Corinairan. “You and your men are going to fix them and make them space-worthy again, Mister Dunnagun.”

The Corinairan laughed. “And exactly how many of them do you expect me to make fly?”

“All of them, hopefully.”

“And how many years did you say I had to complete this impossible task?”

“Months, Mister Dunnagun,” Commander Dumar responded. “Four of them, to be precise.”

Mister Dunnagun looked at the commander. “Excuse me, sir, no disrespect intended and all, but you’re quite mad, really.” Mister Dunnagun looked at the next fighter as it was lowered to the deck by the gantry crane. “Oh, my,” he said as he noticed that the fighter was in even worse condition than the previous ones. “I suppose the bottoms of Corinairan lads will be warming the seats of these buckets?”

“Most likely, yes,” Commander Dumar admitted.

“Heaven help them,” Mister Dunnagun exclaimed as he walked toward the row of broken-down fighters. “Heaven help us all.”

* * *

“You should have seen his face,” Vladimir said in between bites. “He was sure the airlock door was going to cut the tail end off of his ships.”

Nathan picked at his food as he sat at the table in the captain’s mess, across from his friend. “I was surprised they managed to fit all four of them inside. I thought for sure we were going to have to jump back to Earth with their tails sticking out onto the flight apron.”

“I still think we could have brought two more along by parking them outside,” Vladimir insisted.

“Too risky.”

“*Da*, maybe,” Vladimir agreed. “How long until we get home?”

"We're only four hours into the first recharge, so just over a day," Nathan said. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to get started transferring two of our quad rail guns to the Celestia so I can get Cameron off my back."

"Yeah, she's not too happy about melting down her only weapon," Nathan said.

"I am surprised you are not eating in your ready room."

"Mister Willard is doing fine. This is his second trip to Tanna, you know."

"What?"

"You didn't know he had the conn on the previous trip?"

"No, I did not. Then why were you not at breakfast on those days?"

Nathan smiled. "I was in my ready room, just in case."

"That explains all the drills," Vladimir said. "I thought the COB had lost his mind. So, how many Tannans did you squeeze in this time?"

"Just under three hundred. COB managed to score a bunch of cots from Earth. He set them up in the hold where the Ghatazhak had been before they moved to the Jar-Keurog."

"Good thinking. You know, the food has gotten much better in your mess since we got back," Vladimir said as he devoured his waffles.

"The cook has been practicing Earth dishes a lot since my father sent up some staples."

"Where did he get them?" Vladimir wondered. "I thought there was a food shortage."

"Apparently not in the NAU capitol complex."

Vladimir looked at Nathan's plate, which his friend had only picked at. "Is that why you are not eating? You feel guilty that you took food out of some poor starving government worker's mouth?"

"No, that's not it," Nathan said.

"Good. I thought I was going to have to slap you," Vladimir joked as he cleaned his plate. "Are you going to finish that?"

"No, go ahead," Nathan said, pushing his plate toward him.

"So, what is bothering you then?"

"I can't stop thinking about what Telles said a few days ago."

"About using excessive force?" Vladimir wondered, his mouth full. "He is Ghatazhak. Excessive force is all they know."

"Maybe, but part of me wonders if he is right."

"Of course he is right," Vladimir said. "He may be a killing machine, but he is a very intelligent killing machine."

"Then you agree with him?" Nathan asked, a bit surprised by his friend's attitude. "You think we should unleash a swarm of KKV's and wipe out the Jung once and for all?"

"I did not say that," Vladimir corrected. "I said I agreed with what he was saying. You know, about why war causes so much death and destruction and such."

"Then you don't think I should wipe them out?"

"Of course not. Nathan, you misunderstood him. He meant that if you are not willing to do what is necessary, you should not start a war. We have a saying in Russian. 'Do not pull your gun, unless you are ready to kill.'"

Nathan looked confused.

Vladimir shook his head. "You do not understand. That is because you are the son of a politician. You see war as a way to force your opponent to do as you wish. A war is a fight to the death. Your goal must be to defeat your enemy at all costs. Preferably, you keep the cost as low as possible, of course."

"So I just have to be willing to destroy the Jung?"

"*Nyet, nyet, nyet.*" Vladimir put down his utensils, despite the fact that there was still food on his plate. "He is saying that you must go after the Jung with the *intent* to completely destroy them, *and* you must be willing to do so, *if* they do not sue for peace before you reach that point."

Nathan shook his head in disbelief. "How did you get all that from what Telles said?"

"It is simple," Vladimir said, obviously pleased with himself. "I am a very smart man."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"These are not Jung regulars!" Master Sergeant Jahal exclaimed as he ducked back around the corner of the building to avoid the incoming fire. "Not all of them!"

"I have noticed," Lieutenant Telles agreed. "We need to get to the other side." The lieutenant looked upward, noticing that the building they were up against was only two stories in height. "High-low?"

"Let me guess, you're going high?"

"Correct. On three....." The lieutenant backed up several steps, taking care not to allow himself to get into the enemy's line of fire in the process.

"Two....."

Master Sergeant Jahal took a step backward, bringing his right foot back in preparation.

"One....."

Both men coiled their bodies in preparation to act.

"Go." Lieutenant Telles felt the hundreds of synthetic muscle tubules in his combat undergarment squeeze tightly as he jumped. His body shot upward, easily cresting the edge of the rooftop and landing cleanly.

Master Sergeant Jahal bolted forward, diving into a slide on his left side, facing the enemy position. His weapon held up in his right hand, the master sergeant opened fire at the same time as his lieutenant on the roof above. The master sergeant slid several meters before coming to a stop in the middle of the street.

Lieutenant Telles ceased fire but kept his weapon trained on the location of his enemy below. He watched out of the corner of his left eye as the master sergeant scrambled back to his feet and sprinted the remaining few meters to the far side of the street.

"Targets?" the master sergeant called over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

Telles glanced at the tactical display on the inside of his helmet visor. The red icons flashed several times, then disappeared. "Terminated." He scanned the area again. He could see several groups of red icons, all within a five hundred meter radius of him. He looked out at the streets of Miami below him. Smoke rose from several buildings as they burned out of control. Talon fighters streaked overhead, briefly spraying enemy targets with energy weapons fire before pitching up and climbing into the afternoon sky.

Miami was a mess. It was a city divided into multiple sections, each one held by a different boss. The legitimate reformation government had tried to take control of the area, but to no avail. The local bosses had managed to corral resources and control distribution to the point that the citizens of the once-thriving metropolis were forced to swear their loyalty in order to receive the most basic of needs. When the legitimate government of Miami did try to intervene, Jung operatives provided the additional firepower the bosses needed to repel the governmental raids. Usually, they had managed to do so without revealing their existence. Today had been different. The city had come better prepared this time, with sufficient numbers to easily take control of this corner of the city.

Two Kalibri airships streaked overhead. The lieutenant could see the legs of his men dangling from the open sides of the airships as they quickly descended, inserting more of his men on the far side of the engagement area.

"Four Leader, One," Telles called over his helmet comms. "Two groups of six putting down to your east and southeast. Squeeze the remaining combatants between you and the other units."

"Four copies. Terminate all."

"Negative, Four," Telles corrected. "I need a few prisoners to interrogate."

"Understood."

"Shall we join them, sir?" Master Sergeant Jahal asked over the comms.

Lieutenant Telles looked down from the rooftop at the master sergeant in the street below. "Affirmative."

"Are you coming down, or are you going to jump from rooftop to rooftop?"

The lieutenant quickly scanned the area once more. Satisfied that there were no targets in the vicinity that required his attention, he stepped off the edge of the roof and dropped down to the street below, landing in a crouch, his left palm on the ground and his right hand holding his primary weapon up and ready to fire.

"At least we arrived before everyone had run away this time," the master sergeant said as he approached the lieutenant.

"It would not have been so had the Miami security forces not notified us of the raid ahead of time," the lieutenant said.

They both turned their heads as the sounds of increased weapons fire sounded nearby.

"Shall we?" the master sergeant asked.

Both men set off toward the sound of weapons fire at a brisk jog, their weapons held up and ready for action. Lieutenant Telles watched his tactical display on the inside of his helmet visor as it received tactical information from all the Ghatazhak soldiers in the engagement area, giving him a complete, real-time picture of the situation. Red icons were disappearing one by one from his display as his men surrounded and subdued the enemy combatants. Moments later, the remaining red icons turned orange.

The lieutenant looked about as they continued jogging down the empty street. There were bodies everywhere. Dead combatants, Miami security forces, and several civilians. He noticed a young mother lying against the side of a building, the blank look of death on the faces of both her and the infant who lay on the ground beside her.

Master Sergeant Jahal noticed the look on his lieutenant's face as they came jogging around the corner of the next building and slowed their pace to a brisk walk.

Before them was a small parking lot, with several burning vehicles that had been hit by energy weapons fire, many with the bodies of their occupants inside. Ahead of them were ten enemy combatants, their weapons held high over their heads as they came out of their hiding places.

Ghatazhak soldiers quickly encircled them, shouting warnings and instructions to the surrendering combatants to throw down their weapons. One of the combatants hesitated to follow their instructions, and was quickly terminated by the Ghatazhak nearest him. The remaining men quickly dropped their weapons to the ground.

By the time the lieutenant and the master sergeant made it into the parking lot, all nine surviving prisoners were on their knees with their hands behind their heads, fingers interwoven, and feet crossed. More than twenty Ghatazhak soldiers surrounded them, all with weapons trained on the prisoners.

"It is a shame," the master sergeant said as they came to a halt and looked about. "All these people did not need to die."

The lieutenant ignored the master sergeant, continuing forward toward the prisoners. "Report."

"Nine prisoners for your interrogation, as ordered," the corporal answered.

"Very well," the lieutenant said as he examined the faces of the nine prisoners lined up on their knees before him. "Prepare them for transport back to the Jar-Keurog."

"Sir?" the corporal asked, appearing surprised.

The lieutenant noticed a change in the expressions of two of the prisoners kneeling next to one another. They had exchanged glances for only the briefest moment, but it had been more than enough to tell the lieutenant what he wished to know.

Lieutenant Telles walked up to one of the two prisoners who had exchanged glances. "Your tactics did not work today," he said calmly. "We arrived too quickly, and you were unable to make good your escape, in your usual, cowardly fashion."

The prisoner still said nothing, only continued looking at the ground before him.

Lieutenant Telles walked along the line of prisoners as he spoke, taking note of the civilians who were starting to come out of hiding in the periphery. "The Jung use you people as fodder for battle. They pump you full of promises of a better world, then they arm you and send you to face us... to be slaughtered. Then, while you are dying by the dozens, they vanish into the shadows like cowards." The lieutenant stopped, looking at the prisoners again. "You attack innocent women and children. You kill indiscriminately in the name of those who would enslave you for their own means. You die for men who call themselves warriors, yet they hide behind the lesser trained. You are cowards, all of you. You are not worthy of my blade." The lieutenant turned away from the prisoners to face his men. "When we were dispatched to this world to free it from the Jung, I thought we would find worthy adversaries. Thus far, I have not found a single warrior worthy of my blade. These Jung are a joke! How long must I search for a true warrior?"

The lieutenant watched as several of his men laughed at their leader's taunts. He glanced at his master sergeant, who had one eyebrow raised. He turned to face the gathering crowds huddled against the relative safety of nearby buildings. "The Jung would have you believe that they are your liberators!" he yelled at the crowds. "That life under Jung rule would be to your benefit! Yet they hide in the shadows while they send your men to their deaths! The Jung are lying to you! They slay your women and children in the streets while claiming to be your saviors! They strike fear in your hearts! Fear of us, fear of them, fear of death!

They do this so that you will not stand against them! But we are here! The Ghatazhak stand against the Jung in your stead! Against us, the Jung have no chance! They will fall!"

"The Jung number in the millions," one of the prisoners mumbled.

Lieutenant Telles spun around to face the prisoners as one of the two men who had exchanged glances earlier slowly raised his head.

"I see only tens of Ghatazhak," the prisoner added, his voice dripping with hatred.

Lieutenant Telles looked at the man. His face was rugged, his jaw line firm, his build healthy. "I see only two Jung," he told the prisoner, looking first at him and then at the prisoner beside him, with which the first prisoner had exchanged glances earlier. He looked at two of his men standing behind the row of kneeling prisoners. "Raise him to his feet."

The two Ghatazhak grabbed the outspoken prisoner's arms and picked him up so that he stood before the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Telles looked up at the prisoner, who was at least fifteen centimeters taller than him and of considerably greater mass. "Where are these millions of which you speak? Why is it they do nothing to take back a world that is so important to them?"

"They will come," the prisoner stated confidently. "And when they do, they shall crush you without mercy."

"In what, six months? A year? Five years? Surprising that an empire so powerful still moves so slowly across the stars," the lieutenant said.

"The distances between stars are vast," the prisoner said. "It takes time to traverse such distances. Everyone knows this. No one can get around this fact."

"These people did," Telles said. "They came to my world some nine hundred light years away... and in the blink of an eye, no less."

"Now who lies?" the prisoner exclaimed.

Lieutenant Telles stepped closer, looking up into the prisoner's eyes. "You are Jung, are you not?"

"I am," the prisoner stated proudly.

"I thought the Jung did not surrender?" the lieutenant taunted. "Apparently you are not very good at following orders."

"Or I had different orders," the Jung prisoner taunted in return.

"Oh, we shall learn of your orders, in due time."

"You will learn nothing from me," the Jung prisoner claimed with confidence.

"Most assuredly not," the lieutenant agreed. "However, we shall learn what we wish from your comrade next to you. Tell me, Jung, do you consider yourself superior to these Terrans whom you wish to subjugate?"

"Yes."

"And the Ghatazhak. Do you consider yourself superior to us as well?"

"Most definitely, yes," the Jung prisoner stated with conviction.

"Perhaps you would favor the opportunity to prove your claim?"

The Jung prisoner smiled. "Please."

"Then you shall have it," the lieutenant stated. He turned away and headed toward Master Sergeant Jahal, removing his helmet as he walked. "Unbind him!" he ordered.

One of the two Ghatazhak soldiers standing behind the Jung prisoner pulled out his knife and severed the binding around the Jung prisoner's wrists. The Jung prisoner pulled his hands apart, shaking off the binding and allowing it to fall to the ground. He looked around at the crowd of civilians gathering around them. They had already begun to move closer in fascination at the events playing out before them.

Lieutenant Telles tossed his helmet to one of his men standing nearby and began removing his forearm armor. He walked up to Master Sergeant Jahal and turned around.

"This is ill-advised, Lieutenant," the master sergeant said under his breath as he removed the lieutenant's combat pack.

Free from his pack, the lieutenant lifted the armor that covered his upper torso, handing it to the master sergeant as well. "A little faith in your leader, Master Sergeant," the lieutenant said as he bent over to remove the armor plating from his legs and hips.

The Jung prisoner stepped forward and removed his shirt, leaving him dressed in only his pants and boots.

Master Sergeant Jahal peered around from behind the lieutenant, looking at the man his leader was about to fight. "He is not a small man."

"You know what to do, Master Sergeant," the lieutenant said.

"Of course, sir."

"Do you always fight in sleepwear?" the Jung prisoner taunted.

"Always," the lieutenant responded without turning around. "Your knife, Master Sergeant."

"I assume this will be a fair fight?" the prisoner inquired.

"If you are asking if we will be equally armed, then the answer is yes," the lieutenant answered. A knife now in each hand, Lieutenant Telles turned around to face the Jung prisoner who now stood tall and proud not more than a few meters distant. The lieutenant wore only his skin-tight, black, combat undergarment, and his standard, lightweight, Ghatazhak combat boots. "I assume you know how to fight with a blade?" he asked as he tossed the knife in a lazy arc toward the prisoner.

The Jung soldier watched the knife as it slowly rotated in its arc toward him. He caught the knife by its handle, then smiled. "Yes."

The remaining Ghatazhak moved to form a loose circle around both the still kneeling prisoners, and the area in which their leader was about to face the outspoken Jung soldier. Civilians continued to move closer, although still

maintaining a safe distance behind the Ghatazhak, to better witness the impending combat.

Lieutenant Telles walked confidently toward him, as the prisoner crouched slightly and assumed a combat posture, knife held forward. "It has always puzzled me why men such as yourself are willing to fight their captors under such circumstances, when surely you know that despite the outcome of the battle, you shall not survive."

"For the satisfaction of dying with the knowledge that I have taken one more of my enemy with me." The Jung lunged at the approaching lieutenant.

Lieutenant Telles dodged his opponent's feeble probe by stepping to his left and twisting slightly. The Jung soldier swung his knife to his right, hoping to catch the lieutenant, but his opponent had already taken an extra step backward to remain out of reach.

"That's it, assess my capabilities," the lieutenant stated calmly.

The Jung soldier spun around quickly to his left, swinging his knife around gracefully as he crouched down further in the hopes of catching the lieutenant's legs with his blade. The lieutenant jumped slightly upward, tucking his legs up under him tightly as the Jung soldier's bladed swept underneath his feet. As he came down, he tucked and rolled, coming under the Jung's reversal as the prisoner tried to sweep his blade back high.

"Your movements suggest a lack of understanding of the laws of momentum, as well as its advantages," the lieutenant stated confidently. "However, they are quite unpredictable in their pattern, I will give you that."

"You like to talk, Ghatazhak," the Jung soldier huffed. "I suspect you will find it hard to do so when your throat is opened."

The Jung soldier grinned confidently, then launched a flurry of attacks, jabbing and slicing at his opponent as he twisted about.

Lieutenant Telles twisted and dodged, occasionally parrying his attackers jabs with what appeared to be desperate, last second blocks.

Finally, the Jung soldier's foot found the lieutenant's lower abdomen, causing him to keel over and expel a tremendous amount of air from his lungs. The Jung's knee came next, finding the lieutenant's nose and causing his head to whip up and back, sending him tumbling backwards.

The lieutenant managed to turn his tumble into a coordinated roll, coming to his feet at the end a few meters further away than before. He put his hand to his nose, then pulled it away to look at it. His fingers were covered with blood. "Well done, Jung. I gave you an opportunity, and you took it." The lieutenant assumed his combat stance again.

"Give me another and I shall end you," the Jung soldier boasted.

"I shall try to accommodate," the lieutenant said as he carefully advanced.

The Jung soldier took note of the lieutenant's more careful approach, drawing additional confidence at his opponent's hesitations. He glanced at Master Sergeant Jahal, reading the concern in his eyes for his commanding officer.

The Jung soldier smiled, then launched into another flurry of moves, none of which he had used to this point. Again, the lieutenant dodged, twisted, and blocked. This time, however, the Jung soldier's attack came ever closer to ending his opponent's life with each movement of his blade. He knew it was only a matter of time.

The flurry ended, and the two men danced around one another again.

"You are fast, especially for an officer," the Jung soldier admitted. "But you lack the necessary endurance to see this through to its inevitable conclusion."

"Perhaps," the lieutenant said. "Continue, Jung," he said, signaling his opponent to try again.

The Jung soldier drove forward, step by step, swinging his knife from side to side, driving the lieutenant backward. The lieutenant tripped and fell onto his back. The Jung soldier dove forward, coming down on his knees as he drove his knife downward at his opponent.

The lieutenant rolled to his left, barely escaping the Jung's descending blade, coming back up to his feet in sloppy fashion.

The Jung soldier rose slowly to his feet once more, a maniacal grin on his face, sweat dripping from his body in the afternoon heat. "You are losing your edge, Ghatazhak."

Lieutenant Telles hung his head down, shaking it lazily from side to side in contempt. "I grow tired of this game."

"I knew it," the Jung prisoner said with a smile. "Although sooner than I had hoped."

Lieutenant Telles looked up at his opponent again. "Do not confuse boredom with fatigue." He signaled his opponent once more. "Let us end this game."

The Jung roared as he charged his opponent. The lieutenant leapt upward, clearing his attacker as he passed under him. The lieutenant spun around in midair, his blade slicing cleanly across the Jung soldier's right side, neatly carving a large chunk of his skin and muscle from his backside.

The Jung soldier screamed out in anguish as blood poured from his open wound. He spun around quickly, swinging his knife with wild abandon. His knife passed well short of the crouched lieutenant, who raised his knife and brought it down again sharply as the Jung soldier's left hand came around.

The Jung soldier again cried out in agony as his left hand came to rest on the ground in front of him. In a desperate attempt to strike an incapacitating blow against his opponent, the Jung soldier leapt upward into a spinning kick, hoping to catch the lieutenant in his face.

Lieutenant Telles leaned back in expert fashion, bringing his razor sharp blade up into the path of the Jung soldier's

foot, slicing deeply across the prisoner's muscular calf.

The Jung soldier fell to the ground in excruciating pain. Lieutenant Telles stepped over him. The Jung tried to raise his knife to swipe at the lieutenant's leg, but found his opponent's boot crushing his hand instead.

The Jung soldier cried out in pain once more, his knife falling from his crushed fingers.

Lieutenant Telles raised his foot and went down to one knee, straddling the wounded man. "What is your name?"

"Toran!" the man cried out in anguish. "Why do you ask?"

"You chose to stand and fight," Telles answered, "unlike your comrades, who run and hide when the Ghatazhak arrive."

The prisoner cursed his executioner in Jung, then spat in his face.

Lieutenant Telles pushed his knife deeply into the Jung soldier's abdomen, then pulled it upward several centimeters to open him up wide.

Another blood-curdling cry leapt from the Jung soldier's lips. Lieutenant Telles withdrew his knife, then stood and moved casually around the Jung soldier. He bent over at his head and grabbed the bleeding prisoner by his hair, lifting him up off the ground.

The Jung soldier screamed out in pain once more as the lieutenant bent down behind the prisoner.

"You fought bravely," the lieutenant whispered in the prisoner's ear. "Not well, but that was to be expected. However, you have now served your purpose, and for that, I thank you."

The lieutenant held his knife against the front left side of his opponent's neck, then pressed a small button on its handle. The Jung soldier's eyes went wide as he heard a high-pitched whine emanating from the lieutenant's weapon. The lieutenant pulled up hard on the Jung soldier's hair with his left hand, then drew his charged knife across the prisoner's neck, severing it cleanly from his body.

The lieutenant stood, holding the Jung soldier's head high as the prisoner's body fell to one side. Blood poured from the severed head, and pooled at the lieutenant's feet as it poured from the prisoner's headless corpse.

"This is what happens when you side with the Jung!" he announced triumphantly as he held his opponent's head over him. "The people of Earth shall remain free! Now and forever!" The lieutenant tossed the Jung prisoner's severed head aside, turned, and walked back to his sergeant.

"What shall we do with the remaining prisoners?" Master Sergeant Jahal asked as he handed his lieutenant his torso armor.

"Kill them where they kneel," he stated calmly as he donned his armor once more.

* * *

"Who is the fourth plate for?" Vladimir wondered as he took his seat at the table in the captain's mess.

Nathan moved past Vladimir and took his seat at the head of the table. "A surprise guest."

"Well, we know it's not you," Vladimir said as Cameron entered the room.

"What do you mean, it's not me?" Cameron wondered. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," Nathan said.

"Who else is coming?" Cameron asked as she sat down and also noticed the fourth place setting.

"You'll see in a minute."

"How do you like your new guns?" Vladimir wondered.

"Oh, I like them a lot," Cameron answered, her eyes wide. "Any time you'd like to get rid of some more of your weapons, we'll be happy to take them, Nathan."

"I bet," he said as he poured himself a glass of water.

The door opened again, revealing Jessica sitting in a wheelchair, a med-tech standing behind her.

"Hey!" Vladimir exclaimed with excitement. "Look who is finally out and about."

The med-tech wheeled Jessica in and rolled her to the far end of the table as Vladimir rose from his seat to help her to her chair.

"I can make it," she said, signaling Vladimir to back off. Jessica carefully rose from the wheelchair, using the edge of the table to steady herself, then sat down. The med-tech moved the wheelchair back out of the way into the corner of the room.

"I'll be back when you're ready to return, sir," the med-tech stated as he turned to exit.

"Thanks," Jessica told him.

Nathan nodded at the med-tech on his way out. He looked at his three friends, a smile on his face. "Now, this is more like it."

"We just need something to drink," Vladimir added.

"Not me, I'm still on pain meds," Jessica said.

"It's great to see you out of bed, though," Cameron told her.

"It's great to get out of that damned recovery room," Jessica said, "and away from Synda."

"I thought the two of you were becoming like sisters," Vladimir said.

"Don't get me wrong, she's nice enough. She just talks too damned much. She's always asking questions."

"Like what?" Nathan wondered.

"Stupid stuff, mostly. 'What was the academy like? What's it like to shoot an energy weapon? What's going to happen to me after I recover?'"

"You still don't believe she's a spy?" Nathan asked.

"You thought she was a spy?" Cameron asked, appearing surprised. "Just because she knew Tony?"

"That was part of it," Nathan said.

"That, and the fact that she was asking so many questions," Jessica said. "But a spy wouldn't ask so many questions, it's too obvious. A spy should do more listening than talking."

"Unless, of course, she is trying to remove suspicion by asking too many silly questions," Vladimir suggested.

"Trust me, she's no spy," Jessica insisted. "And if she is, all the Jung are going to get from her are some nanites. She's been cooped up in medical the entire time."

"How much longer until she can be sent back down to Earth?" Nathan wondered.

"Six to eight weeks, from what I heard Doctor Chen saying. They can't release her until she's fully recovered and no longer requires constant nanite reprogramming. She should be able to move around in a about a week, though."

"Has she asked about Tony?" Nathan wondered.

"Of course," Jessica said. "I lied to her and told her we got separated, landed apart, that I have no idea what happened to him. She talked about him for a while, but stopped after the first week or two. To be honest, I don't think they were ever that close of friends. Just someone she sparred with at the gym."

"So she won't need to remain in medical?" Cameron wondered.

"Apparently not," Jessica said.

"Where will she stay?"

"I'll speak with Mister Willard," Nathan said. "Maybe he can find something for her to do to keep her busy until she is cleared to leave the ship and return to Earth."

"How long are you going to keep calling him 'Mister Willard'?" Cameron asked. "Maybe we need to give him a rank, like you did with Marcus."

"I've been thinking about that," Nathan admitted. "We should probably give all the Corinairans official ranks within the EDF. The Takarans as well. Most of them have a rank within their own respective organizations, you know."

"Don't you dare make him outrank me," Jessica stated.

"He had far more time in service than any of us," Nathan pointed out.

"How long was he in?" Cameron wondered as the captain's personal cook began serving.

"He was about to finish his service," Nathan said, "so I'm guessing the better part of a decade."

"You're going to make him a commander, aren't you?" Jessica exclaimed as the cook put her food down in front of her.

"Makes sense, especially given that he's going to be my executive officer."

"Hell, I'll be your XO," Jessica said. "You can make me a commander as well."

"That would be fun," Nathan said. "I can't get you to stop calling me 'Skipper' as a lieutenant commander."

"Wasn't he an ensign when he mutinied?" Vladimir wondered.

"The only reason he was never promoted was because he wasn't Takaran," Nathan pointed out.

"That's right!" Jessica exclaimed. "He was a mutineer! Jesus, Nathan. You're going to make a mutineer your XO?"

"At least we know he has the guts to stand up and do the right thing," Nathan pointed out. "I'd rather have someone like that than a yes-man."

"I wasn't a yes-man," Cameron insisted.

"No, you weren't," Nathan agreed as he began eating.

"You were more like a 'Have you lost your mind' or a 'You can't do that' man..." Vladimir teased, "...I mean, woman."

"Oh, God, this is so much better than the chow in medical," Jessica exclaimed as she ate.

"So, tomorrow's the big day, huh, Commander?" Nathan asked.

Jessica looked at them. "What happens tomorrow?"

"We're performing our first test jump on the Celestia," Cameron explained between bites of her salad.

"Are you kidding? That's huge!" Jessica exclaimed. "Two jump ships? The Jung won't know what hit them."

"Even if all goes well tomorrow, we still have a long way to go before we can use the jump drive in combat," Cameron warned.

"Yeah, but we've still got six weeks before they get here," Jessica said.

"Forty-one days," Nathan corrected.

Jessica sneered at him. "That's still plenty of time to test the jump drive. Hell, you used it in combat in what, a week after the first jump test?"

"Something like that," Nathan agreed.

"You guys are installing more weapons on her, right?" Jessica asked.

"That's the plan," Cameron said.

"We've already installed two of our quads on the Celestia," Vladimir said.

"You gave up two of our quads?" Jessica said in dismay. "I love those things. They're like hammers."

"She needed to have some kind of projectile weapons," Nathan said.

"What else are you going to give her?"

"As soon as the Jar-Keurog completes the next batch of fabricators, she'll start to work on weapons," Nathan explained. "The first of which will be more plasma torpedo cannons."

"Sweet," Jessica said. "What else?"

"Laser turrets instead of mini-rail guns..."

"...And another plasma torpedo cannon to replace the one she melted," Vladimir interrupted.

Jessica smiled. "Yeah, I heard about that. Must've been embarrassing," she said to Cameron.

"Hey, we took him out, didn't we? That's our second kill. Not bad for a sub-light ship that's still incomplete and running a skeleton crew."

"Not bad at all," Nathan agreed.

"You know, I saw the video of Telles's little knife fight the other day," Jessica said, moving on. "It's all over the net."

"Disconcerting, to say the least," Cameron said. "I was afraid something like this was going to happen."

"The Ghatazhak had been responding to assistance requests several times a day for the past few weeks,"

Nathan explained.

"You're not defending the lieutenant's loss of control, are you?" Cameron wondered.

"Telles doesn't lose control, Cam," Jessica insisted.

"You're saying he cut off the man's head, and executed the remaining prisoners on purpose?"

"A psychological purpose, yes," Jessica insisted. "Sometimes how you kill an enemy is more important than just killing them."

"That's a frightening thought," Cameron said. "I'm not sure the general population of Earth are going to see it that way."

"It's not the general population that the demonstration was aimed at," Jessica told her.

"The number of incidents has dropped dramatically over the last few days," Nathan pointed out.

"You don't condone his actions, do you?" Cameron asked directly.

"I don't condemn them either," Nathan answered. "I'd prefer that he limit them, however."

"We're talking about Telles, you guys," Jessica reminded them. "The man knows what he's doing."

"Since when did you become a member of the Ghatazhak fan club?" Cameron wondered.

"Since I watched the video," she answered. "Did you see those moves? Come on."

A small laugh escaped Vladimir's lips. "He did put some incredible moves on the man."

"Listen to you two!" Cameron exclaimed.

"In a week the Ghatazhak will have jump shuttles," Nathan said, interrupting them. "They'll be able to respond more quickly and catch the Jung before they make their escape. That should reduce the number of incidents *and* decrease the need for such *demonstrations*."

Cameron didn't look convinced. "I hope you're right, Nathan."

* * *

Prince Casimir moved briskly across the great room to greet his old friend. "Max, it is good to see you," he said as he took his friend's hand. "I trust our plans are progressing well?"

"As well as can be expected," Max said.

"How was Palee?"

"It has been far less disturbed by the fall of the empire than most of the perimeter worlds."

"Not surprising, as the empire stopped patrolling that area years ago," Casimir said with pride, "thanks to the efforts of the Karuzari."

"Indeed."

"Did they have that which we sought?" the prince wondered.

"Yes, and then some. However, the 402s were in worse condition than expected."

"I feared as much. They were good ships in their day, but that day passed long ago."

"Their lack of demand has left them in a state of decay."

"How many were you able to procure?" Casimir wondered.

"More than one hundred airframes," Dumar stated, "fewer than a quarter of which are complete."

"Will it be enough?"

"It will have to be," Dumar said. "Fortunately, we have time to make them ready. In the meantime, have you given any more thought to possibly extending your contract with the jump cargo ship? Perhaps it would be wise to send supplies back to Sol, something to keep them going until we are able to get reinforcements to them."

"I was only able to utilize the cargo ship because they were already making a run to Palee. Her captain owed me a favor and hid our usage from the parliament's watchful eyes."

"I was wondering about that," Dumar said. "We cannot send them only the four oh twos. They will need technicians to maintain them, spare parts to keep them operational..."

"I have thought of that as well, my friend. Take a look at this," Casimir said, activating a hologram in the middle of the room.

"Darvano," Dumar said, recognizing the system in the hologram.

"Indeed. It seems that fate has once again smiled upon Captain Scott."

* * *

"Installation of the mini-jump drives has begun on the first two combat shuttles," Vladimir reported from his place at the command briefing room's conference table. "They should be operational in eight to ten days."

"Lieutenant Telles will be pleased to hear it," Nathan said. "How are things going on the Jar-Keurog, Lieutenant?" Nathan asked Lieutenant Montgomery.

"We shall complete production of the last fabrication sets in a few days," the lieutenant reported. "Four of them will be delivered to Earth. They will be installed in the Ark complex, so as to protect them from attack in the future."

"That's a good idea," Nathan agreed.

"It was President Scott's idea," the lieutenant admitted. "Once completed, the Jar-Keurog shall have twelve sets of fabricators. At that point, we shall begin the production of weapons for both the Celestia and the Aurora."

"What do the people of Earth plan to do with the fabricators?" Cameron asked.

"They plan to first double their capacity to eight sets, all housed within the Ark complex," Nathan explained. "Those fabricators will produce more fabricators, all of which will be delivered to various points all over the world, beginning with the areas that have the greatest needs."

"How are they deciding which areas should get the fabricators first?"

"They've managed to set up some sort of coalition to manage the fabricators. To be honest, it's not really our concern," Nathan said. "We delayed our own fabrication needs in order to produce four sets for the Earth to utilize. The only reason we did that was because the sooner the Earth gets back on its feet, the sooner they can start supporting us. I know it seems harsh, but that's the bottom line of it."

"The fabricators will undoubtedly be of great use to the people of Earth," Lieutenant Montgomery said, "provided that they are utilized wisely."

"That's the part that worries me most," Nathan admitted. "But enough of that." He turned to Doctor Sorenson, sitting next to Commander Taylor at the far end of the table. "Doctor, congratulations on the successful jump tests."

"Thank you, Captain."

"How soon will the Celestia's jump drive be fully operational?" Nathan asked.

"We've only completed a few test jumps thus far," Abby warned. "We still have a lot more to go. It will take at least a dozen jumps alone just to calibrate all the emitters, maybe more."

"I understand that, Doctor..."

"Then we still have to conduct a series of progressively longer test jumps to determine the maximum safe jump range..."

"Doctor, I don't care about how far the Celestia can jump right now. We're not sending her across the sector. I need her to be combat ready. That means jumps ranging from a few light seconds to a few light hours. I need accuracy, and quick execution, not maximum range and safety margins."

"Captain, you may remember that I voiced my objections to the continued use of the Aurora's jump drive in the beginning."

"I remember."

"I did not press the issue because the situation left us little choice. I believe this situation is different. There is still much about this variant of the jump drive concept that is unknown. This drive was developed with a much less conservative approach, making many assumptions about how components would fare over repeated use and at varying power levels."

"Which makes limiting the range at which you conduct your tests even more necessary," Nathan pointed out. "We cannot risk losing the Celestia at this point in time, Doctor, so please restrict your testing to the parameters I have already outlined."

"Yes, sir," Abby answered.

"I would also like you to install the same type of jump drive control system in the Celestia as the one used on board this ship."

"We were planning on doing just that, Captain."

"Excellent," Nathan said. "Major, what's the latest on the Falcon's search for that missing battle platform?"

"As you know, they found nothing along the expected route between Sol and Alpha Centauri. Since then, they have been searching parallel corridors, under the assumption that the battle platform may have taken a different route to avoid detection."

"What are the odds of finding them that way?" Nathan wondered.

"The logic was that it was likely that the battle platform would take a parallel course, well out of the way of other FTL ships that might be returning to Alpha Centauri," Cameron explained.

"What are the odds of two ships colliding in FTL that way?" Nathan asked.

"What were the odds of us coming out of the super-jump right in the middle of a battle?" Cameron said.

"Or in front of a black hole," Vladimir added.

"The battle platforms are quite large, aren't they?" Doctor Chen wondered.

"So is space," Abby stated. "This was one of the original arguments over use of the FTL drives, then again when we proposed the jump drive. If you look at the math, it is highly improbable..."

"Yet, it seems to continue to happen," Nathan said.

"Perhaps the Jung feel much the same about the mathematical probabilities?" Abby pointed out.

"Or they just don't want to risk losing a battle platform due to an accidental collision," Cameron said. "Those things have got to be difficult to build."

"Let's hope," Nathan said. "I'd hate to think that they're popping them out on a regular basis."

"The fact that they have two of them in the same region makes one wonder," Cameron pointed out.

"It also hints at the importance of the Sol system to the Jung," Lieutenant Telles added.

Nathan sighed, a look of concern on his face. "All we can do at this point is to prepare our ships and our crews as much as possible in the time available."

* * *

Lieutenant Telles swung himself around and down into his seat in the newly outfitted combat jump shuttle. "Have the locals been warned?" he asked master sergeant Jahal.

"Yes, sir. They'll disengage and take cover exactly one minute from now."

"Very well," the lieutenant said.

The shuttle's crew chief secured the door, then called to his pilot as he took his seat. "Secure, ready to drop."

"This new departure system is a big improvement," the lieutenant said. "It was an excellent idea, Master Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

A pair of doors, previously designed to cover a weapons bay, opened on the underside of the Jar-Keurog. As the boarding tunnels retracted, the two combat jump shuttles

fired their topside thrusters, pushing themselves out of the renovated bay, down and away from the battleship toward the Earth below. The two shuttles pitched downward slightly and turned, then fired their forward thrusters just enough to give them the speed they required in relation to the surface below. A moment later, both shuttles disappeared in a pair of blinding, blue-white flashes.

The shuttle suddenly rocked as it found itself falling through the Earth's atmosphere only fifty meters above the ground.

"Jump complete," the copilot's voice announced over the comms.

Lieutenant Telles could both feel and hear the shuttle's engines as they roared to full power to stop their descent.

"Fifteen seconds!" the shuttle's crew chief announced.

"Weapons hot," the lieutenant ordered, his finger flipping the charge lever on his own weapon. His visor came to life, suddenly displaying the location of all the enemy targets directly below them.

The doors on either side of the shuttle slid open, disappearing into the bulkheads. Air rushed in from outside, the smell of gunpowder, burning buildings, and explosive ordnance being brought into the interior of the shuttle.

"Stand ready!" the crew chief ordered.

The lieutenant and his Ghatazhak soldiers stood, each turning to face their assigned exits.

The shuttle's descent stopped, coming to a hover only ten meters above the surface.

"Five seconds!" the crew chief announced as the shuttle's two belly turrets opened fire, sweeping laser fire in a circular pattern around the ground below them, out to a distance of fifty meters.

The lieutenant could see the laser fire impacting targets in the distance below, tearing apart buildings, vehicles, and enemy combatants alike.

The laser fire suddenly ceased.

"Go!" the crew chief ordered.

The first two Ghatazhak soldiers jumped out of either side of the shuttle, falling to the ground below, weapons firing as they descended. Two more pairs followed them, with Lieutenant Telles and Master Sergeant Jahal stepping out of the shuttle last.

The lieutenant could see the light of the two shuttles as they jumped away as he landed. He immediately began picking off targets as they presented themselves, following his master sergeant toward their predetermined location in the engagement area. Red icons on the inside of his helmet visor flashed to indicate priority. Each time one of them did so, the lieutenant obediently brought his weapon to bear and fired, terminating the target and causing it to disappear from his visor's tactical display.

As instructed, the local security forces had kept their heads down and continued to do so for fear of getting caught in the tremendous amount of energy weapons fire being exchanged throughout the engagement area.

Lieutenant Telles and his master sergeant continued to charge ahead, firing at every target that presented itself, terminating each with a single bolt of energy from their weapons. The air was thick with the smell of burning flesh and clothing as they reached the perimeter of the drop zone and took cover against the wall of a partially destroyed building.

Lieutenant Telles took a moment to swing his head from side to side. There were no red icons on his visor display, only unmoving green targets that indicated local security forces as well as neutral civilians, along with the blue icons that represented the other Ghatazhak soldiers. "Report," he called out over comms.

"Two clear," the first team called out.

"Three clear." Each team continued calling out until all had reported in.

"One is clear," the lieutenant added to the list. "All units secure the perimeter until locals can take over."

Lieutenant Telles turned and looked at his master sergeant. The entire engagement had lasted less than a minute.

The master sergeant was grinning from ear to ear. "I suspect news of our quicker response times shall soon put an end to these attacks."

The lieutenant smiled back. "Let us hope."

* * *

"Thank you for inviting me to dine with you this evening, Captain," Garrett said as he took his seat at the opposite end of the table. "It is a great honor."

"We are pleased you could join us," Nathan said. "Briefings are generally so regimented, with a detailed agenda that must be followed. Informal discussions around the dinner table allow the conversation to flow where it may."

"True enough," Garrett agreed, "although I was not aware that you were following an agenda in any of the briefings that I attended."

"The captain tends to play fast and loose with the agendas from time to time," Cameron commented.

"I never was one to follow the rules very closely," Nathan admitted.

"Neither was I, Captain." Garrett turned to Jessica, sitting to the captain's left. "It is good to see you up and about as well, Lieutenant Commander. You have been infirmed for quite some time, have you not?"

"Fifty-eight days," she moaned, "but who's counting."

"Does this mean that you shall be returning to duty soon?"

"I still have a ways to go," she admitted. "Hell, I got tired just walking here from medical."

"At least you're walking now," Cameron said.

"What are we having for dinner?" Vladimir wondered.

"Salmon," Nathan answered, as his personal cook began to serve.

"I'm sure it will be most appetizing," Garrett said.

"How are things going on the Jar-Keurog?" Nathan wondered.

"Quite well, actually," Garrett answered. "Surely, the good lieutenant has kept you apprised?"

"I can only report accurately on matters of security, and Ghatazhak operations," Lieutenant Telles admitted.

"Of course," Garrett said as the cook placed his food in front of him. "Things are progressing much better now that we have enough manpower on board. We have all of the ship's systems under control and we have even managed to make some repairs along the way."

"How is production going?" Nathan asked.

"The fabricators are working perfectly," Garrett stated proudly. "As you know, we delivered the plasma torpedo cannons to both of your vessels just a few days ago."

"Yes, installation is well under way," Nathan said. "Those plasma torpedoes will give us some serious punch, especially if the new materials resolve the overheating problem just as Lieutenant Montgomery expects."

"I am sure that he is correct."

"Have you been able to keep up with the demand for materials for the fabricators?" Nathan asked.

"It has been challenging," Garrett admitted. "However, now that Senior Chief Taggart has gotten the mining and processing operations in full swing, we hope to build up a surplus of basic materials."

"What of the more specialized materials needed?" Cameron wondered.

"So far, we have been able to procure such materials from either the debris of the Jung ships that you destroyed, or by dismantling components of the Jar-Keurog."

"Just so long as you don't compromise the operation of the Jar-Keurog to any great extent," Nathan warned. "That

ship is our only spaceport. Without it, we would be at even greater disadvantage."

"Of course, of course. Do not worry, Captain."

"How are your men doing?" Nathan wondered.

"They are doing well. They are enjoying the new challenges, as well as the opportunity to study Jung technology without restriction. As I may have told you before, the Jung only allowed us to learn how to operate some basic systems, as well as to do general non-technical maintenance, in order to reduce their own workloads. We were never allowed to learn *how* everything worked, so as to prevent us from using their technology against them."

"I remember."

"Have you been able to gain access to their central databases?" Lieutenant Telles wondered.

"We have managed to access some of the lower-level databases, such as personnel files, maintenance records, supply manifests, and the like."

"What about the navigational databases?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, but much of it was damaged and is unreadable."

"Have you been able to determine the location of the Jung homeworld?" Lieutenant Telles asked.

"Unfortunately, no. However, we are attempting to repair the damaged files, but it may take some time."

"How much time?" the lieutenant wondered.

"Impossible to say," Garrett told him. "We may not be able to repair the damaged files at all, but we shall try." Garrett looked at the captain. "Is the location of the Jung homeworld a priority, Captain? If so, I can take men off other duties and assign them to the data recovery effort as well."

"I wouldn't call it a high priority," Nathan said, "at least not at this point. However, depending on how things go over the next few months, it may become so."

"Surely, you don't intend to attack the Jung homeworld directly?" Garrett wondered.

"There has been some discussion," Nathan admitted, "but no plans have been made to that end."

"I do not believe it would be a wise move."

"For what reason?" Lieutenant Telles asked directly, as if to challenge the Tannan leader.

"The Jung are a proud people, Lieutenant. Unlike your Ghatazhak, however, they are unable to keep their pride in check. If you attack their homeworld with any amount of success, which is unlikely, they will seek revenge. Furthermore, they will stop at nothing to obtain it, even if it means sacrificing themselves and all they hold dear in the process."

"Even their own civilization?" Nathan wondered.

"If necessary, yes. I know it seems quite illogical to us, Captain, but the Jung are not like us. They are human, yes. They share the same DNA as us, they spawn from the same primordial soup as us. They too, left Earth long ago for a chance to start anew, to build a world they could call their own. But, like so many other colonization missions of their day, their timing was unfortunate. The plague followed on their heels, and although it did not reach their world directly, it did rob them of the support they needed in order to establish their colony and assure its very survival."

"Then how did they survive?" Vladimir wondered.

"Legend has it that the captain of the ship that had delivered the original colonists took it upon himself to procure that which was needed from a colony on a nearby continent. At first, it was a single raid on an already failing settlement which offered little resistance, but more raids soon followed, and in time, the entire planet fell to their aggression. In the beginning, the raids were purely out of desperation. However, over the generations, it became a way of life—one that shaped the very essence of what it meant to be Jung. The desire to survive turned a once peaceful group of colonists into a ruthless dictatorship that eventually conquered the entire core. All because of the actions of one man, Captain Crispin Jung."

"Huh," Nathan mumbled. "And all this time I had thought the Jung were of Chinese descent."

"They are of no particular descent, Captain," Garrett corrected. "They are called Jung simply because it was the last name of the man who did what was necessary to save the original colonists. It was the sons of his sons who eventually led his people back out into space and established an empire."

"And the people just stood by and let it happen?" Cameron wondered in disbelief.

"That which they took from others was used to improve the quality of life on the Jung homeworld. It is said that the Jung homeworld is an amazing place, a virtual paradise."

"But one built at the expense of other worlds," Nathan said.

"Do not forget, Captain, life after the great plague was difficult at best, even three centuries later when it is believed that the descendants of Captain Jung first returned to space."

"If life was so hard, even three centuries later, how the hell did they get back into space?"

"It is said that the Jung homeworld is well protected from cosmic radiation, more so than even the Earth. Although no one knows for sure, many believe that they returned to space in the very same ship that had originally delivered them onto their world."

"They set off to conquer other worlds in a three hundred year-old colony ship?" Lieutenant Telles questioned, unable to believe what Garrett was suggesting. He turned to face Nathan. "They are braver than I have given them credit for, Captain."

"Or stupid," Vladimir said.

"Or desperate," Nathan added. "We ourselves have done many things out of sheer desperation that any sane person would not normally consider. Perhaps they were facing some other unforeseen cataclysm."

"The great plague," Garrett said. "It is told that because of their separation from the other worlds of the core, as well as their timing, that it took three hundred years for the

plague to reach them. No one knows how, no one is even sure that the plague *was* the event that pushed them back out into space. These theories are all based on what little history has made its way across the core over the last few centuries, most of which is unverifiable."

"It makes sense, though," Cameron said. "If their planet's magnetosphere extended far enough, say beyond a gravitationally stable point, that ship could have sat idle for quite some time with very little degradation."

"We were hoping that the Jar-Keurog's database might help us to better understand the Jung," Garrett said. "However, thus far, the contents only appear to pertain to matters of the ship's operation and performance, as well as its personnel."

"I'd be happy just knowing where the Jung homeworld is located," Nathan said.

"That is unlikely," Garrett warned.

"I thought you said that your people were trying to repair the navigational database?" Nathan questioned.

"Yes, but that is unlikely to reveal the location of the Jung homeworld. It has always been a closely guarded secret. What better way to prevent an attack than to keep your location a secret from all potential enemies."

"How the hell do you hide a planet?" Jessica wondered. "Especially a heavily populated one?"

"By reducing emissions and conquering any world within range that might someday seek you out," Lieutenant Telles said. "If the magnetic fields around the Jung homeworld are as powerful as believed, they might help to hide it from detection to some extent."

"But sooner or later, some ship would come across their world," Jessica argued.

"Even at current-day FTL speeds, it would take centuries to search out every possible system in the core."

"And the Jung homeworld is said to be somewhere in the fringe," Garrett reminded them, "the definition of which is somewhat vague."

"It would not take nearly as long using ships equipped with jump drives," Lieutenant Telles pointed out. "You could even create automated, jump-drive equipped drones that could carry out the search."

"Possibly," Nathan admitted.

"Did the original colonists come from Earth?" Cameron asked.

"Their point of departure has never been established, at least not to my knowledge."

"What are you thinking, Commander?" Nathan wondered.

"Sir, if that ship came from Earth, a record of its departure might be in the Ark's cores."

"But we don't know the name of the ship," Jessica said.

"But we do know the name of her captain," Cameron said.

"Those cores are on Takara," Nathan said, "we hope."

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby reported from the navigator's chair. "We're just within the inside edge of the Kuiper belt, sir."

"Accuracy?" Cameron asked.

"We came out seventy-five kilometers short of our intended transition point," Ensign Schenker reported.

"There is still some work to be done on calibrating the emitters," Abby explained. "We're still getting a fluctuation across the aft array, port side."

"Risks?"

"Until it is resolved, we will continue to come up short."

"Better than coming out long," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic stated.

"True."

"Rogue asteroid is dead ahead, sir," Luis announced from the tactical station.

"Charge tube one to ten percent and lock on target," Cameron ordered.

"Helm, give me one degree to starboard," Luis ordered.

"One degree starboard, aye," Mister Donahue answered from the helm.

"Tube one charged to ten percent," Luis reported. "Locked on target and ready to fire."

"Aft topside camera, view forward," Cameron ordered. The view screen changed, allowing them to see the length of the Celestia's topside, as if standing just forward of her four reactor domes. "Fire one."

A red-orange ball of plasma shot out from the Celestia's number one torpedo tube located in the leading edge of the port side of her main propulsion section. It streaked away at incredible speed, striking the massive chunk of rock and ice a few hundred kilometers away only a few seconds later. The asteroid split into several pieces, sending the chunks spiraling off on varying trajectories.

Cameron turned around and smiled at Ensign Delaveaga at the tactical console. "Feels good to have teeth again, doesn't it."

"These aren't teeth, sir, they're fangs," Luis responded with a grin.

"And that's only ten percent," Cameron added. "Pick your next target, Ensign. Tube two this time, ten percent power again. We'll repeat the process with all six tubes, working our way up until we're firing at full power."

"There won't be much left to shoot at by then," Luis boasted.

"There's more than enough out here for us to shoot at, Ensign. I want these cannons fully tested in both single-shot and rapid-fire modes, and at every possible power setting along the way."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered with enthusiasm.

* * *

"I apologize for being unable to report in person, Captain," Lieutenant Telles said over the view screen on the

captain's ready room wall. "Things have been rather busy since we started using the jump-enabled combat shuttles."

"I was under the assumption that once you demonstrated the ability to respond more rapidly, the number of attacks would decrease," Nathan said.

"And they have," the lieutenant assured him. "What has increased is the number of incidents to which we are now able to respond in a single day. A jump shuttle can deploy a team, return to base to load another team, and then deliver that team to another incident, all within ten minutes' time."

"Then this will help you to quell the Jung-sponsored terrorist attacks?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, it has already done just that. We are seeing a sharp decline in Jung activity. Next week, when combat jumpers three and four go into service, I expect that we will no longer be counting the number of incidents per day, but rather per week."

"That is good news," Nathan said.

"We are also seeing a sharp decrease in the use of Jung energy weapons," the lieutenant added. "This indicates a lesser involvement by the Jung."

"Do you think we may finally be rid of them?"

"I do not believe so, no," the lieutenant said. "I suspect that the remaining Jung on the surface have simply gone deeper underground, and are being far more careful in their actions. Some may even go into sleeper mode, carrying on their daily lives as just another citizen of Earth, waiting for the perfect opportunity."

"So it may be years before they are discovered?"

"They may never be discovered," the lieutenant warned.

"That's troubling," Nathan said.

"It should not be, Captain. Truth is, there have probably been Jung operatives on Earth since long before the initial invasion. Quite possibly, before the people of Earth even learned of the Jung's existence."

"You really think so?"

"Was not one of the missions of your special forces to infiltrate Jung-held worlds to collect intelligence?"

"Yeah, it was. I believe that's the assignment that Jessica was originally hoping for."

"Do you know if any EDF operatives were ever put into place on such worlds?"

"No, I don't."

"It might be worth investigating for the future," the lieutenant pointed out. "Such operatives could provide a wealth of information."

"Unfortunately, the EDF's operational database was destroyed when the EDF command center at Port-Gentil self-destructed. All that remains are personnel and inventory databases from what few facilities escaped total destruction during the Jung withdrawal."

"The Jung did not withdraw, Captain," the lieutenant corrected proudly.

"My apologies, Lieutenant. A poor choice of words on my part."

"Yes, sir. I understand that both ships are now fully armed with plasma torpedo cannons."

"Yes, we are."

"Based on the analysis of the Jung databases on the Jar-Keurog done thus far, Mister Munras and Lieutenant Montgomery believe that the plasma cannons should prove quite effective against the incoming Jung forces."

"Yes, I have read the lieutenant's report," Nathan said. "Listen, Lieutenant, I've been watching some of the news broadcasts from Earth lately, mostly the ones taken of you and your men in action. Although the more recent engagements have been admittedly less aggressive, they are still being interpreted as excessively violent by witnesses. They continue to compare them to the incident in Miami, and your little knife fight."

"Then it is having the desired effect," the lieutenant said, looking somewhat pleased with himself.

"So, you're saying it *was* intentional?"

"Of course, Captain," the lieutenant said. "A bit of psychological warfare, if you will."

"I see," Nathan said. "Perhaps next time you can get the same result without giving a weapon to a Jung prisoner? Seems like an unnecessary risk, doesn't it?"

"Trust me, Captain, I was never in any real danger. It was merely good practice. An emotional purging, one might say. The Ghatazhak do not do well when forced to restrain their aggressions. We are built to fight, and fight we must."

"Perhaps that is why Takaran society is so reluctant to accept you back into the general population," Nathan said.

"Their mistake is in the erroneous assumption that the Ghatazhak wish to rejoin their society," the lieutenant pointed out.

Nathan had no response.

"If there is nothing else, Captain?" the lieutenant asked after a few moments of silence.

"No, that will be all, Lieutenant." Nathan picked up his remote and shut off the view screen, ending the communication. He made a mental note of the lieutenant's last statement. Someday, when this was all over, he would have to tell Tug about it.

* * *

"I think it's safe to say we can discontinue the battle drills for the remainder of the day, Master Chief," Nathan said from his seat at the head of the command briefing room's conference table. "You know what they say about getting a good night's sleep before the big exam."

Master Chief Montrose looked confused. "No, sir, I don't."

"Commander, how is the Celestia?"

"Ready to go, sir," Commander Taylor answered. "All plasma cannons have been fully tested and can fire triple shots at full power. However, after that, they need a one-minute rest to cool down. Otherwise, we can fire repetitively, once every few seconds, for up to one minute before they need to cool."

"I don't suppose there's a way to keep them cool?" Nathan wondered.

"Not without extensive redesign of the torpedo compartments," Lieutenant Montgomery said.

"I don't think it will be a problem, sir," Luis pointed out. "If we rotate tubes, firing once every five seconds, you can fire continuously for nearly five minutes before you reach critical temperatures. At one shot every two seconds, you can fire continuously for nearly two minutes. That's a lot of firepower put onto a single target."

"Good point," Nathan agreed. "I still wouldn't mind solving the overheat problem completely someday."

"Of course, Captain."

"Mister Munras?"

"The Jar-Keurog is ready for action as well, Captain," Garrett reported. "We still have eight of our big rail guns. We can reach out and strike the smaller Jung ships long before they can strike back at us. Their battleships, however, will be a different story."

"We'll try our best to keep them busy," Nathan promised.

"That would be appreciated," Garrett said.

"Major?"

"We have sixteen Talons and twenty Eagles in operation. We also have another twenty Jung fighters manned by Tannan pilots, although I would hold them in reserve, as their combat flight training is somewhat limited," Major Prechitt explained.

"How are the EDF pilots getting along with your men, Major?" Nathan asked.

"Quite well, actually. However, the EDF pilots insisted that we all have 'call signs'. Apparently it is a Terran military aviation tradition dating back to long before the great plague. It has taken some getting used to, but in the interests of building better unit cohesiveness, my men have adapted."

Nathan smiled. "What's your call sign, Major?"

"Preacher," the Major said, looking less than excited about the name.

"Have the Tannan pilots also taken call signs?" Nathan wondered.

"Yes," the major answered. "However, I'm not sure that they understand what some of them actually mean."

Nathan turned toward Lieutenant Telles. "Lieutenant?"

"Of the remaining seventy-two Ghatazhak, I have assigned sixteen each to both the Aurora and the Celestia, in order to defend against any boarding attempts. The remaining forty Ghatazhak shall remain on board the Jar-Keurog for the same reason."

"Let's hope that the Jung operatives still on Earth do not decide to attack surface targets at the same time," Nathan said.

"If they do, it would be best to let the local security forces deal with it as best they can," Lieutenant Telles insisted, "at least until the battle has concluded."

"Doctor Sorenson?" Nathan said, turning toward Abby.

"The Celestia's jump drive has been fully tested up to a jump range of one light month," Abby reported. "Anything longer would be risky at this point."

"How about repeated jumps of a single light month, using fully charged energy banks?" Nathan wondered.

"We have not yet charged all of the Celestia's energy banks. It would be best to restrict operations to the first two cells."

"So once the energy in those two cells is used up, they can no longer jump?"

"Not until they recharge those two cells, which should only take about ten minutes."

"So, if they had to escape, they could?"

"Yes, sir," Abby answered.

"Doctor Chen?"

"We've set up a makeshift sickbay on the Celestia using equipment and supplies found on the Jar-Keurog. They'll be able to handle ten or twenty casualties, but any more than

that will need to be transferred back to us. Also, any patients requiring surgical intervention will need to be transferred back here as well."

"The first two jump-equipped cargo shuttles just finished their trials this morning, Captain," Major Prechitt added. "We're currently converting one of them into a medevac shuttle for now. The second one will remain in utility configuration."

"That's good thinking..."

Nathan was interrupted by the intercom. "*Captain, Comms. Flash traffic from the Falcon,*" Naralena announced over the open intercom built into the conference table.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"Falcon reports they've located the missing battle platform, sir. They're headed for Sol. Thirty-nine days out at a speed of twenty light."

"Understood." Nathan said nothing as he turned off the intercom.

"Captain, if the battle platforms can do twenty light..." Cameron began.

"I know," Nathan interrupted. "We've got an even bigger problem than we thought."

"Even if we manage to somehow defeat the first battle platform, there's another parked less than two months away," Cameron added.

"There's nothing we can do about that right now," Nathan said. He looked around the conference table, examining each and every one of their faces. These people were his family. "The Jung fleet should arrive tomorrow, somewhere between fourteen and fifteen hundred hours, ship time. It's a pretty safe bet that they know we're waiting for them. With news of the battle platform being only a month away, it is imperative that we try to keep the damage to our ships at an absolute minimum, as we will not have much time to make repairs before the next attack. That means we jump in, hit hard, and jump out again, as quickly as possible, and I mean quickly. We must strike from

varying angles. We must remain unpredictable. We must make them fight our fight, not theirs."

"And what is 'their' fight?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic wondered.

"They will come in with maximum force," Garrett explained. "They will pay little attention to defending vessels, instead concentrating on their primary target, which in this case is most likely the Earth, or more accurately, its population."

"We need to thin their forces out before they arrive," Major Prechitt suggested.

"He's right," Cameron agreed.

"Not necessarily," Lieutenant Telles argued. "It matters not whether you engage them here or outside the system. The most you can hope to achieve is to take out two, maybe three ships before the armada reaches Earth. All you will do is show them that you are desperate, that you want to keep them away from the Earth at all costs."

"Because we do," Cameron said.

"You cannot show fear, or a lack of confidence in your ability to repel them," Lieutenant Telles warned. "You must challenge them head on. Make them wonder if they have underestimated you. They have already lost many ships to the Aurora. When they see two such ships, jumping about and firing energy weapons at them, they will become cautious. Their caution will work to your benefit. It may even buy the Earth some time, time you will need to defeat their forces."

Nathan looked at Cameron, then at Jessica.

"It's your call," Cameron said.

"He's right, Captain," Jessica said. "Battles are fought in the mind as much as they are with the fist."

Nathan sighed. "We have all worked very hard the last few months in order to prepare for tomorrow's battle. There is still much I wish we had time to do, but we are probably better armed now than we have ever been, and we have a better crew than we have ever had. We are no longer a

single ship struggling to survive. We are now three heavily armed vessels, with hundreds of well-trained men and women to operate them. We are Terrans, we are Tannans, we are Corinairans, and we are Takarans. We are the Alliance, and together, we shall draw a line in the sand and dare the enemy to step across." Nathan took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "For the sacrifices we are all about to make, I thank you all." Nathan paused, looking at his friends once more. "Dismissed."

* * *

Nathan stepped out of the elevator and into the foyer outside President Scott's office in the bunker under the North American Union's temporary capitol complex. Much to his surprise, a smiling face was there to greet him. "Miri," he said, a smile suddenly forming. He opened his arms and walked toward her.

"How are you doing, little brother?" she said as they embraced.

"Much better now," Nathan said. "I'm sorry I couldn't get away to come down and visit before now."

"It's okay, Nathan. I understand. You're a big important captain now. You're a busy man."

Nathan rolled his eyes.

"Besides, I've been pretty busy myself," she said. "Tracking down the missing relatives of your crew was not easy. I wish we could have found them all."

"It's okay, Miri. I know you tried."

"We haven't given up yet," she promised.

"Any idea what he wants to see me about?" Nathan asked, glancing at the door to his father's office.

"I haven't a clue," she admitted. "He's been locked up in there, day in and day out. He's always on video calls with someone, day and night. All I know is that he insisted that you come down tonight."

"I guess I'd better get it over with, then," Nathan said with a sigh. "Will you be around later? Maybe we can have

dinner, if it's not too late?"

"Sure, but I have to warn you, the food isn't that good around here."

"It'll be fine," he said, touching her shoulder. "I'll find you later."

Nathan took the last few steps across the room to his father's door. He paused momentarily, turning around to face Sergeant Weatherly and the two Ghatazhak standing on either side of the elevator doors. "If you hear screaming, come storming in guns blazing."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Weatherly answered.

"I was kidding, Sergeant."

"I know, sir."

"Maybe."

Sergeant Weatherly smiled. "He's your father, sir."

Nathan took a deep breath and opened the door. The room was dimly lit. His father was sitting behind his desk, signing some documents. The light on his desk was one of only two lights that were on, along with a floor lamp in the opposite corner. Nathan walked into the room, closing the door behind him. As he approached his father's desk, it occurred that his father appeared quite old. His father had always looked much younger than his years, even at seventy-two. Now, he looked every day his age and then some.

"You wanted to see me, Mister President?"

"Nathan," his father said, glancing up from his papers as he continued signing. "Please, sit down."

Nathan pulled one of the chairs on his side of the desk back and took a seat. He waited patiently for his father to finish his current task, looking about the room. It was less spartan than the last time he had been there more than two months ago. Now there were pictures. His deceased mother, Eli and his family, his daughters and their families. The small model of his grandfather's biplane, the one that Nathan had learned to fly in many years ago. It wasn't much, but it was just enough. Nathan looked at the pictures,

studying them each, one by one, soaking them in as if he would never see them again. Then he noticed the picture at the end. It was him, in his uniform, the day of his graduation from the Fleet Academy.

"There," his father finally said. "Sorry about that. A little last-minute business."

"Something important, no doubt," Nathan said, not really meaning to sound sarcastic.

"Actually, it was." His father picked up the stack of papers and handed them to Nathan. "These are orders, issued by the newly formed Terran Union, authorizing you to take command of all space forces, for the purpose of defending the Earth against the Jung, however you see fit."

Nathan's eyes widened, his eyebrows raised. "You're kidding," he said as he took the papers and started shuffling through them.

"You'll also find orders making your rank, and the ranks of anyone else to whom you granted field promotion, legal."

"How did you manage to..."

"It wasn't easy, I can tell you that," his father said as he rose from his chair. "It took a lot of video conferences, as well as a few thinly veiled threats, to convince the other nations to sign on. As you know, in order for the EDF charter to remain in effect, we had to have at least sixty percent of the officially recognized nations of Earth sign on. Luckily, there are only twelve officially recognized nations of Earth still in existence. Or should I say, 'reborn'."

"Nations have been popping up all over the place," Nathan pointed out. "How do you decide which ones are 'officially recognized'."

"We decided to go with the nations that existed at the time the charter was first signed," his father explained.

"Clever," Nathan said, shaking his head.

"I've been at this sort of thing a long time, Nathan. Of course, that little sneak attack by the Jung helped push them in the right direction."

"That was months ago."

"Maybe, but it got them to take things more seriously. When they learned of the approaching Jung fleet, things really started to happen. Honestly though, I think it was that little demonstration down in South America by your Lieutenant Telles that really pushed them to take the last step and sign the damned thing. Oh, and the fabricators didn't hurt, either."

Nathan continued reading the orders as his father came around and sat on the edge of the desk directly in front of him.

"There are some stipulations, however," his father warned. "You have to enlist the non-Terran members of your crew in the EDF as well."

"I don't see that as a problem," Nathan assured him. "Any restrictions on what rank I give them on enlistment?"

"We decided to leave that up to you. Hell, Nathan, you just got command of the entire Earth Defense Force. I believe congratulations are in order, don't you?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Nathan sighed. "You know, for the longest time after Captain Roberts died, I cursed being stuck with command. I wanted nothing more than to get back here and hand it over to someone else... anyone else. Then, when we got back and found the Jung already here, it was like I had no choice... I was it. It sucked even worse, but I got over it. I had no choice, really. Then we somehow managed to liberate Earth, and again I had a glimmer of hope. Not that someone would take command of the Aurora for me. I was fine with being captain. I guess I was hoping that someone higher up would start telling me what to do. Someone with more experience."

"Well, there's not much chance of that," the president said. "Galiardi's still in no shape to command. Hell, he might never be. The only person you have to answer to now, is me."

"Excuse me?"

"Yup, that's right," his father said. "I'm now the President of the Terran Union as well."

"But you hate the military," Nathan said.

"Actually, that's not true," his father said. "Not in the slightest."

Dayton Scott rose from the edge of his desk and moved back around to the other side, looking at the pictures arranged neatly on the table behind his desk. He picked up the picture of his dear, departed wife, Marlene. "I wasn't able to tell anyone," he said. "Not even your mother."

"What are you talking about?" Nathan wondered.

His father put the picture down and turned around, putting his hands on the back of his chair. "Remember Founders' Day, the night before you left? You confronted me in my office, asked me why I had suddenly changed my position on the military buildup in space."

"Yeah. If I remember correctly, you responded with your usual 'it's complicated' dodge."

"It wasn't a dodge, Nathan. It was complicated. You see, years earlier, before you even graduated college, I was approached by Admiral Galiardi and Admiral Yamori. They needed my help to buy them time to finish a top-secret project, one that they both believed would turn the tables on the Jung overnight."

"You're talking about the jump drive," Nathan said in disbelief.

"They needed someone to run for President of the NAU, someone who could win. They also needed that person to appear to be anti-military. They wanted to lure the Jung into believing that if they waited a few more years, that I would eventually become the President of the United Earth Republic."

"That's why you changed your position on the military buildup? It was all a ruse?" Nathan leaned back in his chair, in shock. "I don't believe this. You knew all along about the jump drive. You put me on that ship, didn't you?"

"No, I had nothing to do with..."

"Did Eli know about the jump drive as well? Did you tell him?"

"No, I never told Eli anything about the jump drive. Hell, Eli was easy to convince. He didn't like the military any more than I was pretending not to like them."

"Then how the hell did he know?"

"What makes you think he knew?"

"How else did the Jung know about it?" Nathan asked. "Did you know about the test?"

"Of course not," his father defended. "I mean, I knew they were close to testing it, but I had no firsthand knowledge of when or where..."

"How the hell did I end up on the Aurora?"

"Your mother begged me to get you reassigned. She couldn't bear the thought of you going off into space and not seeing you for two years. She was afraid something would happen to you."

"Well something sure as hell did, didn't it," Nathan exclaimed.

"All I did was ask Eli to contact the admiral, to ask him to get you reassigned. That's all. I'm sure that's all Eli did. He simply made a call."

"Are you sure there is no way that Eli could have known about the jump drive?"

"I don't see how," his father said. "There were very few discussions about it, and when there were, they were private. Eli wasn't even around."

"Oh, man," Nathan exclaimed, putting his face in his hands. "Why are you even telling me all of this," he asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Why now? Why tonight, of all nights?"

"I just thought you should know the truth."

"Why?" Nathan asked again. "It didn't seem to matter before."

"Things are different, now," his father said. "Everything has changed..."

"Is it because you think I'm about to die?"

"Yes!" his father exclaimed. "Partly, yes, Nathan! You might die tomorrow. You know damn well you might die!

Hell, we all might die! If you fail to defeat the armada tomorrow, they'll probably wipe us out and start over, rebuild the entire planet in their own image! This might be my last chance tell you the truth, damn it! My last chance to tell you how proud I am of you!"

Nathan sat there, staring at his father. "Wow," he finally said. "I've been waiting to hear you say that my entire life." A small laugh escaped his lips. "And to think, it only took the end of the world to get you to say it."

"Well, you know how bad the Scott men are at expressing their feelings," his father said.

Another long silence ensued. "I thought it would feel better than this," Nathan finally said.

"So did I," his father agreed. "Of course, I imagined it happening under entirely different circumstances."

"Yeah, me too." Nathan stood slowly. "I should probably be going. I told Sergeant Weatherly to burst in shooting if he heard any yelling. I'd hate for him to shoot you."

"Yes, that would be unpleasant."

"Besides, I promised Miri I'd visit with her a while."

"Of course," his father said.

Nathan turned and headed slowly for the door. He paused, one hand on the doorknob, his head down, still facing away from his father. "I'm sorry about Eli."

"I know you are, Nathan," his father said, "but he left you no choice."

Nathan said nothing else, just opened the door and left.

"Be safe, Nathan," his father said after the door had closed.

CHAPTER NINE

"Command has sealed off all outer decks, purged their atmosphere, and discontinued their artificial gravity," Master Sergeant Jahal reported as he entered the Ghatazhak command center, deep inside the Jar-Keurog. "If the Jung try to board with some kind of a breach box, it will not stop them, but it may slow them down."

"It would be better if we had more men," Lieutenant Telles said as he stared at the captured battleship's deck plans on the monitor.

"Do you truly believe they will try to retake this ship?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Mister Munras did say that the Jung have never had a ship taken from them."

"Not to his knowledge, at least."

The master sergeant noticed the concerned look on his leader's face. "You are concerned?"

"We are soon to enter into battle. Should I not be?"

"But we have the advantage," the master sergeant reminded him. "Two warships, with jump drives and plasma weapons..."

"Commanded by two inexperienced, insufficiently trained officers," the lieutenant added.

"Captain Scott has proven himself in battle, and on many occasions."

"And on all those occasions, the enemy underestimated both him, and the capabilities of his vessel. That will not be the case on this day. I'm afraid our captain shall need to be far more inventive to emerge victorious."

* * *

Nathan sat calmly in his command chair on the Aurora's bridge. On the main view screen, he could see the Earth below them, partially hidden by the numerous tactical windows that were evenly spaced along the bottom of the screen. In the distance, just above the Earth, he could barely make out the Celestia. They had separated more than an hour ago in preparation for the impending battle.

"Contact," Mister Navashee announced. "Jump flash. It's the Falcon."

"Flash traffic," Naralena reported from the comm station at the back of the bridge. "Falcon reports the Jung fleet dropped out of FTL just beyond the orbit of Neptune. They decelerated hard for ten minutes, then slipped back into FTL."

"I'm getting the Falcon's tactical data now, Captain," Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical directly behind Nathan. "Looks like they slowed to about thirty thousand kilometers per hour. A few of them altered course slightly before going back to FTL."

"They're going to come out at different locations instead of all together," Nathan said.

"Six have changed course," Lieutenant Eckert explained. "Two cruisers and four frigates."

"Confirm total count?" Nathan asked.

"Twenty ships total, sir. Two battleships, four cruisers, six frigates, and eight gunboats."

"Comms, confirm all data links are active?"

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered. "We have live links with the Celestia, the Jar-Keurog, and with flight ops on the Jar-Keurog."

"Put all three of them on," Nathan ordered.

"One moment," Naralena answered. "Go ahead, sir."

"This is Aurora Actual. They've undoubtedly been watching us on their way in," Nathan began, "and I'm sure they did a full scan of the system while they were decelerating, so they know that we're here, or at least that we were here four hours ago. Point is, they're expecting a

fight, so we're not going to catch them by surprise. I expect they'll come out of FTL somewhat spread out, although it looks like the majority of their forces will still be together. Everyone stay sharp and remember the tactics we discussed. Good luck."

Nathan turned to Naralena, indicating for her to end the conference call. "Get me the Falcon."

* * *

Josh looked out of the Falcon's canopy to the port side as they passed the Aurora. As he cleared her nose, he rolled the interceptor onto its left side and pulled the nose up to start a slow circle around her bow. The Jar-Keurog was on the Aurora's far side, a few kilometers away still, yet easy to make out against the black, starry background of space. He looked downward to the planet below. The Earth seemed so peaceful from space; without a hint of the chaos that still ravaged many of its cities.

"Aurora Actual, go for Falcon," Loki called over the comms from behind Josh.

"I know you two have been flying your butts off for the last few weeks..." Nathan began.

"I think he means months," Josh said.

"Probably more so than anyone," the captain continued. *"I just wanted to thank you, and to give you the same standing orders that I gave the jump shuttles. If we lose this fight, get back to Takara. Let them know what happened. Make sure they prepare themselves, because someday, the Jung will come to their world as well."*

Loki said nothing for several seconds. Finally, he sighed and answered. "Understood, Captain."

"Stay out of harm's way," Nathan warned, *"but stay within earshot. We may need you."*

"Yes, sir."

"Good luck, gentlemen. Aurora Actual, out."

"A bit overdramatic, don't you think," Josh speculated.

"Twenty ships, Josh," Loki said. "Twenty."

"Eight of them were gunboats!" Josh declared. "Hell, we could take out a gunboat!"

"You heard him. We're supposed to stay out of the way."

"I'm not saying I'm gonna go chasing down gunboats, Loki. I'm just saying that the Aurora can handle the gunboats and the frigates all by herself, probably without getting a single scratch on her!"

"I hope you're right."

"You know I'm right," Josh insisted as he straightened his turn and headed toward the Jar-Keurog in the distance. "And there's two of them, remember? Armed with plasma torpedo cannons, and lasers, and..."

"I know what they're armed with, Josh," Loki interrupted. He looked forward at the Jar-Keurog as the massive battleship began to fill the canopy. "It's those two battleships I'm worried about."

"The captain took that one intact," Josh said, pointing at the Jar-Keurog ahead of them. "He'll deal with the next two as well. It's that damned battle platform I'm worried about. If we just had a few dozen KKV's, that big bitch would be done for."

* * *

"You didn't touch your dinner," Miri said as she entered her father's office in the underground NAU command center.

"My world is about to be attacked, and my son is about to face a fleet of twenty Jung warships, with only two warships and an orbital platform," the president said as he stared at the pictures arranged on the table behind his desk. "Who could eat at a time like this?"

"An armed orbital platform," Miri corrected.

"What?" He turned to look at his daughter.

"It's not really an orbital platform, right? It's a captured battleship that has no engines... with big guns."

"I just wish there was something more that I could do."

"Nathan and his people are ready," Miri said. "The people of Earth have taken shelter as best they can. What

more can you do?"

"Pray?"

Miri looked at her father. "Since when do you pray?"

"Since your mother died," he sighed.

* * *

"I don't know if I can do this," Jessica mumbled.

"Do what?"

"Just sit here while everyone else goes to war."

Synda looked at Jessica sitting in the bed next to her. "I guess it must be hard, huh?"

"You have no idea."

"What would you be doing if you weren't stuck in here?" Synda wondered.

"Well, since they've got a real tactical officer, I'd probably be in the security office."

"What would you be doing?"

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Just sitting there, I guess. Unless we got boarded or something." She looked at Synda. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to this. I have a feeling there aren't going to be a lot of opportunities for covert ops in the future."

* * *

"Contacts!" Ensign Kono announced from the Celestia's sensor station. "Fourteen of them, Commander."

"Sound general quarters," Cameron ordered.

"General quarters, aye," Ensign Souza acknowledged.

The lighting on the bridge dimmed, taking on a red hue around the top and bottom of the bulkheads, as well as along the face of the various platforms on the Celestia's bridge.

"I've got them," Luis announced from the tactical station. "Two battleships, designating as bravo one and bravo two. Two cruisers, designating as charlie one and charlie two. Two frigates, designating as contacts foxtrot one and foxtrot two."

Eight gunboats, designating as contacts golf, one through eight."

"Jesus," Cameron muttered. She turned around to face her tactical officer. "That's only fourteen. Where did the other six go? The ones that changed course just before they went to FTL?"

"I don't have them on my threat board, Commander," Luis said.

Cameron turned to Ensign Kono. "Are you sure they're not out there? They may have gone wide."

"No sir," Mister Navashee answered as the lighting on the Aurora's bridge dimmed and took on a red hue along the edges and steps. "Only those fourteen. Three million kilometers out."

"Celestia's TAO has designated all tracked targets," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"I expected the rest of them to come in from the sides," Nathan said. He rotated his chair to face aft. "Plot the course of those other six, based on their heading at the time they went back into FTL," he ordered Lieutenant Eckert at the tactical station.

"On the board, window four," the lieutenant reported.

Nathan turned and looked at the windows along the bottom of the main view screen. "They changed course just enough to pass on either side of the Earth. They're going to come in from the far side, to avoid the Jar-Keurog's big guns. Can you calculate how long until they come out of FTL on the other side?"

"Based on their speed when they went into FTL, and assuming that they traveled at the same FTL factor as the rest of the Jung fleet during that last jump... about five more minutes, Captain."

"Comms, have the Falcon jump to a position where they can see the far side of the Earth and still maintain line of

sight with the Jar-Keurog. I want to know the moment those ships arrive, and what they're doing."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Status of the enemy ships, Lieutenant?" Nathan asked.

"Weapons are powered, shields are up. They're ready to fight, Captain."

"All department heads report all stations manned and ready," Naralena reported. "XO is in combat, Chief of the Boat is in damage control."

"Reactors are at full power," Mister Riley reported. "Jump drive is fully charged and ready."

"Main propulsion and maneuvering are online and ready as well," Mister Chiles added.

"All weapons are deployed, charged and ready," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "The ship is at general quarters, Captain,"

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Comms, hail the Jung fleet. Transmit the following message. 'Jung fleet. Surrender, withdraw, or die. Those are your only options.' End of message."

Naralena looked at her captain, her head still tilted down toward her console as she typed out the message. "Aye, sir. Transmitting message."

"Is that all he said?" Cameron asked, surprised at the brevity of the message. "Surrender, withdraw, or die?"

"Yes, sir," Ensign Souza answered.

Cameron glance upward briefly, rolling her eyes to one side. "Not very subtle, is he?"

"He never was," Luis assured her.

"How long do you think it will take for them to respond?" Ensign Souza wondered.

"We're being targeted," Luis reported.

"Contacts!" Ensign Kono announced from the sensor station. "Missile launches! Lots of them!"

"Not long at all," Cameron said. "How many?"

"Twenty-four!"

"They're not very subtle, either, are they?" Cameron said. "Targets?"

"Twelve at us, twelve at the Aurora," Luis reported.

"None at the Jar-Keurog?"

"No, sir," Luis answered.

"Interesting," Cameron mumbled. "Helm, change course. Come to port toward the contacts, and pitch down zero point five degrees. Line us up with contact charlie one."

"Coming to port, onto contact charlie one, pitching down zero point five, aye," Ensign Hunt answered.

"Navigator, new jump," Cameron continued. "Put us a few kilometers forward of charlie one."

"Plotting jump, a few kilometers forward and beneath charlie one, aye," Mister Jakoby acknowledged.

"I want to pass just underneath that cruiser," Cameron explained. "No more than a kilometer at the most." She turned to her tactical officer. "As we pass under, we'll pitch up and bring all tubes onto the target. We'll be passing under them awfully fast, so you'll have to time your shots just right."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered.

"Be ready to pitch up, Mister Hunt."

"I'll be ready, sir."

"If we pitch up at a rate of ten degrees per second, I can place my shots all in the same area," Luis suggested, "maybe even the same shield."

"Very well," Cameron agreed.

"Ten degrees per second," Ensign Hunt acknowledged.

"As soon as we get all four shots away, jump us ahead two light minutes, Mister Jakoby," Cameron added. "It will all happen very fast, so don't wait for my order to jump. We don't want to give them any time to fire on us."

"Yes, sir," the navigator answered. "Jump plotted and ready."

"Tactical, stand by all forward tubes, single shots, full power."

"Tubes one through four, charged and ready."

Cameron swallowed hard. "Jump."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Celestia's bridge. The main view screen was suddenly full of Jung ships, most of them to their starboard, all of them growing closer, about to pass overhead.

"Jump complete!" Mister Jakoby reported.

"Pitching up!" Ensign Hunt added.

"Fire when ready," Cameron ordered.

"One away," Luis announced.

Cameron watched the main view screen as the first ball of red-orange plasma streaked over their heads on its way toward the nearest Jung cruiser about to pass over them.

"Escape jump plotted and ready," the navigator reported.

"Two away."

Another ball of plasma streaked over their heads as the enemy cruiser's shields glowed brightly with the impact of the first plasma torpedo.

"Three away."

"Incoming rail gun fire!" Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station only a moment before the impacts vibrated the Celestia's bridge.

"Four away."

"Jumping," Mister Jakoby announced as the fourth plasma torpedo streaked over their heads.

"Celestia has jumped away!" Mister Navashee announced. "Contact charlie one's dorsal shields are down, both forward and midship, Captain!"

"Helm, bring us onto charlie one, pitch down so we pass close under her. As close as possible."

"Same thing, all four tubes?" Lieutenant Eckert asked.

"Yes, but not on charlie one," Nathan corrected. "Mister Chiles, as soon as you put us on course, yaw to port twenty

degrees and give us just enough up angle on the bow to bring our tubes onto contact foxtrot one, right next door."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Stand by to jump. I want to come out five kilometers ahead of them, a single kilometer below, just like the Celestia did."

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"What about charlie one?" Lieutenant Eckert asked. "Her shields are down."

"Pound her underside with our quads as we pass. Then we'll fire a triple shot from both our stern tubes after we pass."

"I'll have to yaw back and pitch down after we fire on the frigate, Captain," Mister Chiles warned.

"That'll add another twenty seconds to our pass," Lieutenant Eckert added.

"From that range, and at that speed, all they can hit us with are their point-defense rail guns. We can take it for a few seconds," Nathan insisted. "As soon as we fire our stern tubes, we jump ahead one light minute and come hard to starboard."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"What about the Celestia?" Mister Eckert wondered. "Won't she be right in front of us when we jump?"

"Remember the rules for follow the leader, Lieutenant," Nathan reminded. "Leader jumps two light minutes and breaks left, follower jumps one and breaks right."

"The missiles that were targeting the Celestia and the Aurora have changed course," the Tannan sensor operator reported. "They are headed toward us!"

"We're being targeted," another technician announced. "By all twenty-four missiles."

"Activate point-defense guns," Garrett ordered.

"The Celestia just attacked contact charlie one," the sensor technician reported. "The cruiser. Oh! The Aurora!"

She has jumped in and attacked as well! Two ships! The Aurora has attacked charlie one *and* foxtrot one! The frigate is breaking apart! The cruiser is badly damaged and is turning away."

"How bad?" Garrett inquired.

"Contact charlie one is badly damaged. It has no shields, and its main propulsion is operating at significantly reduced output."

"But it can still move, yes?" Garrett asked.

"Yes, sir, it is still under way."

"Why do they not finish them off?" Garrett wondered.

"Because a ship that is withdrawing is not an immediate threat to the Earth," Lieutenant Telles explained as he entered the Jar-Keurog's command center. "The rest of them are. Have the remaining Jung ships come out of FTL yet?"

"Not yet," Garrett said, "but the Falcon is in position and watching the other side of the Earth for us."

"Point-defenses have engaged, three missiles have been destroyed!" the Tannan at one of the tactical stations reported. "Twenty-one missiles are still inbound."

"Time to impact?" Lieutenant Telles inquired.

"Four minutes, fifteen seconds."

"Continue firing," Garrett insisted.

"Yes, sir," the technician answered.

"Twenty seconds to completion of turn," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"Attack jump is plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"I'm getting scans in now, Captain," Mister Navashee announced. "Foxtrot one has broken up. Four, no, five pieces, and a lot of debris. Numerous secondary flashes as well. Charlie one is disengaging and turning to starboard, away from Earth. She has no shields across her dorsal side, significant hull damage, and reduced propulsion capacity. Many of her weapons along her bottom have been damaged as well. She's limping away, Captain."

"Helm, change of course," Nathan announced. "Alter your turn. Add five degrees. I want to be on a line between bravo two and charlie two. And come up a degree as well so that we pass just over the row of gunboats in front of them."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman answered. "Adding five degrees to the turn and angling one degree upward relative."

"How much space between charlie two and the row of gunboats?" Nathan asked.

"One hundred kilometers," Lieutenant Eckert answered from the tactical station.

"More than enough room. Mister Riley, recalculate our next jump. Put us about ten kilometers forward of charlie two's bow."

"Yes, sir," the navigator acknowledged.

"After we jump, swing our tail out onto that cruiser, Mister Chiles. We'll fire on her with our stern tubes. At the same time, we'll fire on whatever gunboats happen to be within the firing solution of our forward tubes," Nathan added as he turned toward his tactical officer.

"Understood," Lieutenant Eckert said.

"End of turn in five seconds," Mister Chiles announced.

"Jumping in ten seconds," Mister Riley added.

"Any sign of the Celestia?" Nathan wondered.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "But if she jumped ahead two and broke left, we wouldn't be able to see her light for another fifty seconds."

"Jumping in five seconds," Mister Riley reported.

"Stand by, triple shots, all tubes," Nathan ordered, "quads to the sides, minis angled forward."

"Standing by for triple shots, all tubes, sir," Lieutenant Eckert answered. "Quads out, minis angled forward."

"Jumping."

Blue-white light washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete."

"Yawing to starboard," the helmsman announced.

"I have a firing solution on the cruiser," Lieutenant Eckert reported eagerly.

"Aft tubes, triple shots, fire!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing, triple shots, tubes four and five," the lieutenant announced.

"All rail guns on the gunboats..."

"Captain!" Mister Navashee interrupted. "The gunboats are gone!"

"Direct hits! All torpedoes!" Lieutenant Eckert exclaimed.

"Where'd they go?"

"They must have gone to FTL, sir!"

"Contact charlie two is dead in space!" the lieutenant added with pride.

"Verify!" Nathan ordered.

"Rail gun fire!" Lieutenant Eckert reported as the floor of the bridge shifted violently under their feet. "From the frigate! Foxtrot two!"

"Jump us ahead thirty light seconds, then come hard to port!"

"Jumping in three..."

Nathan felt another violent shake that threatened to knock him out of his command chair as rail gun rounds from the nearby Jung frigate continued to slam into the aft, starboard side of the ship.

"Two..."

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee reported. "It's the Celestia! She's passing overhead!"

"One..."

"She's firing plasma torpedoes at foxtrot two!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Jumping!"

The jump flash washed over the bridge again. The shaking stopped as the flash subsided.

"Turning to port," Mister Chiles reported.

"Which way was the Celestia passing over?" Nathan immediately asked.

"From our starboard to port!" Mister Navashee answered.

"Helm! Reverse your turn!"

"Reversing my turn, aye!" Mister Chiles answered.

"Mister Riley, as soon as we've turned ninety degrees, jump us ahead two light minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"Mister Navashee, find those gunboats."

"Aye, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Helm, after we jump, continue turning to starboard. I want to get behind those battleships."

"Yes, sir."

"Ensign Kono, I need to know where those gunboats went," Cameron ordered.

"Yes, sir!" the Celestia's new sensor officer answered as she studied her sensor displays.

"Helm, pitch down and come about to make a return pass in the opposite direction, but underneath that frigate."

"Pitching down and coming about, aye," Ensign Hunt answered.

"Mister Jakoby, plot the next jump, five kilometers this side of contact foxtrot two."

"Yes, sir."

"Shouldn't we be attacking her topside again?" Luis wondered aloud. "It's already damaged..."

"If we come back across her topside, we'll be in perfect position for those battleships to pick us off, Ensign," Cameron explained. "We got lucky last time, as they didn't expect us to jump in right in front of them like that. They'll be ready for us next time. So we come in under, and keep the target between us and those battleships."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered.

"That's two down, and two damaged!" Loki exclaimed.

"Hell yes!" Josh exclaimed from the Falcon's front seat. "Captain's kicking ass!"

Loki's console beeped. "Oh, crap."

"What was that?"

"Oh, crap. Ooooh, crap!"

"Would you stop saying 'oh, crap' and tell me what the crap you're talking about?" Josh insisted.

"Jar-Keurog, Falcon, flash traffic!"

"What is it, Loki?" Josh begged.

"They're here."

"Who's here?"

"The Jung! Who else?"

"How many of them?"

"All of them, Josh! I mean, all the rest of them."

"Falcon, go for Jar-Keurog," the voice answered over the comms.

"Contacts! Just came out of FTL. First group. One cruiser, two frigates, Earth orbit, same altitude, one hundred and twenty degrees ahead of you. Designate contacts charlie three, and foxtrot three and five. Second group, same configuration. One hundred and twenty degrees behind you on the same orbit and altitude. Designate contacts charlie four, and foxtrots four and six."

"Falcon, Jar-Keurog. Copy your report. Are contacts maintaining position?"

"Jar-Keurog, Falcon. Affirmative, contacts are matching your speed, maintaining constant distance from you."

"Falcon, Jar-Keurog. Can you tell what they are doing?"

"Jar-Keurog, Falcon. Stand by." Loki studied his sensor display for several seconds before answered. "Jar-Keurog, Falcon. Contacts are bombarding the Earth. Repeat, contacts are attacking the surface. Looks like they're spreading out a bit for better coverage, as well."

"Understood. Jar-Keurog, out."

"Jesus," Loki exclaimed. "They're launching a butt load of ordnance, Josh."

"Everybody on the surface has taken shelter, Loki," Josh reminded him.

"That's not going to help, Josh, and you know it."

"Jump complete!" Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

"Targets dead ahead!" Mister Navashee added.

"I have firing solutions for all forward tubes on contact bravo one, sir," Mister Eckert reported.

"Triple shots, all tubes, in sequence... Fire!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing! Triple shot on one!" Mister Eckert reported.

Nathan looked up and saw three balls of red-orange plasma streak over their heads toward the distant Jung battleship that grew ever larger in the Aurora's main view screen.

"Incoming rail gun fire!" Mister Navashee added urgently.

"Triple shot on two!"

The bridge began to shake as incoming rail gun fire pounded the Aurora's exterior hull.

"Triple shot on three!"

"Celestia just jumped in," Mister Navashee announced.

"She's passing under contact foxtrot two!"

"Triple shot on four!"

"Jumping in..." Mister Riley began.

"Hold your jump!" Nathan ordered, rising immediately to his feet. He turned toward his sensor operator to his left.

"Her course will cross ours, Captain!" Mister Navashee warned.

"Same relative altitude?"

"Close enough, sir!" Mister Navashee added. "She's firing!"

"Bravo one and bravo two are launching missiles!" Lieutenant Eckert warned. "Impact in ten seconds!"

"Helm, hard to port!"

"Hard to port, aye!" Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Foxtrot two is coming apart!" Mister Navashee reported with glee.

"Impact in five!"

"Has she jumped?" Nathan demanded.

"Four!" Lieutenant Eckert warned.

"Celestia is jumping now!" Mister Navashee reported.
"She's gone!"

"Three!"

"Now, Mister Riley! Jump!"

"Two!"

"Jumping!"

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him as the blue-white jump flash again filled the bridge. "One of us didn't follow the rules," Nathan mumbled.

"Which one?" Lieutenant Eckert wondered.

"To be honest, I'm not sure," Nathan admitted.

"Captain!" Naralena called out from the communications station at the back of the Aurora's bridge. "Flash traffic from the Jar-Keurog. Falcon reports two groups have come into position in Earth orbit, just over the horizon on either side of the Jar-Keurog. They're bombarding the Earth, sir."

"I'm getting the tactical update from the Jar-Keurog now, Captain," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Each group is composed of three elements. A cruiser, and two frigates. They've spread out to improve coverage, but they're all holding their distance from the Jar-Keurog, just under her horizon."

"So they can't fire on them," Nathan surmised.

"Comms, contact the Celestia. Order them to attack the group ahead of the Jar-Keurog. We'll attack the one behind them. And contact the Jar-Keurog and tell them we are clearing the primary engagement area. They are clear to engage bravo one and bravo two with their big guns."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Helm, put us on a heading for the far side of Earth."

"Calculating new course now, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Mister Riley, prepare a new jump. Five light minutes beyond the far side of Earth."

President Scott watched the tactical displays on the wall of the underground control center for the North American Union's temporary capitol complex in Winnipeg. Data relayed from the Jar-Keurog provided them with real-time information about the battle raging in the Sol system and around their world.

"Mister President," one of the senior security officers reported, "we're getting reports of Jung bombardments from all over Europe, Africa, Russia, the Middle East... Everywhere except for the Americas."

The president looked at the officer. Despite his higher position within the NAU's security division, he was young and had little experience. "It is because the Jar-Keurog is currently passing over us," he explained to the young man. "If they are unable to stop them, our time will yet come."

"Flash traffic from the Aurora!" the Tannan communications technician reported. "The Aurora and the Celestia are moving to engage the ships in orbit on the far side of Earth. We are ordered to engage the enemy battleships with our big guns!"

"Pass the word to the gun crews to open fire on contacts bravo one and bravo two," Garrett instructed. He looked at Lieutenant Telles and smiled. "Now, we join the fight!"

"Oh, my God!" Ensign Kono exclaimed as the Celestia's jump flash subsided. "They're bombing the hell out of them!"

"I have a firing solution on foxtrot six," Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station.

"Tubes one and two, triple shots, fire!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing triples on one and two!" Luis answered. "Tubes one and two away!"

"Helm, five degrees to port, up two," Cameron ordered as the red-orange light of the departing plasma torpedoes lit

up the interior of the bridge. "Put us on course for the second frigate, passing just below her."

"Torpedo impact in five seconds!" Luis announced.

"Contacts!" Ensign Kono reported. "Four missiles inbound!"

"Missile impact in twenty seconds," Luis reported.

The main view screen filled with a series of brilliant red-orange flashes as the Celestia's plasma torpedoes struck their target.

"Put us two kilometers from foxtrot four, Mister Jakoby," Cameron ordered.

"Foxtrot six is destroyed!" Luis reported with pride. "Missile impact in ten seconds!"

"Jump plotted and ready, Captain!" Mister Jakoby reported.

"Stand by tubes three and four," Cameron ordered. "Jump the ship."

"Jumping."

"They're going to FTL!" Ensign Kono announced as the jump flash washed over them.

"Jump complete."

"What the...?" Cameron said, surprise on her face.

"Contacts!" Ensign Kono announced. "Four inbound missiles! They must have launched them just before they went to FTL!" she added.

"Foxtrot four FTL'd it only five hundred kilometers!" Luis reported. "Engaging laser turrets! Targeting inbound missiles!"

"Roll us onto our starboard side, Mister Hunt!" Cameron ordered. "Get more lasers on those missiles!"

"Firing laser turrets!" Luis reported. "Missiles ten seconds out!"

"Escape jump, Mister Jakoby," Cameron ordered.

"One missile down!"

"Another missile launch!" Ensign Kono reported. "From the cruiser! Eight of them!"

"First wave, five seconds," Luis warned, urgency creeping into his tone.

"Escape jump ready!" the navigator announced.

"Second wave of missiles is twenty seconds out," Luis added.

"Jump!" Cameron ordered.

The blue-white flash washed over them as the order left the commander's lips, bringing a sense of relief with it.

"Jump complete," the navigator reported.

"Where are we?" Cameron demanded.

"Four light minutes out," Mister Jakoby reported.

"One hundred degrees to port, Mister Hunt," Cameron ordered. "Two-jump, triangular return pattern."

"Are we even hitting the targets?" Garrett asked.

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer answered. "With nearly every round fired. The battleships are heavily shielded, even more so than ourselves."

"Perhaps they are of a newer class," Lieutenant Telles suggested. "With improved systems?"

"It is possible," Garrett admitted. "The Jung have shipyards all over the sector. Very few of the ships built in the Jung home system venture far from their port. It is believed that the Jung keep the most advanced ships closer to home. In case of rebellion, they would have the advantage."

"Our people were much the same," Telles admitted.

"Sir!" the sensor officer called out. "Contacts bravo one and bravo two! They are separating! Moving away from one another and accelerating!"

"What?" Garrett wondered, confused.

"They wish to split the focus of your weapons, thereby cutting your firepower in half."

"That makes no sense," Garrett insisted. "If six guns are targeting two ships, with three guns per ship, how does

increasing the distance between them reduce their firepower?"

"By distancing themselves, you will be unable to concentrate your fire on a single ship without risking the other ship advancing on your position."

"Then they fear that we may do just as you say," Garrett realized.

"Possibly," the lieutenant agreed.

"Then we must do so," Garrett insisted. "They have not yet returned our fire. If they do, we are unlikely to survive."

"The question you *should* be asking *is*," the lieutenant said, "*why* have they not yet fired upon us."

Garrett looked at Lieutenant Telles as the answer dawned on him. "They wish to take back their ship... in one piece. They wish to board us?"

"That is how we acquired this ship."

"But your men, they will defend us, yes?"

"Indeed, we shall. However, if they come with sufficient numbers, even the Ghatazhak may not be able to repel them."

"But how can they get through our defenses?" Garrett asked. "Only their battleships can withstand our barrage. Their smaller ships do not stand a chance against our big guns."

"I have been asking myself that very question," the lieutenant admitted. "I am surprised to admit that I do not have an answer."

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

Nathan rose to his feet with a start. "Jesus!" he exclaimed as he looked at the image of the Earth below. There were yellow-orange balls of fire rising up from the surface all over the European continent below them. Additional flashes lit up the vast clouds of smoke that hung over the continent in large, ugly patches of black and gray.

He could see numerous plasma trails from falling ordnance as it fell away from the Jung frigate directly ahead of them and plunged into the Earth's atmosphere.

"I have a firing solution on foxtrot five," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

Nathan's voice was solemn. "One through four, triple shots." His voice took on a hint of vengeance. "Fire."

"Firing one through four, triple shots," the tactical officer responded. "Firing one."

"Missile launch!" Mister Navashee reported as the first trio of red-orange plasma torpedo lit up the interior of the bridge.

"Firing two."

"Foxtrot five has launched eight."

"Firing three."

Nathan watched with great satisfaction as the third group of plasma torpedoes streaked across the view screen overhead, and the first group slammed into the distant frigate in a rapid series of brilliant reddish-yellow flashes.

"Firing four," Lieutenant Eckert reported as the last triplet of plasma torpedoes left the Aurora's number four torpedo tube. "Time to missile impact is fifteen seconds."

"Helm, pitch up one degree," Nathan stated as the fourth set of plasma torpedoes passed through the debris of the already annihilated frigate.

"Foxtrot five, destroyed," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Ten seconds to missile impact."

"Pitching up one degree, aye," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Jump us forward, one light minute," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping forward, one light minute," Mister Riley acknowledged. "In three..."

Nathan continued to stare at the battered continent below him on the main view screen as his navigator counted down the last few seconds, and the Aurora jumped away.

“Contacts!” the Jar-Keurog’s Tannan sensor operator reported. “Three, four, five... It’s the gunboats! They’re coming out of FTL all around us!”

“All of them?” Garrett inquired.

“Yes, eight gunboats now! They are firing!”

“But they have no missiles,” Garrett said. “They couldn’t possibly...”

“They hope to disable our weapons,” Lieutenant Telles pointed out. “Especially our big rail guns. They cannot move into position to board us while those guns are still in operation, and those battleships will not approach until they are completely disabled.”

“But...”

“They will weaken our defenses, then insert hundreds of troops through multiple points of entry. They know this ship better than we do. They know how to get inside. Once they do, they will override these systems, seize control, and this ship will become our coffin. The Jar-Keurog will then join the other two battleships in the bombardment of Earth, and the captain will have three battleships with which to contend.”

“What should we do?” Garrett begged, realizing he was out of his element.

“Continue your attack on the battleships with your big guns. They are too slow to track the gunboats anyway. Use your point-defense turrets against the gunboats, and dispatch all fighters as well. With any luck, they can hold them at bay until the Aurora and the Celestia have dealt with the ships currently attacking the Earth from the far side.” Lieutenant Telles looked at Garrett. He was visibly shaken. The lieutenant grabbed Garrett’s shoulders and gave him a shake. “Do you understand me?”

The Tannan rebel leader snapped out of his fog and looked at the lieutenant. “Yes, yes. I understand.”

“We won’t have much of a target profile to aim at if we take them head on,” Lieutenant Eckert warned.

"That's why they won't be expecting us to do so," Nathan answered. "Their guns and missile launchers will be perpendicular to their course. Even if they have a few guns pointed forward, we'll be hard to hit as well, especially since we present an even narrower profile."

"Yes, sir."

"Be ready to translate downward and pitch up on my command, Mister Chiles," Nathan warned.

"Yes, sir."

"Jumping in five seconds," Mister Riley reported.

"Stand by forward tubes," Nathan ordered. "Single shot, full power, cycle your tubes, continuous fire."

"Single shots, full power, cycled, continuous fire, aye," Lieutenant Eckert acknowledged as the navigator completed his countdown.

"One.....jumping." The blue-white jump flash filled the bridge momentarily, disappearing as quickly and as silently as it had come. "Jump complete."

"Start the clock," Nathan ordered.

"Clock is running," Mister Navashee answered. "Range to charlie three, ten kilometers and closing."

"Commence firing," Nathan ordered.

"Firing one," Lieutenant Eckert reported as the first red-orange ball of plasma streaked over the heads across the view screen. "Firing two..."

"Eight kilometers," Mister Navashee updated. "They're firing rail guns."

"Firing three..."

Nathan felt the bridge vibrate as the Aurora nose was pounded with rail gun fire from the Jung cruiser's smaller, yet powerful, forward point-defense rail guns.

"Firing four..."

"Ten seconds on target," Mister Navashee reported. "Their forward shields are holding. Six kilometers and closing."

"Helm, start your downward translation and pitch up slowly to keep our tubes on the target."

"Translating downward and pitching up to keep the target in our sights, aye," Mister Chiles answered.

"Stand by to switch to triple shots, Lieutenant," Nathan added.

"Standing by for triple shots, aye."

"Twenty seconds, four kilometers, still closing" Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge began to shake more violently than before.

"They're getting more guns on us, Captain," Mister Navashee warned.

"Switch to triple shots and continue firing," Nathan ordered.

"Switching to triple shots and continuing to fire!" the lieutenant responded.

The continuous stream of single plasma shots switched to triple shots as the Aurora pitched up slowly to keep her torpedo tubes trained on the enemy cruiser as they slid underneath.

"Thirty seconds on target. Her midship shields are weakening, Captain," Mister Navashee advised. "They're swinging their dorsal missile launchers around to fire."

"Stand by to jump," Nathan ordered.

"Her midship shields are down!" Mister Navashee announced. "She's firing missiles."

"Stop your tube cycling," Nathan ordered. "All forward tubes, triple shots. Fire!"

"Firing all tubes!" the lieutenant replied.

Nathan looked up as twelve red-orange balls of plasma streaked over their heads at once. "Jump!" he ordered as bright yellow-orange flashes filled the bridge, announcing the impact of their plasma torpedoes against the enemy cruiser's unprotected hull.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley answered as the jump flash washed over them. "Jump complete," he added a second later.

"Helm, one hundred degrees to port, ten degrees up relative. Triangular jump turn, thirty light second jumps."

"One hundred to port and ten up relative," Mister Chiles answered from the helm. "Triangular, thirty light second jump turn, aye."

"Get me a damage assessment on charlie three," Nathan ordered Mister Navashee.

"On it, sir."

"She couldn't possibly have survived, Captain," Lieutenant Eckert insisted. "We hit her with twelve plasma torpedoes from only two kilometers away... And without shields."

"I'm sure you're right, Lieutenant," Nathan agreed, "but you should always verify."

"First turn complete," the helmsman reported.

"Confirmed," Mister Navashee announced. "Charlie three is destroyed. She's in three pieces and they're all headed for the atmosphere."

"Next jump is ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Excellent," Nathan said, enjoying the moment. "Let's go finish that other frigate. Execute the next jump, Mister Riley."

"Preacher, away!" Major Prechitt announced as his Talon fighter lifted off the flight deck and thrusted away from the Jar-Keurog.

"*Dongo, away!*" his wingman called over the comms as he followed his leader out.

"*Preacher, Dongo, vector one four seven, four relative. Target golf five. Active channel is tango five,*" the flight controller's voice ordered. "*Lapdog and Jellybean will join in one. Toodles and Hammer, in two.*"

"Preacher copies, one four seven, four relative. Targeting golf five. Time on target, twenty seconds. Switching to tango five." Major Prechitt rolled his Talon fighter onto its starboard side and started a hard right turn. All around him were Jung gunboats, only half of which had been engaged by Alliance fighters. "Stay on me, Dongo."

"I don't know if I'm ever going to get used to these names," the major's wingman answered. *"What the hell is a 'dongo' anyway?"*

"I have no idea," the major said as he finished his turn. "Could be worse. You could be Neusrac."

"You mean 'Nutsack'," his wingman said with a laugh.

"Not funny," another, barely audible voice called over the comms.

Major Prechitt smiled. "Golf five dead ahead. Arming Sierras. Range in five."

"Arming Sierras."

"I'll take the front half, you take the back." Major Prechitt activated his missile targeting system, drawing a circle around the forward half of the image of the enemy gunboat on the screen with his finger. "Preacher, firing. Sierra two," he announced as he depressed the firing button on his control yoke. A moment later, two anti-ship missiles streaked away from his underside, bright orange plumes at their aft ends.

"Dongo, firing. Sierra two."

Four points on the image of the gunboat on his targeting screen blinked red continuously. Then one of the blue triangles representing his missiles disappeared. "They've got point-defenses," the major announced as his second missile turned into a yellow ball, indicating an impact and detonation.

"Yeah, but no shields!" Dongo responded as both his missiles were shot down. *"Damn!"*

"Continuing in, guns hot," the major announced. "Evasive maneuvers."

Major Prechitt maneuvered his fighter in wild fashion. Side to side, up and down, varying his patterns as unpredictably as possible as he continued toward the gunboat at full power. "Translating up," he reported as he fired his bottom thrusters. The gunboat ahead of him dropped down out of his view momentarily, until he pitched

his nose down to bring his guns onto the target. "Firing guns."

Red bolts of energy leapt from the cannons built into the leading edges of the fighter's wing-body. Pieces of the gunboat's hull blew apart, sending debris scattering in all directions in the low-gravity environment of space. The major continued firing as his fighter slid sideways over the top of the gunboat. He watched with great pleasure as his energy weapons ripped apart one of the gunboat's many rail gun turrets. Every rail gun he destroyed was one that could no longer fire on his pilots' or any Alliance ships. "I just took out one of her topside rail guns. Try to put a missile into her as you pass," he ordered his wingman.

"Dongo, arming, Sierra one," his wingman replied. *"Hell!"*

"What is it?" the major asked, alarmed by his wingman's sudden exclamation.

"I'm hit! Underside! Can't get my weapons bay open," his wingman reported. *"Continuing gun attack."*

"Safe that missile," the major warned as he finished his pass and pitched his nose back up to maneuver and take additional evasive actions.

"I did."

"Preacher, Lapdog. Twenty seconds out. Sierra two, hot."

"Lapdog, Preacher. Golf five, weak spot, midship, topside. Watch her fore and aft dorsal rail guns, they're fast trackers."

"Lapdog copies. Firing, Sierra two."

"Jellybean, firing, Sierra two."

"Jelly, translate up, target the aft turret. I'll go forward."

"Jelly copies."

"How are you doing, Dongo?" Prechitt asked his wingman.

"I'm good, sir. Just don't ask me to fire any missiles."

"Fair enough," Major Prechitt said. "Lapdog, Jellybean, break fore and aft after your pass. We'll come about

vertically and come back across her topside again, see if we can put a hole in her."

"Lapdog copies."

"Jellybean copies."

"Preacher, pitching up relative to target," the major announced as he pulled his nose up and away from the Earth below them.

"Dongo, pitching up."

"Oh, yeah! Did you see that? Lapdog, breaking left, forward of target."

"Jellybean, breaking right, aft of target," his wingman reported.

"Preacher, starting attack run on golf five, topside, midship. Sierra two, hot."

"I got the forward dorsal turret," Lapdog reported.

"I got the aft one!" Jellybean announced.

Major Prechitt looked to his left, at the aft end of the gunboat, as one of its stern side-mounted rail guns turned toward Jellybean's Talon. "Jellybean! Pitch down and break right! You've got a turret tracking you!"

The turret finished swinging around aft and opened fire on the Talon as it pitched down and rolled onto its right side to start its turn. The slugs tore into the tail and left wing-body of the fighter, eliciting a secondary explosion in its left side. The Talon rolled back left in response, then flipped nose over tail as the rail gun slugs continued to tear it apart.

"Jellybean is down!" Major Prechitt reported over comms. "Jellybean is down!" He glanced forward again, just long enough to mark his target and launch his missiles. "Preacher, firing, Sierra two."

Major Prechitt looked back to his left as an explosion lit up the nose of the tumbling Talon fighter aft of the gunboat he had just launched his missiles toward. Something streaked away from the tumbling fighter. The major glanced down at his sensor display to confirm his suspicions. "He ejected! Jellybean ejected! I've got a good position on him. Transmitting now!"

Major Prechitt looked forward again as his two anti-ship missiles slammed into the gunboat's hull. The first missile failed to penetrate the gunboat's thick hull, but the second one crashed through and exploded from within. Chunks of the ship jetted up through the opening as it ripped open even wider.

"She's open amidships!" he announced as he pitched up to avoid the ascending debris. "Dongo! Break right to avoid debris!"

"Dongo, breaking right!"

"Lapdog, coming around to target's port side."

"Lapdog, Preacher. Put two Sierras midship and you'll cut her in half!"

"Lapdog, going hot, Sierra two."

"Shit! I'm hit!" Dongo yelled over the comms.

"What the..."

"That damned side rail gun! I've lost maneuvering! I'm dead stick!"

"He's passing over the target!" Lapdog reported. *"Dongo! You've gotta turn before that port gun gets a solution on you!"*

"I can't..."

"Preacher, pitching down!"

"...I've lost all power!"

"Rolling right! Going to guns!" Major Prechitt pushed his control stick forward, swinging his nose down as he came over the top of the gunboat, rolling his fighter over to bring both guns along the target's longitudinal line. As the gunboat's port forward rail gun turret came into his view, it was already firing. He heard a scream from his wingman just before the nose of Dongo's fighter was torn apart by rail gun fire. "Goddamn it!" the major cursed as he opened fire with his energy cannons and tore the gunboat's rail gun apart.

"Lapdog, firing, Sierra two!"

Major Prechitt watched as his fighter drifted away from the Jung gunboat. He searched for any sign that his wingman had managed to eject, but found none. Lapdog's

missiles slammed into the gunboat, driving deep into the ship's interior before exploding. Just as the major had predicted, the missiles split the gunboat in half, rendering it harmless.

"Hell yeah!" Lapdog yelled in excitement. *"Golf five is down hard!"*

Major Prechitt said nothing.

"Preacher, did Dongo get out?" Lapdog asked.

"Negative, Lapdog. Join up on me."

"Lapdog copies." The pilot's voice had suddenly lost all its excitement.

Major Prechitt sighed as he swung his nose around and reset his targeting system. "Flight, Preacher and Lapdog need a target."

"Preacher, flight. Vector two seven five. Down ten relative. Join Toodles and Hammer on golf four. Active channel tango four."

"Preacher copies," the major answered. "Joining Toodles and Hammer on golf four. Two seven five, down ten relative. Time on target, thirty seconds. Switching to tango four."

"Jump complete," the Celestia's navigator announced as the jump flash subsided.

"Ten seconds to firing solution," Luis reported.

Cameron watched the forward view screen as the topside of the Jung frigate passed from the top of the screen downward. "Stand by all forward tubes."

"Five seconds."

"They're rotating their missile launchers upward!" Ensign Kono warned.

"Three..."

"Escape jump ready," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Two..."

"They're going to fire, Commander," the sensor operator added.

"One..."

"Simultaneous fire, triple shots, one through four," Cameron said calmly. "Fire."

"Torpedoes away," Luis responded.

The Celestia's bridge lit up more brightly than before as four triple shots of red-orange plasma left all four of the Celestia's forward torpedo tubes and streaked over the heads on the main view screen.

"Missile launches!" Ensign Kono reported.

The bridge lit up again as a dozen bright, yellow-orange flashes appeared in the center of the main view screen, where only a moment ago the image of the Jung frigate was passing in front of them.

"Direct hits!" Luis announced with pride.

"Jump," Cameron ordered without the slightest hint of emotion.

"Jumping."

Again the blue-white jump flash filled the interior of the Celestia's bridge for a split second before subsiding.

"Jump complete."

"Helm, pitch our nose back up to match our heading," Cameron began calmly. "Three-jump box turn, single light minute jumps. Reduce your speed by eighty percent. We'll pass over the aft end of charlie four, yawing to keep our tubes on her as we pass so that we can pound the hell out of her." Cameron turned around to face Luis at the tactical station behind her. "Single shots, full power, cycle your tubes. Don't stop firing until the target is destroyed. I want that cruiser in a single pass, Mister Delaveaga."

"Yes, sir."

"Ensign Kono," Cameron said as she turned toward her sensor operator, "verify foxtrot four was destroyed. I don't want any surprises when we jump back to engage that cruiser."

"Yes, sir."

Cameron returned to the command chair and took her seat. It took all of her self-control not to show how good it felt to so easily destroy the Jung ships. Frigates, and even

cruisers were easy kills. The battleships would be a different story.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash quickly faded away.

"Helm, pitch down and bring our nose onto the target," Nathan ordered.

"Pitching down, nose to target, aye," Mister Chiles answered.

"Stand by to fire all tubes," Nathan added.

"Ready, triple shots, one through four, full power," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"Range to target, five kilometers and closing," Mister Navashee reported.

"I have a firing solution," the lieutenant announced.

"Fire all tubes," Nathan ordered calmly.

"Firing all tubes, aye."

"Captain!" Mister Navashee interrupted as the bridge was illuminated by the departing plasma torpedoes. "The target!"

Nathan looked up at the screen as the Jung frigate suddenly turned into a red and black streak and then disappeared. "What the...?"

"She's gone to FTL!" Mister Navashee said.

"Son-of-a-bitch." He looked at his sensor operator. "Where did she go?"

"No way to tell, sir," Mister Navashee admitted. "I can give you a general direction, but there's no way to know what FTL factor she left at."

"Helm, match her course. Mister Riley, calculate the target's estimated travel distance, based on last known speed and a jump factor of one point zero one of light. Then plot a jump, just shy of that distance. Jump as soon as we're on that course."

"We're chasing after her?" the lieutenant asked in surprise. "How do you know how fast she's going?"

"I don't," Nathan admitted. "But if she's doing a micro-jump to escape and return to the battle at another position, then she's going to use the lowest FTL factor possible. If she's going full out to get away, then it doesn't matter as she's already long gone."

"But the battle..."

"We'll give it one shot. If we don't find her fast, we jump back and rejoin the fight," Nathan explained. "It won't take any longer than jumping out and coming about to jump back again."

"The remaining gunboats are retreating," the Tannan sensor operator reported. "They are headed around the planet, toward the Celestia on the far side!"

"Our fighters have scared them away," Garrett exclaimed.

"Our fighters only destroyed two of their gunboats," Lieutenant Telles said.

"Is it not possible that their commander did the math, and decided that their gunboats could not prevail against so many fighters?" Garrett argued.

"You know how many fighters those battleships carry?" the lieutenant reminded him.

"But they are not here," Garrett reminded the lieutenant. "Order the fighters to pursue the gunboats," he ordered. "We shall drive them into the Celestia's guns and annihilate them."

"There may be another reason that they are withdrawing," the lieutenant warned. "Those battleships. The ones that have yet to fire on us."

Garrett's eyes widened. He turned to his weapons officer. "Concentrate all of our big guns on bravo one," he instructed. "We must strike before it is too late." He turned back to Lieutenant Telles. "If we can take down one of them before they open fire, with the help of the Aurora and the Celestia, we may yet survive."

"Celestia, Falcon. Flash traffic," Loki called over the comms.

"Falcon, go for Celestia."

"Celestia, Falcon. Six gunboats headed your way, up orbit. ETA five. Our fighters are in pursuit, so check your fire."

"Falcon, Celestia copies. We'll be watching for them."

"I can't believe this is going so well!" Josh exclaimed.

"It's not over yet, Josh," Loki warned. "There's still two battleships, a cruiser, and a frigate out there. Not to mention those six gunboats."

"You've seen how easily they're taking down those ships," Josh argued. "With all those plasma torpedoes, firing triple shots and stuff, they're knocking down their shields and tearing them open. Hell, the Aurora just took out a cruiser in a single pass!"

"Two battleships, Josh."

"One of which the Jar-Keurog is currently pummeling. Have some faith, Loki."

"I have plenty of faith, Josh," Loki said. "Faith that something completely unexpected will happen, and we'll get put right in the middle of it."

"When did you become such a pessimist, Loki?"

"Since the day I started flying with you."

"New contact!" the Jar-Keurog's sensor operator reported. "Jung frigate! I believe it is the one designated foxtrot three!"

Garrett was shocked. "Are you sure? It is supposed to be on the far side, one hundred degrees around and behind us."

"I have checked its emissions signature against the data from the Aurora," the sensor operator assured him. "It is the same one!"

"Where?"

"Port side, two kilometers and closing!"

"Closing?"

"I believe she means to ram us!" the sensor operator reported.

"She means to board us," Lieutenant Telles insisted. "Where will the frigate impact us?"

The sensor operator studied the incoming frigate's trajectory for a moment before answered. "Here! Midship, upper decks!"

Lieutenant Telles stepped over to the nearest console. "You!" he ordered the technician at a nearby console with considerable authority, "Show me the deck plans for that area." Telles studied the deck plans for several seconds. "They will drive in three directions," he said as he studied the deck plans. "Down and aft, toward main power, forward and toward the interior to capture the computer core, and here, to the control center." Telles turned to Garrett. "Arm your men. Defend this compartment at all costs!"

"But, your men, they will def..."

"To the death, which is entirely possible given the circumstances." Telles stepped closer, looking Garrett in the eye. "They cannot be allowed to take this ship, for if they do, the Earth is doomed."

"But the Aurora..."

"If the Jung retake this ship, the Aurora will have no choice but to destroy her. If you believe you are about to lose this compartment to the Jung, you must destroy the ship yourself."

"But how?" Garrett questioned. "We cannot overload the antimatter reactors. The reaction would destroy the entire planet!"

"Fire whatever maneuvering thrusters you still have left and push this vessel toward the surface. Let gravity and the atmosphere do the rest. Do you understand?"

Garrett looked the lieutenant in the eyes, gathered up his resolve, and answered. "Yes. Yes. I will do what is

necessary.”

Lieutenant Telles smiled, slapping Garrett on the side of the shoulder. “These are the events of which stories will be forever told.” He then turned and headed for the exit, Master Sergeant Jahal handing the lieutenant his helmet as he passed. Telles donned his helmet as he headed through the doorway, tapping the comm control on the side of the helmet as he broke into a jog. “Telles to all Ghatazhak. Move immediately to the port side to repel boarding attempt. Decks twelve through fifteen, sections five and six. If it moves and it is not Ghatazhak, kill it.”

Garrett turned toward his sensor operator. “Time to impact?”

“Two minutes.”

Garrett sighed, then turned to one of his subordinates. “Break out the weapons. Arm everyone.”

“Yes, sir!” his subordinate answered before departing.

“Program whatever thruster operation is necessary to send this ship plunging into the atmosphere if necessary. I want us to be ready.”

“Jump complete!” Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia’s jump flash subsided.

“Charlie four, five hundred meters to starboard of our flight path!” Ensign Kono reported.

“Range to target is fifteen hundred meters and closing fast!” Luis reported from the tactical station. “Firing solution in five seconds!”

“Helm,” Cameron began, “yaw as we pass to keep our tubes on the target. Tactical, triple shots, full power, cycled tubes. Fire when ready.”

“Yawing as we pass, aye!” Ensign Hunt answered from the helm.

“Firing one!” Luis announced.

“Navigator,” Cameron continued, “be ready on that escape jump.”

"Already plotted and ready," Mister Jakoby answered as the first triple shot of plasma torpedoes lit up the bridge.

"Direct hits!" Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. "Starboard side, main propulsion, shields are down by half!"

"Firing two!"

"Keep them coming," Cameron urged.

"More hits! Cruiser's shields are down to ten percent. They're bringing up her mains," Ensign Kono warned. "She's making a run for it."

"Firing three!"

"Helm, change your pitch as they move," Cameron ordered. "Keep our tubes on them."

"Pitching up to track the target, aye."

"Target is firing rail guns!" Ensign Kono alerted. "She's bringing her aft missile launcher around as well."

The bridge of the Celestia rocked as the Jung cruiser's massive rail guns pounded the ship's bow.

"Firing four!"

"Target's shields are down!" Ensign Kono announced. "She's charging her FTL fields!"

"Firing one!" Luis reported as he continued firing triple shots of plasma torpedoes at the fleeing target.

"Range to target is increasing," Mister Jakoby warned. "She's pulling away from us."

"Direct hits! Upper port side! Secondary explosions detected in main propulsion!"

"Firing two!"

Cameron watched the gruesome scene unfold on the main view screen in morbid fascination as the next three plasma torpedoes streaked over their heads, slamming into the aft end of the fleeing Jung cruiser. Three more bright flashes of yellow-orange light came only seconds after the previous flashes as the Celestia's sixth round of plasma torpedoes detonated. Cameron could feel herself disconnecting from the sounds of the bridge around her, as her crew continued to report events.

Cameron was startled back to reality by a brilliant flash of light on the main view screen, as the cruiser's main engines exploded.

"Target destroyed!" Luis announced triumphantly from the tactical station.

"Incoming debris!" Ensign Kono warned.

"Jump the ship!" Cameron ordered as large pieces of the enemy ship came hurtling toward them.

"Impact in thirty seconds," the Tannan sensor operator's voice announced over Lieutenant Telles's helmet comms as he and his men jogged down the outer corridor of the Jar-Keurog's thirteenth deck.

"Close up," Telles ordered as he reached up with both hands and pushed the neck collar of his torso armor up into the underside of his helmet and locked it in place. He heard a soft hiss and a sudden rush of cool air as his helmet sealed up to his torso armor, and his entire suit pressurized.

The Jung frigate fired its deceleration thrusters one last time to slow itself down to the proper speed just before the tip of its long forward penetration spear pierced the Jar-Keurog's outer hull. The spear drove in through the battleship's outer layers as the frigate's momentum continued to push it deeper into the side of the massive ship. Debris from the damaged hull tumbled out in all directions as numerous tiny electrical explosions flashed from within the outer layers of the hull.

As the resistance to the penetration spear caused the frigate to slow, the charging ship fired its forward thrusters to maintain its momentum, pushing its massive penetration spear further forward, determined to reach the decks within the battleship's thick, multi-layered hull.

The left wall in front of Lieutenant Telles exploded, tearing open in a mass of twisted metal as a massive, black, pointed spear pierced the bulkhead. The spear continued across the corridor, piercing the bulkhead on the other side with ease.

The deck shook violently, knocking the lieutenant and his men off their feet. Telles rolled over onto his side as he landed. He could hear the sound of metal being twisted, torn, and scraped as a massive black wall continued to slide across the corridor in front of them. There was a sudden rush of air, and he felt his body being pulled toward the outer edges of the ship. The lights flickered several times, then everything went dark.

Telles felt himself slam into a wall. Another body slammed against him. He could hear several more thuds around him, along with the sound of rushing air and the voices of his men calling out over comms. Then there was silence. No external sounds, just the voices of his men, and the men in the control center, all shouting in controlled states of anxiety over his helmet comms.

Lieutenant Telles reached up and turned on his external lighting on the sides of his helmet as the ship continued to shake violently. One by one, his men around him did the same. "Fall back!" he ordered his men. "Fall back!"

"Lieutenant!" Master Sergeant Jahal yelled over the comms.

"We have to get some space between us and them!" Lieutenant Telles ordered.

"What them?" Jahal wondered as he scrambled to his feet.

"Move! Move! Move!" the lieutenant ordered, grabbing one of his men by the upper arm and shoving him forward.

Telles and his men charged down the corridor away from the still sliding wall behind them. He could feel the artificial gravity in the corridor changing. First lighter, then heavier, then lighter again. Several times, he felt as if his knees would break under the strain, but each time the gravity

became heavier, the tubules in his combat undergarment adjusted to increase the strength of the muscles that supported his knees.

The wall finished sliding just as the lieutenant made his way around a corner some twenty meters down the corridor. The violent shaking stopped, leaving only an unsteady rocking sensation. The entire corridor suddenly shook again, followed by several of his men who had not yet turned the corner behind him being thrown further down the corridor along with a lot of metal debris.

The lieutenant waited for the shaking to stop, then peered back around the corner. A large opening on the side of the black wall had blown open, and Jung soldiers clad in dark gray, armored pressure suits were pouring into the corridor from the other side.

"We're being boarded!" he announced over the comms. "I need shooters on the other side! Two teams! High-low! Go, go, go!" The lieutenant leaned back around the corner as Master Sergeant Jahal lay down on the deck and poked his weapon around the corner along the floor. Both men opened fire with their energy weapons, spraying the onrushing mass of Jung troops.

Four Ghatazhak soldiers took several steps back down the corridor away from the intersection, then sprinted forward. Two men leapt high, flying through the darkened corridor just under the ceiling, firing as they sailed across. At the same time, two other men slid across the deck, also firing. All the while, Jung energy weapons fire flew down the corridor, bouncing off the walls and ceiling, narrowly missing the sailing Ghatazhak only to strike the bulkheads at the end of the corridor.

"Telles! Sinnott! We've got Jung by the dozens! Deck sixteen! B-two! They're coming up out of that big black spear that just came through!"

"We've got them down here as well!" the lieutenant answered. "Hold them as long as you can, then fall back and establish a new position! Use stunners! We have to hold

their advance long enough for the Aurora to get that frigate off of us!"

"*Yes, sir!*" Sinnott answered.

"*We've got them over here as well, Lieutenant,*" another Ghatazhak soldier reported.

"Torrezza! Is that you?" Telles asked.

"*Yes, sir!*" Torrezza answered. "*We must have gotten separated by that damned thing!*"

"That's three sides they're coming out of!" Telles said. He looked across the corridor at his men on the far side who were also firing at the Jung soldiers pouring out of the penetration spear. "Stunner!" he ordered as he pulled a small, round object from his thigh pouch. He pressed a button on the side of the device and tossed it down the corridor toward the Jung. His men on the other side followed suit, tossing balls of their own. A few seconds later, the corridor lit up with bright white flashes as the balls detonated, one after the other.

Jung troops fell to their knees, then toppled to their sides, going into convulsions as they fell. Telles and his men stepped out from the side corridors to get better angles and opened up on the falling Jung troops, tearing them apart with energy weapons fire. Within a few seconds, all the fallen Jung were shredded into various body parts all separated from their hosts. Then more soldiers—ones who had been shielded from the effects of the Ghatazhak stun-balls while still inside the frigate's massive penetration spear—came pouring out as well.

"Fall back! Twos behind fours, to intersection bravo four!" the lieutenant ordered as he pulled another stun-ball from his thigh pouch. "Control, Telles! Relay to the Aurora! Tell them to get that frigate off our hull, or we'll be completely overrun!"

"Golf eight, twenty kilometers," Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station. "Firing solution in ten seconds."

"Very well," Cameron answered. "Ensign Kono, are you detecting an antimatter core on those ships?"

The young ensign studied her sensor displays for several seconds before answering. "No, sir. I'm detecting two fusion reactors, but no antimatter."

Cameron turned to her tactical officer. "Single shots, Mister Delaveaga. Full power, cycle the tubes. We'll reassess between shots."

"Single shots, full power, cycled, aye," Luis answered.

"Full magnification on the target, please," Cameron added.

The image of the Jung gunboat still nearly twenty kilometers away appeared on the main view screen. It looked remarkably similar to the gunboats that had ambushed the Aurora eight months ago after their first test of the jump drive.

"I'm not detecting any shields," Ensign Kono said, sounding surprised.

"Gunboats don't have them," Cameron said. "At least not this class of gunboats."

Ensign Kono turned and looked at her captain.

Cameron noticed the look and glanced back toward her sensor officer. "We've faced this type of gunboat before, only they had antimatter reactors. None too pleasant when those things breach."

"I'll bet," Ensign Kono answered.

"I have a firing solution on golf eight," Luis reported.

"Comms, order our fighters to disengage and get clear."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Souza answered.

"Range is now fifteen kilometers and closing," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Our fighters are disengaging and moving clear," Ensign Kono reported. "Target is turning, she's coming about, Captain. We're being targeted."

"We're ready to fire," Luis reminded his captain.

"Not yet," Cameron instructed, "let our fighters get clear."

"Incoming rail gun fire," Ensign Kono reported.

Seconds later, Cameron felt the slugs from the gunboat's rail gun slam into the forward portions of the Celestia's armored hull, sending vibrations throughout the bridge.

"Target is powering up FTL fields, preparing to run," Ensign Kono added.

"Fire one," Cameron ordered calmly.

"Firing one," Luis answered as he activated the firing sequence for torpedo tube one.

Cameron watched as the red-orange ball of plasma slid into the magnified image from above and slammed into the bow of the small gunboat. The entire forward port quarter of the enemy vessel disintegrated, sending fragments of her interior decks spinning out in all directions. Fires within her exposed decks flashed and then disappeared as the oxygen that fed their flames was lost to the cold of space outside. The edges of the massive hull breach glowed bright red as the perimeter of the hole continued to grow larger at a decreasing rate. The plasma blast had literally melted a hole in the side of the Jung gunboat, all in a fraction of a second. The enemy ship, however, was still firing on them with her remaining guns.

"Fire two," Cameron ordered.

"Firing two," Luis answered.

Again, a ball of plasma struck the gunboat in the port side, just behind the first hole, with identical effect. This time, however, it exposed the gunboat's propellant tanks. The result was a brilliant, if not short-lived, fireball that ripped through the ship's exposed decks. The gunboat went dark.

"Target has lost all power, they're adrift, and in a lateral spin. Their orbit is decaying."

"Target their main propulsion as it comes around and fire tube three when ready," Cameron ordered.

"Targeting main propulsion," Luis answered. "Firing three."

Everyone on the bridge watched the main view screen as the lifeless gunboat slowly rotated. As its stern end came around to face them, the Celestia's third plasma torpedo slammed into the gunboat's engine. The white light of the impact flashed, and the gunboat's main thrust ports melted away to nothing before their eyes.

"They won't be going anywhere," Cameron stated. She paused for a moment, fully expecting someone on her crew to wonder if they were going to just leave the Jung gunboat and its crew to die in reentry, but not a single objection was heard. "Helm, bring us to the next gunboat," she finally ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Lieutenant Telles dove for cover, flying through the open hatch as bolts of energy from Jung weapons sprayed the corridor outside. As he scrambled back to his feet, two of his men poked their weapons around through the open hatch and continued spraying the attackers with rapid-fire laser blasts from handheld weapons.

"Give me a two-twenty!" the Ghatazhak soldier nearest the hatch yelled.

Lieutenant Telles moved in behind Master Sergeant Jahal as the master sergeant tossed a grenade to the Ghatazhak soldier at the hatch. The soldier caught the device in midair, flipped the top cover off and depressed the activator, then tossed it down the corridor toward the enemy.

An explosion rocked both the compartment and the corridor outside, nearly knocking the Ghatazhak off their feet again.

"Again!" the soldier demanded.

"There's not going to be much ship left to fight for if we keep popping two-twenties in the corridors," the master sergeant said as he tossed another grenade to the soldier at the hatch.

"As long as there's not much left of the Jung, I'm okay with that," Lieutenant Telles answered as he reached for the comm controls on the side of his helmet. "Sinnott! Telles! Sit-rep!"

"We're about thirty seconds from going hand-to-hand!" Sinnott answered over the comms. *"We keep popping two-twenties, but they keep climbing over body parts and wreckage to get to us! They're like fucking tule bugs!"*

The lieutenant looked about, trying to come up with another idea. "Fuck!" he exclaimed in uncharacteristic frustration. "Munras! Telles!"

"Go ahead, Lieutenant!" Garrett replied over the comms.

"How long until the Aurora gets here!"

"Two minutes," Garrett answered.

"We don't have two minutes!" the lieutenant answered. "They've already overrun two of my teams and are spreading throughout the ship. We're about to be overrun ourselves, and we're the last ones between them and you!"

"What would you have me do?" Garrett asked.

"Be ready to scuttle this ship!" There was no response. Lieutenant Telles looked at his master sergeant. "Do you copy?"

"Understood, Lieutenant. We will be ready."

The master sergeant looked at his lieutenant. "Do you believe he'll do it?"

"The man fought the Jung for ten years," Lieutenant Telles said. "He hates them as much as anyone. He will take great satisfaction in denying them the return of their ship."

"Give me another two-twenty!" the soldier at the door yelled.

"That was my last one," Master Sergeant Jahal answered.

"I have one more," Lieutenant Telles said as he pulled it out and tossed it to the Ghatazhak soldier at the door. "As soon as you toss it, we move!"

The soldier at the door nodded his understanding, activated the grenade then tossed it down the corridor. The grenade exploded, again rocking the entire deck.

“Move out!” Lieutenant Telles ordered. He and Master Sergeant Jahal followed the two Ghatazhak soldiers through the hatch back out into the corridor, charging down the debris-strewn passage away from their attackers. It took only seconds for their enemy to resume firing. Energy weapons blasts shot past them as they ran, bouncing off bulkheads, decks, and overheads, creating a maze of red ricochet trails in front of them. One of the Ghatazhak soldiers ahead of the lieutenant stopped and turned around to return fire as Lieutenant Telles and the master sergeant ran past him.

As they reached the next corner, Lieutenant Telles turned around to join the last Ghatazhak soldier in returning fire. Just as he got his weapon around and started firing, a Jung energy bolt landed square in the soldier’s faceplate, melting it and the top of the man’s helmet in the process. The soldier fell to his knees as his face burned from the melted faceplate and his lungs gasped for oxygen. Seconds later, he fell forward, unmoving.

Lieutenant Telles stepped to the side, ducking behind the corner, and turned to continue running. “Go! Go! Go!” he ordered the other two men. “We must move inward before the Aurora gets here. She will obliterate that frigate and everything in this section will be sucked out into space!” he explained as they charged down the corridor. “Telles to all Ghatazhak! Fall back toward the core! Fall back toward the core!”

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley announced as the Aurora’s jump flash subsided.

“Jar-Keurog dead ahead,” Mister Navashee announced. “Ten kilometers and closing fast.”

“Helm, put our nose on the aft end of that frigate,” Nathan ordered. “Tactical, stand by on all forward tubes. Single shots, half power. Let’s see if we can draw them away from the Jar-Keurog before we blow her to hell.”

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"Captain, Falcon reports the Celestia has destroyed the last cruiser and is now going after the gunships," Naralena reported.

"At least that will stop the bombardment, for now," Nathan said.

"Jump flash!" the Tannan at the Jar-Keurog's sensor station announced. "It's the Aurora!"

"Finally," Garrett said under his breath.

"They will be in firing position in ten seconds."

"And we will be rid of the parasite that has attached itself to us," Garrett mumbled in disdain.

"More contacts!" the sensor operator added. "The battleships! They just came out of FTL!"

"Where?" Garrett demanded.

"Five hundred kilometers and closing! Opposite side!"

"Target the nearest battleship!" Garrett ordered. "All weapons! Fire!"

"I have a firing solution," Lieutenant Eckert reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Fire one." Nathan ordered.

"Firing one!"

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Bravo one and bravo two just came out of FTL on the far side of the Jar-Keurog, about five hundred kilometers out."

"Impact! Aft shields!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Thirty percent drop in foxtrot three's aft shields," Mister Navashee reported.

"Are they moving?"

"No, sir."

"Fire two," Nathan ordered.

"Firing two."

"What about the battleships?" Nathan asked, his concern becoming more evident on his face. "What are they doing?"

"They're moving into firing position, moderate closure rates."

"Impact!" Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Aft shields again."

"Foxtrot three's aft shields are down to fifty percent," Mister Navashee reported.

"Range to target; five kilometers and closing," Mister Riley reported.

"Fire three," Nathan ordered.

"Firing three," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"Are the battleships firing?" Nathan asked, turning his attention back to his sensor operator.

"Not yet, sir," Mister Navashee answered, "but the Jar-Keurog sure is. She's hitting bravo two with all guns!"

"Comms, relay through the Falcon. Order the Celestia to leave the gunboats for the fighters for now and engage bravo two from behind," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Tactical, full power, all tubes, triplets, starting with tube four. Let's force her to move."

"Full power, triple shots, firing four," Lieutenant Eckert acknowledged.

Nathan glanced up as the three plasma balls streaked overhead.

"Falcon reports, Celestia has received the message, and will be on target in two minutes," Naralena reported.

"Very well," Nathan acknowledged.

"Impact!" Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station.

"Foxtrot three has lost all aft shields!" Mister Navashee announced. "She's firing thrusters, pulling away from the Jar-Keurog!"

"Finally," Nathan exclaimed.

"Foxtrot three is bringing her weapons around. Guns and missile launchers," Mister Navashee reported.

"Helm, prepare to come to port," Nathan ordered.
"Mister Riley, stand by for a thirty light second jump."

"Shall I continue firing?" Lieutenant Eckert wondered.

"Hold your fire, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered. "Let her get clear of the Jar-Keurog first."

"Her rail guns are opening fire," Mister Navashee reported.

"Hard to port!" Nathan ordered as the bridge shook from the impact of enemy rail gun slugs.

"She'll have her missile launchers around in five seconds!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Be ready on the jump, Mister Riley," Nathan reminded.

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Aft tubes, full power, simultaneous triple shots, as soon as you get a solution," Nathan ordered.

"Aft tubes, full power, triple shots," Lieutenant Eckert answered. "Six seconds to firing solution."

"Target's missile launchers will be ready to fire in two seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"Solution in four," the tactical officer added.

"Missile launch!" Mister Navashee announced. "Eight missiles inbound! Impact in six seconds!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"I have a firing solution," Lieutenant Eckert announced.
"Firing tubes four and five!"

"Impact in three seconds," Mister Navashee warned.

"Direct hits!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Target is breaking up!" Mister Navashee added.

"Jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley answered as the Aurora's blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete."

"Mister Navashee, verify foxtrot three is dead."

"Aye, sir."

"Helm, ninety degrees to starboard," Nathan added.
"Standard three-jump box turn. We'll come around and jump

in behind bravo one, about ten kilometers out, on a forty-five degree angle to her aft starboard side."

The control center of the Jar-Keurog shook violently as alarms sounded from all stations within the compartment.

"What is it?" Garrett demanded. "What is happening?"

"The frigate!" the Tannan sensor operator reported. "It exploded! We have been struck by its debris! Massive sections of our hull have been opened to space across our port side! Decks ten through eighteen, sections four..." The sensor operator turned to look at Garrett as he finished his report, his mouth agape, "...five, and six."

"Telles, Garrett!" Garrett called over his comms. "Telles, this is Garrett! Do you hear me?" Garrett waited for several moments, desperately hoping that the lieutenant would respond. "Command center calling any Ghatazhak. Report!"

"Sir!" the sensor operator interrupted. "The battleships are opening fire on us!"

The Jar-Keurog began to shake violently as the massive slugs from the rail guns of both Jung battleships pounded her shields.

"Shields are down to thirty percent!"

"Continue firing on the nearest battleship!" Garrett ordered. "If we must die, we shall take at least one of them with us!"

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia's jump flash cleared.

"Commander!" Ensign Kono called out. "Bravo one and bravo two are both pounding the Jar-Keurog!"

"What about the frigate?" Cameron wondered.

"She's gone!" Ensign Kono reported. "I'm picking up a lot of debris on the Jar-Keurog's port side, and there are several massive openings in her side as well."

"Range to bravo two is twenty kilometers and closing," Luis reported from the tactical station.

"Prepare to fire on all forward tubes," Cameron ordered. "Full power, triplets, cycle your tubes, continuous fire."

"Forward tubes, full power, triplets, cycled and continuous," Luis acknowledged.

"The Jar-Keurog is returning fire!" Ensign Kono reported. "Recommend we pitch down after firing and go deep under her to avoid the Jar-Keurog's fire."

"Helm?" Cameron called.

"Understood," Ensign Hunt answered.

"Where's the Aurora?" Cameron asked.

"I'm not picking her up, sir," Ensign Kono answered.

"I have a firing solution," Luis announced.

"Target their aft guns and missile launchers, and fire when ready," Cameron ordered.

"Targeting aft weapons. Opening fire!" Luis announced.

"Prepare aft tubes. Full power, triplets, simultaneous," Cameron ordered as the bridge flashed red-orange continuously as triple shots of plasma streaked over them in rapid succession.

"Mister Jakoby, prepare to jump ahead five hundred kilometers," Cameron added. "Helm, expect to pitch our stern up to bring aft tubes onto the target immediately after the jump. As soon as we fire from our stern tubes, we'll jump ahead again, thirty light seconds."

"Yes, sir," both the navigator and the helmsman answered.

"Comms, broadcast our attack plan to the Aurora, so she knows what we're doing."

"Do we even know where she is?" Ensign Souza reminded her.

"She's out there somewhere," Cameron said. "She probably just jumped, so we haven't picked up her light yet."

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Bravo one, dead ahead, fifty kilometers and closing fast," Mister Navashee reported.

"I have a firing solution," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Open fire, all tubes," Nathan ordered.

"Firing all tubes," the lieutenant answered.

"Both battleships are firing on the Jar-Keurog," Mister Navashee added. "She's about to lose all starboard shields, sir!"

"One away."

"Be ready to pitch down and pass under the target, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered as the Aurora's plasma torpedoes streaked overhead. "We'll jump ahead five hundred kilometers and then hit her with our stern tubes before we jump away again."

"Captain!" Naralena called out. "Message from the Celestia. She's going to pass under bravo two, their port to starboard."

"Two away," Lieutenant Eckert reported as he continued firing triple shots of plasma torpedoes at the Jung battleship directly ahead of them.

"Helm, belay last," Nathan ordered. "We'll pass *over* the target instead."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"Three away."

"Captain! Oh, my God!" Mister Navashee exclaimed.

Nathan turned suddenly to look at his sensor officer.

"The Jar-Keurog! Her shields are gone! She's coming apart!"

"Four away."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Nathan exclaimed. "Are our torpedoes having *any* effect?"

"Negligible, sir," Mister Navashee answered as he stared at his sensor displays. "We've put eight—correction, twelve into her port side and her shields have barely dropped five percent."

"Helm, hold your course. Hold the jump," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, another round, all forward tubes."

"Holding course," Mister Chiles answered.

"Holding the jump," Mister Riley followed.

"One away," Lieutenant Eckert reported as he resumed firing plasma torpedoes.

"Celestia has jumped under bravo two," Mister Navashee reported. "She's firing her aft tubes on the target now."

"Two away."

"Any change in bravo two's shields?"

"Negative," Mister Navashee reported. "Bravo one is bringing her guns to port, Captain. They're targeting us."

"Three away."

"Celestia has jumped away," Mister Navashee reported.

"Four away."

"Hold your course. Keep firing," Nathan ordered.

"Holding course, aye."

"Firing one," the lieutenant reported. "Captain, if we don't jump..."

"Bravo one has target lock on us," Mister Navashee warned. "She's firing her main guns!"

"Firing two."

"Plasma cannon, Lieutenant!" Nathan ordered. "Target her nearest big gun!"

"Firing three," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Targeting plasma cannon onto target's aft rail gun. Firing plasma cannon, one second intervals. Firing tube four."

"No effect!" Mister Navashee reported.

The Aurora shook violently as the first of the Jung battleship's massive rail gun slugs slammed into the Aurora.

"Hull breach, missile deck! Just below the plasma cannon!" Naralena reported.

"The plasma cannon is not getting through their shields, Captain," Mister Navashee warned.

The Aurora shook again.

"Another hull breach, starboard fighter alley."

"Helm! Pitch up, hard! Navigator! Jump us, ASAP!"

"Pitching up hard!" Mister Chiles answered as he entered commands into the helm.

"Jumping thirty light seconds in three..."

The ship shook again, this time her aft end sliding slightly to port.

"Two..."

"I just lost number twelve maneuvering thrusters!" Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "Compensating with eleven and thirteen!"

"One..."

The Aurora shook one last time, as another rail gun round slammed into them.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley announced. The Aurora's blue-white jump flash washed over them. "Jump complete."

"Come about to port, ninety degrees, then jump ahead thirty light seconds."

"Coming to port, aye," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"Comms, broadcast to the Celestia. Tell them to hold position and give us their coordinates so we can rendezvous."

"Yes, sir."

"Mister Navashee, what are the targets doing now?"

"I'll need a few, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "We're thirty light seconds out."

"Where'd we take that last hit?" Nathan wondered.

"Port side, just below the forward torpedo bay," Naralena answered. "Damage control reports propellant tanks eight and ten are open to space."

"Casualties?"

"Eleven wounded, four dead, two missing," Naralena answered.

"Captain, both battleships are moving into orbit. Bravo one on the near side, bravo two on the far side."

"They're moving in to continue the bombardment," Nathan surmised. "What about those gunboats?" Nathan wondered.

"Unknown, Captain," Mister Navashee answered. "They're still on the far side, and we haven't gotten a data feed from the Falcon in several minutes now."

"Celestia has answered, Captain," Naralena reported from the comm station. "They're holding position, waiting for us."

"I've got their position, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Plot a jump to rendezvous," Nathan ordered.

"The Celestia just fired on bravo one," Loki announced from the back seat of the Falcon's cockpit. "Twelve total plasma torpedoes."

"Did it do any good?" Josh asked.

"Weakened her shields a bit. Three percent reduction, maybe." Loki answered. "She just jumped out again."

"Don't suppose it stopped them from bombing the Earth, did it?"

"Nope," Loki answered. "Bravo two is moving in over the Americas now."

"Damn!" Josh exclaimed. "This sucks! We can't just sit here and watch."

"What do you propose we do, Josh? Attack a battleship? Even you're not that crazy."

Josh sighed.

"The Aurora just jumped in... Same as the Celestia did. She's firing as well. Bravo one is firing on her, though. Her guns were already moving in that direction, I guess."

"Well, that doesn't seem very bright."

"They jumped away," Loki reported. "Maybe he was testing their response?"

"Maybe."

"Bravo two is launching against the surface," Loki said in somber tones. "This is really difficult to watch."

"You're telling me."

"Celestia just jumped in again. From bravo one's topside this time. She's firing triplets, all four tubes at once. She just

fired a second set of four as well."

"Anything?"

"Two percent again."

"Why don't they concentrate on the same spot?" Josh wondered.

"Then the Jung can just leave all their guns and missiles pointed in the same direction," Loki explained. "Blast them every time they jump in."

"It will take them forever to wear down that battleship's shields this way," Josh said.

"Worse, eventually the battleship will just point a few guns in each direction, so they can shoot quickly no matter what angle they jump in from."

"Why don't they jump inside their shields?" Josh asked. "It worked before."

"They jumped through a weak spot between shields, remember?" Loki reminded him.

"So just find another weak spot."

"Won't work," Loki told him. "The battleship has pulled its shields in tighter than before."

"How tight?" Josh wondered.

Loki's eye moved from his sensor displays in front of him to the back of Josh's helmet a meter and a half in front of him. "Why?"

"Just wondering?"

"About five hundred meters."

"Hell, we could fit in there."

"I knew it!" Loki exclaimed.

"What?"

"I knew you were going to find another way to get us killed."

"Oh, come on, Loki!" Josh replied.

"Wouldn't work anyway!" Loki exclaimed. "Their shields are too strong. We'd never make it through."

"Actually, we would." Josh said.

"No, we wouldn't."

"I'm telling you, Loki, we would. I was reading..."

"If the Aurora can't jump through them, how do you expect us to jump through them?"

"The Aurora's too damned big!" Josh argued. "I was studying the sensor logs from the battle against the Jar-Keurog."

"What the hell were you doing with the sensor logs?"

"I was running out of stuff to read during all those damned recon jumps," Josh explained. "Kaylah gave me a copy to study, to look for anomalies and such. There's a gap in between the shield overlaps. They're like panels that overlap but don't actually touch. Kaylah said they probably have to do that so that when one shield panel overloads it doesn't cause a cascade effect that brings down all the other shields."

"How big a gap?"

"Maybe a hundred meters or so?"

"Or so?"

"I'm not sure. It was something like that. I know it was at least one hundred, though."

"You're sure it wasn't one hundred centimeters?" Loki wondered, "because that would really make a difference, you know."

"No, it was at least one hundred meters," Josh insisted. "That much I'm sure of."

"So, you want to jump us in between two highly charged energy barriers that are only one hundred meters apart, so we can go in and attack a battleship that's about ten kilometers long and has a million guns."

"Yeah, something like that. Can you plot that jump?"

"No, I can't," Loki said. "The jump computer can, though." He sighed. "I knew this was going to happen."

"Come on, Loki. What are we supposed to do? Sit here and watch the Earth get wiped out? Especially when we know we can do something about it?"

"Don't you think we should run this past the captain first?" Loki asked as he began processing the jump calculations.

"So he can say no?" Josh said. "You heard him that day outside of medical, after we rescued Jessica. He sends us in because he knows we'll do something exactly like this. Hell, he's practically expecting it."

"I've given up arguing with your twisted logic, Josh. Just bring us twenty degrees to port and apply ten percent forward thrust for twenty seconds so I can set up the first jump."

Josh smiled. "This will work, Loki. Trust me."

Loki rolled his eyes.

"All forward tubes charged and ready," Lieutenant Eckert reported from the Aurora's tactical station. "Triple shots, simultaneous, full power."

"Stand by to execute attack jump," Nathan ordered.

"Standing by to jump," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Under or over this time, sir?" Mister Chiles asked.

"Whichever way her guns aren't pointing," Nathan told him.

"Celestia should be finishing her attack run and jumping clear in five seconds," the lieutenant added.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The jump flash washed over the bridge once again as the Aurora instantly moved one light minute closer toward her target.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the jump flash faded away.

"Bravo one, dead ahead," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Range is twelve kilometers and closing. I have a firing solution."

"Target is bringing her main guns around," Mister Navashee reported, "top to bottom."

"Fire all forward tubes," Nathan ordered.

"Firing."

The bridge glowed a hellish orange-red as twelve plasma torpedoes streaked overhead on the main view screen.

“Direct hits, port midship shields,” Mister Navashee reported. “Three percent drop in shields twenty-two and twenty-three.”

“Pitch under her, Mister Chiles. Prepare to jump ahead thirty light seconds.”

“Pitching down, aye,” Mister Chiles acknowledged from the helm.

“Captain!” Mister Navashee cried out in surprise. “Jump flash!”

“The Celestia?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir! The Falcon, and she’s inside bravo one’s shields! She’s hauling ass across her port side, firing her nose turret! Holy crap! She’s targeting their shield emitters!”

“What?” Nathan suddenly rose to his feet. “How the hell...”

“They must have jumped in between layers, Captain. The Jung shields have overlapping layers, but they don’t actually touch. There’s a gap.”

“Her guns are targeting us, Captain,” Lieutenant Eckert reminded Nathan. “They’re going to fire any second.”

“New jump!” Nathan ordered. “Five light seconds! Jump when ready!”

“Five light seconds,” Mister Riley answered.

“How big a gap?” Nathan wondered. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“It’s only fifty meters wide,” Mister Navashee said, “and it’s not consistent.”

“We didn’t think it was of any use as there was no angle that would give us a firing solution,” Lieutenant Eckert added.

“Jumping in five...”

“Jesus, Captain! It’s working! At least four of their shields are down to thirty percent power!” Mister Navashee exclaimed. “They’re taking out emitters all over the place!”

“Four...”

“If they stay in there too long, one of those mini-guns is going to get lucky,” Lieutenant Eckert warned.

"Three..."

"Comms, area broadcast to the Celestia. Tell her to attack those shields. Mister Navashee, give her the shield numbers. And tell the Falcon to get out of there before they get hammered!"

"Two..."

"They're guns have us targeted," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"One..."

"The Falcon just jumped away!" Mister Navashee reported.

"They're firing!"

"Jumping."

The jump flash lit up the inside of the bridge as the Aurora slipped away just far enough to ruin the enemy battleship's firing solution.

"Jump complete."

"Helm, box turn, up and over. Get us back onto her port side, quick as you can."

"Comms, did you make contact with the Falcon?"

"No, sir. They jumped away before I could hail them," Naralena answered.

"First turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jumping in three seconds..."

"Keep trying to make contact with them," Nathan said.

"Two..."

"Tell them not to do that again until we can coordinate our attacks together," Nathan continued.

"One..."

"This might be our one and only chance."

"Jumping."

"Fuck! That was awesome!" Josh exclaimed. "That was some great shooting there, Loki! You must've taken out twenty or thirty emitters in a single pass!"

"Hell, I was just sweeping the area," Loki admitted. "I wasn't targeting anything!"

"That has got to help!"

"Maybe some, but we're going to have to make at least one or two more passes."

Josh turned to look over his shoulder at Loki. "Are you serious?"

"Hey, it was your idea," Loki said.

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd be willing to do it more than once."

"I got a good scan of those gaps while we were inside their shields. By the way, Josh, the gaps aren't one hundred meters... More like forty to fifty meters."

"Hey, I just figured that..."

"Yeah, I know what you figured."

"So, we're going back in?"

"Hell yes," Loki declared, "and I know just how to do it. Roll forty to starboard and then pitch up ninety. We need to come at them from a different angle every time or they'll nail us."

"You got it," Josh agreed as he rolled the ship and then pulled their nose up. "Maneuver complete."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping," Loki announced. A moment later their cockpit lit up with the blue-white flash of the jump. "Jump complete. Pitch another one hundred, then roll forty-five back to port so we'll have our belly at them and we'll fit between the layers."

"Got it," Josh said as he executed the next maneuver.

"As soon as we come out of the jump, you'll have ten seconds to translate us twenty meters closer to the target. If we don't we'll be on the wrong side of the next shield panel."

"And if I only manage nineteen meters of translation?" Josh wondered.

"Then we slam into the edge of the next shield."

"What will that do to us?"

"I have no idea, and I don't wish to find out."

"Twenty it is," Josh said. "Maneuver complete. Hey, maybe we should slow down a bit then?"

Loki smiled. "Now that's a new one. Josh Hayes wants to slow down."

"No, seriously, Loki," Josh said, turning his head back toward him again. "Why risk it if we don't have to?"

"The slower we go, the greater the chance we get taken out by one of their point-defense turrets," Loki explained.

"How come I didn't have to translate downward last time?"

"I guess the gap was big enough that we made it through with a little bit of an angle. The next one isn't."

"Well, all right then."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Josh fired the Falcon's topside thrusters to push them down closer to the enemy battleship as the jump flash washed over them.

"Jump complete!" Loki announced.

"Translating down!" Josh reported.

"Firing!" Loki pressed the trigger on the control stick for the Falcon's double-barreled energy cannon turret that sat under their nose just forward of the cockpit. He swung the cannon from side to side, trying to take aim at emitters whenever he spotted them.

"Oh, fuck!" Josh exclaimed. "They're firing at us! Hang on!" Josh put the Falcon into a series of wild maneuvers, translating her from side to side and varying their distance from the hull of the massive battleship as they streaked along her surface, firing all the while. Debris flew up as the bolts of energy from their turret plowed into the hull of the black and red battleship.

Josh's eyes suddenly became huge. "Fuck! Fighters!"

Several dozen Jung fighters began to pour out of one of the battleship's numerous hangar bays directly in the Falcon's path.

"Shit!" Josh exclaimed as he rolled the ship wildly as they passed through the exiting swarm of enemy fighters.

"Did we make it?" Josh opened his eyes. "Hah! Did you see that? It was like the waterfall, only worse!"

"We've got about twenty Jung fighters on our ass, Josh!"

"Well jump us the hell out of here, then!"

"Jumping in three..."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"All forward tubes ready," Mister Eckert reported.

"Falcon just jumped away!" Mister Navashee announced.

"They did it, Captain! Bravo one's midship shields are down!"

"Contact the Celestia, tell them to follow us in and stay to our starboard side. Keep pounding that battleship until she splits open," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Mister Riley, jump us in, twenty kilometers out."

"Twenty out, aye," Mister Riley answered. "Jumping in three..."

"Stand by triple shots, full power, cycle your tubes."

"Two..."

"Triple shots, full power, cycled, aye," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"One..."

"Keep firing until she's beaten," Nathan added.

"Jumping."

The Aurora's jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Target her midship and open fire!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing one!" the lieutenant answered.

"Full deceleration, Mister Chiles," Nathan added.

"Full deceleration, aye."

"Firing two!"

"Full magnification," Nathan ordered.

"All torpedoes are hitting her hull!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing three!"

"We're digging into her, sir!" his sensor operator added.

"Firing four!"

"Celestia just jumped in off our starboard beam!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing one!"

"Celestia is opening fire," Mister Navashee added.

"Firing two!"

Nathan watched the main view screen as triplets of red-orange plasma torpedoes from both the Aurora and the Celestia streaked toward the Jung battleship in rapid succession, each of them reporting impact with brilliant yellow-white flashes.

"Firing three!"

"Target is bringing her main guns around to fire," Mister Navashee reported. "All her port-side shields are failing!"

"Target her port guns with the plasma cannon, Lieutenant!" Nathan ordered.

"Targeting her port-side guns," the lieutenant acknowledged. "Firing four! Plasma cannon locked on her aft-most port gun. Firing one! Firing plasma cannon!"

"Comms, tell the Celestia to target bravo one's forward-most port-side guns with her plasma cannon as well."

"Yes, sir!" Naralena answered.

"One gun destroyed. Targeting the next gun forward. Firing two!"

"Jesus that ship can take a beating!" Nathan exclaimed.

"I'm starting to read multiple systems overloads within bravo one's hull," Mister Navashee reported. "They're jettisoning their antimatter cores!"

"So they don't mind glassing the planet, but they don't want to completely destroy it," Nathan said.

"She's going!" Mister Navashee announced.

There was a brilliant white flash, followed by numerous smaller flashes, too many to count.

"Had to be one of her ordnance bays," Mister Navashee reported.

The flashes became less frequent, finally subsiding completely a few seconds later. All that was left were

massive, dead sections of the ship, floating amongst a field of debris.

"Target bravo one is down," Lieutenant Eckert announced with obvious satisfaction.

"I have the Falcon, Captain," Naralena reported.

"Put them on," Nathan ordered. He tapped his headset. "Falcon, Aurora Actual. What in the hell did you think you were doing? More importantly, do you think you can do it again?"

"Yes, sir," Loki answered over the comms. "I managed to collect really good scans of both their shield grid overlaps and spacings on the first pass, and emitter placements on the second. If you give me a few minutes, I can program in auto-targeting recognition parameters so that our gun turret will pick them off on its own."

"Great," Nathan answered. *"It will take us about five minutes to get around to the far side and make at least one attack run on her. It would probably be better to make several, get the target thinking about us instead of you."*

"Won't they already know what we're going to do?" Josh wondered.

"They're on the far side, Josh," Loki answered. "They didn't even see it happen."

"What if they had someone sitting in high orbit watching like us?"

"We would've picked them up on sensors," Loki argued.

"Start your attack run in ten minutes," Nathan ordered. *"That should give us all plenty of time."*

"Understood, sir."

"Nice work, gentlemen. Aurora Actual, out."

"We'll pitch, yaw, and roll as we pass over her," Nathan explained to his helmsman, using his hands to demonstrate the maneuver. "That way, we keep our tubes on her the

entire time, and we maintain constantly changing yet *minimal* target profile."

Mister Chiles smiled at his captain's enthusiastic demonstration of a rather basic maneuver. "I've got it, sir."

"Of course you do," Nathan said, patting his able young helmsman on the shoulder. Mister Chiles and Mister Riley were nowhere near as animated and excitable as Josh and Loki, but when it came to flying the Aurora, they had proven themselves to be skilled professionals, calm and collected when under fire.

"The Celestia will be in position and ready to start her attack run in one minute," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "All forward tubes are charged and ready, and the plasma cannon has been programmed to automatically target bravo two's big guns."

"Weapons free on all systems," Nathan ordered. "Feel free to pop off a few rounds at anything you can get a decent shot at."

"I've instructed combat to take control of both the quads and the plasma cannon, sir. I wanted to make sure that I didn't get overloaded and miss an opportunity to fire."

"Good thinking, Lieutenant." Nathan turned to his sensor operator. "How are things looking down there?"

"The surface is getting pounded," Mister Navashee answered. "Mixture of low-yield tactical nukes, high-altitude EMP blasts, and precision conventional stuff. And it's not just carpet bombing, either. They're flattening cities with nukes, taking out infrastructure, and disabling everything electronic in and around every major population area on the planet."

"Worse than before?"

"Much worse, I'm afraid."

"Fifteen seconds to jump," Mister Riley reported.

"Then we better make this work," Nathan said, "or there won't be anything left worth saving."

"Falcon reports they'll be ready to start their first run in five minutes," Naralena reported.

"Good. Just remind them to stick to the schedule. I don't want us to be shooting at that battleship while they're on their attack runs."

"Yes, sir."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles reported as the Aurora's jump flash washed over them.

The view of the second Jung battleship suddenly filled their main view screen.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Range to target is ten kilometers and closing!" Mister Navashee announced. "We're passing over her from her port to starboard. Closest range will be four kilometers."

"Firing one!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Adding yaw and roll," the helmsman announced.

"Jump flash!" Mister Navashee announced. "The Celestia has started her run."

"Firing two!" Lieutenant Eckert continued. "Quads and plasma cannon are firing."

"She's passing under them," Mister Navashee continued, "from the target's starboard to port."

"Firing three!"

"Several of her topside shields are down by two or three percent," Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing four!"

"No damage to the target. They're firing point-defenses at us. Bringing their missile launchers and big guns onto us as well."

"Firing one!"

"Stand by to jump," Nathan said as he watched the plasma torpedoes strike the battleship's shields in brilliant yellow-white flashes.

"Jump plotted and loaded," Mister Riley answered.

"Firing two!"

"Passing the midpoint," Mister Navashee announced. "Range is four kilometers and growing."

"Firing three!"

"Target is bringing their starboard missile launchers up to fire on us as we pass!" Mister Navashee warned.

"Firing four!"

"We'll only have ten seconds to jump clear when she fires!"

"Firing one!"

"Target's shields are down ten percent," Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing two!"

The Aurora began to shake violently as rail gun slugs from the enemy battleship's massive rail guns began to pound their hull, tearing it open.

"She's firing her mains!"

"Hull breach! Deck C! Forward of section eight!" Naralena announced.

"Firing three!"

"Damage control reports fires on Deck C, sections seven and eight!"

"Celestia has jumped away!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing four!"

"Jump the ship," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping, aye!" Mister Riley answered.

The blue-white jump flash washed over them again, and the violent shaking instantly ceased as the Aurora jumped clear of the battleship's guns as well.

"Turn us tight, Mister Hunt," Cameron ordered. "I want to start the next attack run as soon as possible."

"Coming around hard," Ensign Hunt answered from the Celestia's helm.

"Five seconds to next jump," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Damage report?" Cameron asked Ensign Souza at the comm station.

"Reports are still coming in, sir. We took some hull damage, but most of our damage monitoring systems are

not hooked up yet, so someone has to be there to see and report the damage."

"And we are woefully understaffed, as well," Cameron added as the Celestia's jump flash filled the bridge momentarily.

"Yes, sir," Ensign Souza answered. "No casualties reported so far though."

"Good enough."

"Executing second turn," Ensign Hunt reported.

"Ten seconds to attack jump," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Falcon just jumped into position for her attack jump," Ensign Kono announced.

"Five seconds."

"Forward tubes are charged and ready."

"Add a little forward speed, Ensign. It's a long run from that ship's bow to stern," Cameron said.

"Bringing up the mains," Ensign Hunt answered.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Killing the mains and adjusting pitch to maintain firing solution," Ensign Hunt reported as the jump flash subsided.

"Firing solution in three seconds," Luis reported.

"Fire when ready," Cameron ordered. "All forward tubes."

"Range to target is eight kilometers and closing," Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. "We'll pass within four kilometers."

"Firing forward tubes, full power, triplets, cycled and continuous," Luis reported as the first three torpedoes streaked over head on the main view screen.

"Direct hits!" Ensign Kono reported. "Topside, forward section. Enemy shields are down three percent. No damage noted."

"Continue firing."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered as he continued firing plasma torpedoes at the battleship.

"Aurora just jumped in aft of the target," Ensign Kono reported. "She's passing under, aft to bow. She's firing."

"All four tubes have been fired, repeating from tube one!" Luis reported.

"Target is bringing her rail guns on us!" Ensign Kono reported. "She's firing!"

Cameron felt the ship suddenly lurch to starboard as the first massive rail gun slug slammed into the port side of the Celestia.

"Hull breach! Port side!" Ensign Souza reported. "Decompression in port-side fighter alley!"

"Falcon has started their attack run," Ensign Kono announced.

"Passing midpoint!" Luis reported. "Continuing to fire forward tubes."

"They're bring their topside aft missile turret around," Ensign Kono warned. "If they fire, we'll only have a few seconds to jump out of the way!"

"Mister Jakoby, be ready to jump," Cameron ordered.

"Already am, sir," the navigator answered.

The ship lurched again, this time in the opposite direction.

"Another hull breach!" Ensign Souza reported. "Main propulsion, forward, starboard side..."

"Tubes two and four are down!" Luis reported. "I lost all starboard tubes!"

"Continue firing with one and three!" Cameron ordered.

"They're going to get hot," Luis warned.

"I just lost all power to the starboard jump field generators!" Mister Jakoby announced. "We can't jump!"

"Aft missile launcher is painting us!" Ensign Kono reported.

"Discontinue torpedo attack!" Cameron ordered. "Helm, nose on course and go to full power!"

"Pitching up to course, full power, aye!"

"Missile launch!" Ensign Kono announced. "Four inbound!"

"Ten seconds to impact!" Luis added. "Firing point-defense lasers! Recommend hard to starboard and roll to

the same!”

“Helm!” Cameron began.

“Turning and rolling to starboard!” Ensign Hunt answered, anticipating his commanding officer’s next request.

“One missile down!” Luis reported. “Two down.”

“Sound impact warning, all decks!”

“Attention all decks! Missile impact! Missile impact!”

The Celestia shook violently as the last two enemy missiles detonated, pushing their aft end hard over to port.

“We’re hit!” Ensign Kono reported.

“I’ve lost engines three and four!” Ensign Hunt announced.

“Damage control reports explosions in main propulsion!” Ensign Souza reported. “Starboard side, aft!”

“Maintain your turn,” Cameron ordered. “Tighter if you can. We can’t let them get a shot at our last two engines!”

“Jump complete!” Loki announced as the flash subsided.

“Damn!” Josh exclaimed. “That was fucking wild! Nice target coding, by the way!”

“Thanks,” Loki said. “Come back around to our next jump point so we can get to our next pass.”

“Coming hard about,” Josh answered as he started a hard turn to port.

“Oh, shit!” Loki exclaimed. “The Celestia’s getting beat up! She just took another missile amidships!”

“Why isn’t she jumping?”

“She must have lost her jump drive!” Loki exclaimed. “She’s trying to fight off the missile attacks with her point-defense lasers.”

“What about the Aurora?”

“She just jumped away,” Loki answered. “She should be moving into kill position in one minute.”

“Turn complete!” Josh announced as he straightened out their course. “On heading and speed for next attack jump.”

“Engaging auto-jump,” Loki said. “Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

“Translating down hard!” Josh reported as the jump flash faded.

“Jump complete. Starting auto-fire!” Loki reported.

The Falcon slipped downward closer to the surface of the massive battleship and began firing. Narrow bolts of energy streamed from the twin barrels of their nose turret in rapid succession as the turret danced from target to target, as it fired at every shield emitter it detected.

“Translation complete!” Josh announced. He looked out his forward canopy as the surface of the battleship streaked under them just ten meters below. “Fuck, this is intense!” he exclaimed as rail gun fire from the battleship’s point-defense turrets began to stream up toward them.

“The Aurora just jumped in off the target’s port side!” Loki reported. “She’s firing behind us!”

“Not too close, I hope!”

“It’s working!” Loki exclaimed with excitement. “Cascade failure! All shields!”

Josh looked up as the glimmering energy barrier above them that protected the enemy battleship from the Aurora’s weapons suddenly faded from existence. “Let’s jump the fuck out of here!”

“I’m on it!”

The Falcon suddenly lurched upward, her tail coming up sharply.

“What the...”

“We’re hit!” Loki announced.

The ship lurched again, this time rolling over to starboard.

“Fuck!” Josh exclaimed.

Another lurch, followed by an explosion in their left lifting body wing.

“We just lost our jump drive!” Loki reported.

“I’ve got no lateral controls!” Josh announced. Another impact and the Falcon began a lateral spin. “Shit, Loki!

"We're going down!"

"Do something!"

"I can't!" Josh exclaimed in frustration. "I've got no controls!" Josh glanced outside as the surface of the massive battleship came rushing up toward them. "I'm sorry, Loki."

"Cascade failure of all her shields!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Open fire! All tubes!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing all tubes!" Lieutenant Eckert answered as red-orange balls of plasma began to streak overhead.

"The Falcon is hit!" Mister Navashee reported. "She's hit again! Explosion in her left wing! She's in a lateral spin! She's going down! Impact in five seconds!"

Nathan jumped to his feet, staring at the screen in hopes of seeing the Falcon, despite the fact that they were still too far away to see anything.

"Impact!" Mister Navashee reported. "The Falcon is down hard!"

"Did they eject?"

"No, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "I didn't see anything. Just a big explosion on impact."

"Scan for emergency transponders," Nathan ordered.

Mister Navashee shook his head. "I'm not picking up any from the Falcon," he said. "Just from some of our Talon pilots further down range."

A wave of sorrow washed over Nathan like an icy cold. He suddenly felt nauseated and light-headed, causing him to sit back down.

"Bravo two is breaking up," Mister Navashee reported. "She's ejecting her cores!"

Several brilliant flashes appeared on the main view screen as the Jung battleship blew apart.

"Bravo two is destroyed," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

Nathan's head hung low. He had just lost two of the finest young pilots he had ever known. He had just lost two of his friends.

"Captain, the Celestia is requesting evacuation of their wounded," Naralena reported.

"Remaining three gunboats are going to FTL," Mister Navashee reported.

"The Jung may not surrender, but they do retreat," Lieutenant Eckert stated.

"Captain?" Naralena urged.

"Launch the medevacs," Nathan ordered solemnly. "And launch the SAR shuttles to pick up those Talon pilots."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Secure from general quarters," Nathan said as he stood and headed for his ready room. "You have the conn, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Eckert watched his captain pass by him out of the corner of his eye, nodding to him as he passed. "Aye, sir. I have the conn."

CHAPTER TEN

Nathan sat in his ready room, his hands shaking from the overdose of adrenalin still coursing through his veins. They had just taken on, and defeated, twenty Jung warships, of which only three gunboats had escaped. However, the toll had been enormous. They had lost the Jar-Keurog, and the nearly five hundred men who had been on board, among them being their Tannan ally, Garrett, as well as Lieutenant Montgomery, Lieutenant Telles, and half of the Ghatazhak. Even worse, he had lost Josh and Loki. The two young men had rescued Nathan and his friends from Tug's molo farm on Haven. Over the months, they had become more than Nathan's friends, they had become his eyes and ears, and on occasion, his very sword. He could always count on them to do the impossible, when it was the impossible that needed to be done.

Nathan's mourning was interrupted by the triple beep of the intercom. He turned and looked at the device built into his desk. It beeped three times again. He sighed, and reached for the controls. "Yes?"

"Captain, Commander Taylor is on vid-comm," Naralena said over the intercom.

"Put her on my screen," Nathan answered in a barely audible tone.

The large view screen built into the forward bulkhead over the couch came to life, revealing Cameron's weary-looking face. She was sitting on the edge of the desk in her ready room on board the Celestia, not more than five hundred kilometers away from them.

"You look like I feel," Nathan said.

"Thanks a lot," Cameron said. *"But I suppose I probably do. How are you doing?"*

"Okay, I guess. You heard about Josh and Loki, right?"

"*Yeah, I heard.*" Cameron was silent for several seconds. "*Ensign Schenker thinks he saw some emergency suit transponders in the area just before the Jar-Keurog was destroyed. They don't look like Corinairan transponders. We think they may be Ghatazhak.*"

"You think some of them got out alive?"

"*Anything is possible,*" Cameron said. "*They are Ghatazhak, after all.*"

Nathan nodded agreement.

"*As soon as our wounded are evacuated, I thought we would go back around to the Jar-Keurog's debris field and search for survivors.*"

"Good idea," Nathan agreed. "I've got SAR shuttles out picking up pilots who ejected and are still hanging out in orbit. A few of the Corinari pilots made it down to the surface as well."

"*Our jump drive is offline for a while,*" Cameron said.

"What happened?"

"*It got shaken up a bit when we took a few rounds from bravo two's big guns. Abby says it isn't as robustly constructed as the one on the Aurora, that the slightest thing can knock it offline. She wants to scrap it and build another one like yours from the ground up.*"

"Might not be a bad idea," Nathan said, "if the Jung give us a chance. Meanwhile, we're going to have to make do with what we've got. How long will it be down?"

"*Abby promises a day or two at the most. She could get it online quicker, but she said it wouldn't be any less touchy. If she takes an extra day or two, she can tweak it a bit. Her words, not mine.*"

"As long as it's back online before more Jung show up. That's all I care about."

"*Any word about the conditions on the surface?*" Cameron wondered.

"I haven't spoken with my father yet," Nathan said. "Just wanted to let the adrenaline wear off first, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"It looks pretty bad from up here, though."

"So, what do we do now?" Cameron asked.

"We do what we always do," Nathan answered. *"We patch things up as best we can and find a way to beat the next ship that comes our way."*

"Any ideas on how we do that?" Cameron wondered. *"The next one isn't a ship, Nathan, it's a battle platform."*

"We do what you suggested," Nathan said. *"We build even bigger plasma torpedo cannons, and install them in our launch tubes."*

"Nathan, those battle platforms are bound to have shields as well. Probably even stronger than the ones on the battle ships. Bigger cannons won't be enough."

"Then we use a jump shuttle to go in and take out emitters the same way the Falcon did," Nathan said.

"Those gunboats got away," Cameron reminded him. *"The battle platform will be expecting that trick."*

"Maybe, but it's all we've got right now."

"What about Tilly's idea of miniaturizing the jump drives even further so we can convert the last of our nuclear torpedoes into jump torpedoes?"

"It would be a lot easier if Montgomery were still alive."

"Still, it's worth looking into."

"Agreed, but first we need to at least double our current onboard fabrication capabilities."

* * *

Nathan sat down in his quarters in front of the view screen on his living room wall. He looked at the blank screen for several minutes before picking up the remote and turning it on. He called up various news feeds from the surface, splitting them into four different screens, but didn't bother with the sound. The pictures told enough of the story. The destruction was catastrophic, just as he feared.

The door buzzer sounded.

"Enter," Nathan called, unwilling to rise.

The door opened, and Jessica walked slowly inside. It was obvious that she wasn't yet herself, and every movement that she made was considered and careful.

"I didn't know you were out roaming the halls these days," Nathan said.

"I'm not," she admitted. "Had my ride drop me at your door. I figured you could use a little company right about now."

"I doubt I'd be good company," he warned.

"I'll take my chances," she said as she carefully lowered herself down onto the couch next to Nathan.

"That bad, huh?" Nathan said, seeing how difficult it had been for her to sit down.

"Yeah, so you'd better appreciate the effort, Skipper." She sighed as she settled into the couch. "I heard about Josh and Loki. That really sucks. I really liked those guys."

"Yeah, me too."

"How's Marcus taking it?"

Nathan looked at her. "I don't know. He's probably hitting a bottle of something right now. That's what I feel like doing."

Jessica looked up at the images on the view screen. "Looks pretty bad down there."

"Yup." Nathan sighed. "You know, every time I try to save the Earth, it gets more fucked up." He looked at Jessica. "I don't know that it's going to survive this one, Jess."

"It will survive," Jessica assured him. "It may not look much like the Earth we knew, but it will survive."

Nathan looked at his friend. "That's what Dubnyk said. After he spent some time looking at vids about current-day Earth. Same names, same continents, same cities, but all different. Is that how the Earth will look to us someday? Is that what we're all fighting, and dying for? An Earth that will never be the same?"

"I'm the wrong gal for such questions, Nathan. I'm here because I like the excitement, the guns, the danger." She turned her head and looked at him. "I'm kind of twisted."

"I never would've guessed," Nathan said, a small smile creeping in.

"You're here for a different reason, though," she said. "You're here because you believe in what you're doing."

"I thought I was here because I was trying to escape my family, start a new life out among the stars," he said with a wave of his hand.

"Maybe that's why you signed up, but that Nathan died a long time ago. He died when you decided to stay and face the Yamaro."

Nathan looked at her again, squinting. "When did you become so deep?"

"It's the pain killers."

"Of course. Speaking of pain killers, you got any you want to share? I have to call my father and report in. He's the leader of the Earth now, you know."

"Why does that not surprise me," Jessica said. "And no, by the way, I don't have any to share. Doc is damned stingy with those things. As a matter of fact, I'm about due for another, so I'd better get back to medical before my ride bails on me." Jessica patted Nathan on the leg. "Say 'hi' to your old man for me," she said as she slowly rose from the couch. She moved across the room toward the door, stepping carefully. She paused and turned back toward the captain. "Just keep doing what you've been doing, Nathan. You're a lot better at this than you think you are."

Nathan watched his friend exit, then picked up his comm-set and put it on his ear. "Comms, Captain."

"Go ahead, sir," the comm officer answered.

"Contact President Scott of the NAU and patch him through to the view screen in my quarters."

"Straight away, sir."

* * *

The hatch on the aft end of the search and rescue shuttle opened, and two Ghatazhak soldiers in pressurized combat suits stepped inside. The two soldiers stepped around the

shuttle's crew chief and moved forward, taking seats next to Master Sergeant Jahal and another Ghatazhak soldier, both of whom already had their helmets off.

Master Sergeant Jahal smiled as the two Ghatazhak who had just boarded removed their helmets. "You are a difficult man to kill, Lieutenant."

"As are you, Master Sergeant," Lieutenant Telles answered. "I trust our forces were triumphant."

"Indeed they were."

"How many did we lose?"

"I'm afraid the four of us are all that remains of those on the Jar-Keurog."

"So we now number only thirty-six," Lieutenant Telles said. He leaned his head back against the bulkhead and sighed. "How long until we reach the ship?" he asked the crew chief.

"About twenty minutes, sir," the crew chief answered. "We've got a few more pilots to rescue before we head back."

"Lieutenant, we cannot hope to continue to assist the people of Earth with so few left in our ranks," the master sergeant said.

"No, we cannot," the lieutenant agreed. "I will explain this to the captain. At the very least, he must be more selective about when and where to utilize the Ghatazhak from this day forward."

The door at the back of the shuttle opened again. A rescue technician in a pressure suit stepped inside the shuttle, followed by two pilots in Corinairan pressurized flight suits. The rescue technician removed his own helmet, setting it on the deck beside his feet, then moved to take one of the rescued pilots' helmets as the shuttle's crew chief removed the other pilot's helmet.

"How can you possibly blame me for this one?" Josh wondered aloud as the shuttle's crew chief removed his helmet.

"Because it was your idea in the first place!" Loki argued as the rescue technician removed his helmet.

"Well, you were all for it, if I remember correctly. In fact, you were like, 'Captain, I got lots of great scans of shit! We can do this! No problem!'"

"That's not what I said," Loki disagreed.

"Yes, it is, word for word," Josh insisted. "Okay, maybe not word for word, but close enough."

"Gentlemen!" Lieutenant Telles bellowed, disrupting their argument.

Josh and Loki both turned and looked at Telles.

"Hey, Lieutenant!" Josh said. "You made it!"

"As did you." Lieutenant Telles smiled. "It is good to see you both."

* * *

Marcus sat in his old office in the Aurora's flight operations deck, his head down in his hands, tears running down his cheeks.

Master Chief Montrose entered the compartment. "Marcus?"

Marcus wiped his eyes, trying to hide his sorrow from his friend. "I was just..."

"It's okay, Marcus."

Marcus hung his head down again. "Stupid kid," he sniffled. "Always finding new ways to get into trouble." He looked at his friend. "I knew this day would come. All these years, I knew it. Hell, I'm surprised it didn't come sooner."

"The boy has no fear," the master chief said.

"The boy has no brains," Marcus said, hanging his head down again. He struggled vainly to hold back his tears. "He was all I had."

"It's okay, Marcus. You still have him."

"Don't give me any of that 'he'll always be in your heart' crap," Marcus grumbled.

"No, I mean you still have him. SAR Two picked him and Loki up twenty minutes ago. They're safe and sound on the

Celestia.”

Marcus looked at his friend in disbelief. “Are you serious? He’s not dead?”

“No, far from it.”

Marcus laughed. “I’m gonna kill that little shit, you know that don’t you!”

Master Chief Montrose laughed along with his friend, “I expect so.”

* * *

Nathan stood at the podium in the pilots’ briefing room. Before him were the command staff of both the Aurora and the Celestia, as well as the acting department supervisors from each ship. In addition, Major Prechitt and his staff, and Doctor Chen and her staff were also there, along with Doctor Sorenson and the surviving members of the Celestia’s jump drive project. Lieutenant Telles, Master Sergeant Jahal, and Jessica sat at the back of the room.

Nathan took a deep breath and began. “I’ll get straight to it. In thirty-seven days, a Jung battle platform will arrive in the Sol system. We have very little intelligence about this vessel. We only know that it is massive, more than thirty kilometers in length. It is a fortress in space, one that can travel faster than the speed of light. However, it has about as much maneuverability as a barge. It is heavily armed, armored, and shielded, and it undoubtedly has many smaller ships operating from her decks. Some of these ships may be as large as a frigate, for all we know. Needless to say, this ship is unlike anything that we have ever faced, yet face it we must. For if we fail to destroy it, the Earth is doomed. They will bombard the surface from orbit until every human on the planet is dead. We have to figure out a way to stop this ship, and I, for one, am open to any and all suggestions.”

“Are we sure about its arrival date?” Major Prechitt asked.

"Assuming they maintain their current speed, yes," Nathan answered. "However, we are tracking the battle platform using combat jump shuttles for the time being, just to be safe."

"Can we use the same strategy we used on the battleships?" Lieutenant Eckert asked.

"Possibly," Nathan said. "Problem is, we don't have the Falcon any longer. We've considered using the combat jump shuttles, but they are much too slow and would get picked off with ease before they could take out enough emitters to make a difference."

"What about conventional torpedoes," Ensign Tillardi suggested. "Especially the ones with nuclear warheads. Could we fit them with miniature jump drives, jump them in between the shield layers, and then detonate them? Surely that would wipe out more than a few emitters."

"An excellent suggestion," Nathan answered. "Unfortunately, conventional torpedoes are not very maneuverable, and they are definitely not maneuverable enough to line up properly for a jump that precise."

"They also have to translate downward as soon as they jump in," Josh added from the back of the room.

"Another good point," Nathan said. "The missiles would actually be better suited to the task, as they are far more maneuverable. I don't believe they can translate downward, though."

"They wouldn't have to," Cameron said. "They're not going to fire at anything. All they have to do is detonate from inside the shields."

"Use a jump shuttle to put the jump drive-equipped torpedoes on a proper course," Ensign Tillardi suggested.

"I like the idea of jumpable weapons, Tilly, really, I do," Nathan said. "Problem is, we don't have enough time to develop them. If we're going to take down that battle platform, we're going to have to do so with what we've got, or what we can make and implement within thirty-seven days."

"What about jumping something *through* the battle platform," Vladimir suggested. "Would that work?"

"You cannot jump an object of considerable mass through another object of considerable mass," Abby reminded them. "The effect is the same as the two objects colliding in normal space. Unless the jumping object is carrying significant kinetic energy, the collision will be of little consequence. You would have to accelerate the object to considerable speed before jumping it into the target. As you know, the faster an object is traveling, the more energy is required to alter its course even the slightest degree."

"Will we be getting any help from Earth?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

Nathan's head went down. "I'm afraid not," he told them. "The Earth was heavily bombarded. It is complete chaos down there. What little rule of law still exists is doing everything they can to help their people survive. Quite frankly, there is no infrastructure left on the Earth."

"What about all the fabricators they were building?" the lieutenant commander wondered.

"All but the original eight, which were kept in the Data Ark, were destroyed. They are hoping to begin making more fabricators again, but it is unknown how long that might take. Even if they do manage to get them running again, they will have no choice but to use them to meet the immediate needs of the people. As I said before, we are on our own."

* * *

"Fabrication sets three and four will be finished and ready in two to three days," Master Chief Montrose reported. "We'll be able to begin work on the new plasma cannons once they are completed."

Nathan leaned back in his chair behind his ready room desk. "Excellent. How long will it take to complete them?"

"Technically, fifteen days. However, because of their size, we have to build them in sections which we can move

through the ship to the launch tubes for installation. Because of that, it might take a few days more."

"Would it be easier to move the fabricators to the fighter bays?" Nathan wondered.

"We thought about that," the master chief said, "but decided in the end it wouldn't really save us any time."

"Are we going to be able to get them installed and ready for action in time?"

"Ready, yes. Fully tested? Well, that's another issue."

"I would prefer at least one or two test fires before we use them in battle, Master Chief."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"That's all I can ask, Master Chief." Nathan noticed someone talking with Sergeant Weatherly just outside his ready room. He looked toward the open hatchway just in time to see Abby entering.

"I'm sorry, Captain. Am I interrupting?"

"No, ma'am," Master Chief Montrose assured her. "I was just about to leave."

"Is there anything else, Master Chief?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir."

"Very well, dismissed."

Abby stepped to one side as the master chief left. As she took a seat across the desk from Nathan, Sergeant Weatherly closed the hatch from outside.

"Closed hatch. Must be serious," Nathan said, half joking. "I hope you're not here to tell me that the Celestia's jump drive still isn't working."

"No, sir, the Celestia's jump drive is operational. In fact, we've managed to make it a bit less sensitive."

"That's good news. So, what did you want to see me about?"

Abby looked down for a moment, unsure how to ask.

"What is it, Abby?" Nathan pleaded, noticing that she was uncomfortable.

"I feel guilty even considering this, Captain," Abby began with considerable hesitation. "Especially after you reunited

me with my family..."

"Please, Abby, it was the least that I could do."

"I can't begin to tell you how important it was, and still is, to see them, to know they are alive and well."

"Then why do you have such a worried look on your face?" Nathan asked. "I mean, other than our next impending crisis, that is."

"Things are so bad on Earth right now," she continued, "worse than they have ever been in recent history."

"Your family *is* safe, though," Nathan reminded her. "Just like all the other families of our crews, they are under the protection of the NAU."

"Yes, of course they are, and I'm incredibly thankful for that as well... We all are." Abby shifted in her chair, still appearing ill at ease. "It's just, with the Jung battle platform coming, I can't help but worry... Will they even survive the next attack? Will anyone on Earth survive?"

"Will we survive?" Nathan added. "Abby, we can't ponder such things. It's completely counterproductive. We have to believe that we have a chance, no matter how slim that chance may be. *Hope* is what keeps us going, after all."

"I know," Abby agreed, "but so does peace of mind."

"As in?"

"As in the peace of mind of knowing that the people you are fighting for are safe, no matter what happens to you."

"No one person's safety can be guaranteed, Abby."

"No, but it can be improved."

"I don't see how," Nathan said.

"By evacuating them to someplace safe," Abby suggested, "or at least someplace safer than the Earth."

"Where would you have me take them?" Nathan asked. "The Jung are everywhere."

"The Pentaurs cluster," Abby answered. "They would be safe there, wouldn't they? Maybe Tug—I mean, Prince Casimir—maybe he could take them in?"

"Abby..."

"I'm not asking for myself, Captain," Abby said, interrupting him. "I know you need me here, I accept that. I just need to know that they are safe. I cannot go through that same hell again. I can't."

"Abby, I cannot send one of our only two ships on a run across a thousand light years of space. It's too risky, and there's not enough time."

"A jump shuttle can make the trip in days," Abby argued.

"We don't even know if the first shuttle made it there at all," Nathan argued. "The fact that we haven't heard back from them in several months does not bode well. Hell, they may have gotten sucked into the very same black hole that almost swallowed us up. Is that the kind of risk you want to put your family in?" Nathan sighed. "I'm sorry, Abby. Really, I am."

Abby also sighed. "I understand, Captain," she said quietly, her head down and with a forlorn expression. "I'm sorry, but I had to ask."

"That's quite all right, Abby. I'm just sorry that I couldn't give you the answer you wanted."

"I won't bother you further, Captain," she said as she rose and headed for the exit.

"Abby, wait," Nathan called after her. "I couldn't evacuate them to the Pentaurus cluster, even if I wanted to. However, maybe—and I stress maybe—just maybe we *could* evacuate them to Tanna."

"Tanna?"

"Why not?" Nathan said. "Obviously, I'm going to have to talk with the Tannans about this, as well as the leaders of Earth, but I don't see why anyone would object."

Abby's face began to light up, as a feeling of hope replaced that of desperation. "Thank you, Captain."

"Don't thank me yet," Nathan objected. "Remember, I said 'maybe'. There are still a lot of things to work out. However, I shall try my best."

* * *

Vladimir looked at Nathan, who had said very little since they sat down for breakfast over fifteen minutes ago. His friend had never been that talkative, and had usually required coaxing to engage in conversation over a shared meal, but today he was taking it to extremes.

"You are eating, so I know there is nothing physically wrong with you," Vladimir said in between bites.

"Huh? Oh." Nathan looked at his food as he picked at it with his fork. "Just preoccupied, I guess. A lot going on. You know how it is."

"There is always much going on. How is *today* different than any other day?"

"It just feels like they're giving up on the Earth," Nathan said, "and that we're agreeing with them by facilitating their evacuation."

"Ah, so that is it?" Vladimir realized. "It is the evacuation that is bothering you."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"No. Not at all. Why should it?"

"Seriously?"

Vladimir put his fork down, something he rarely did while eating, to emphasize his point. "Look, we have four cargo shuttles with jump drives that are not being utilized at the moment. Why not use them to evacuate some people. Especially if it makes the crew of this ship work even better. Does that not benefit the people of Earth?" Vladimir picked up his fork and shoveled another load of scrambled eggs into his mouth. "Besides, it is fewer people for the Earth to feed."

"Is your family going?" Nathan wondered.

"My family? Are you crazy? They are Russians. They live where it is buried in snow half the year. 'This is our home! We would rather die here! If it is God's will, then so be it!... Blah, blah, blah!' It is all very stupid." Vladimir shrugged. "But what can you do?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Nathan admitted.

"Of course I am right."

"Maybe I'd feel better if it were only the families of the crew who were going, but now they're planning on evacuating as many as possible."

"*Da?*" Vladimir looked at Nathan. "This, I did not know. How many?"

"Four cargo shuttles, about one hundred people per shuttle, ten flights per day over twenty-eight... That's what, about one hundred thousand people?"

Vladimir squinted. "How do they choose who is to go?"

"I don't know. Something about starting with people with necessary skill sets."

"That does not seem fair."

"I think they said ten percent were going to be randomly selected."

"How do you randomly select people to be evacuated to another planet?" Vladimir wondered. "What do you do, kidnap them and throw them onto a shuttle? What if they do not wish to leave? Like my sister and my mother. You know... Crazy people."

"I don't know," Nathan said. "I'm not getting involved in the process. I'm just providing the means of transportation."

"This is good," Vladimir agreed. "Better to keep your mind focused on what is important, like fixing up our ships and preparing for the next battle."

"Yeah, that's what I keep telling myself," Nathan said. "It's hard to separate yourself from the everyday struggles of the world you're trying to protect, though. Especially when every decision you make affects those very people."

"Ships, weapons, targets," Vladimir said. "That is all you should be thinking about."

"Two ships, basically only two weapons that matter, and one target. Seems like it should be easy."

"Just stop thinking about everything else." Vladimir insisted. "It is easy to do."

Nathan continued eating as he considered his friend's advice. Finally, he looked at him and asked, "Do you think we're fighting a losing battle?"

Vladimir laughed. "Of course! Did you see the size of that battle platform? It is enormous. Unless you get some lucky break or some super-weapon falls into your lap at the last moment—which for you, by the way, is not as impossible as one might think—then the Earth is truly doomed."

"Great. And us?"

"We will probably survive. You know, 'live to fight another day', and all that."

Nathan shook his head, a lopsided grin on his face. "Your pep talks suck, you know that?"

"You are most welcome, my friend."

* * *

"Right this way, people," the deckhand instructed the group of people arriving on board the Aurora from Earth.

Four jump-equipped cargo shuttles sat across the aft end of the Aurora's main hangar bay. Several hundred people, all of them members of the families of the crews of the Aurora and the Celestia, were coming aboard to get their medical clearance and see their loved ones serving aboard before being evacuated to Tanna.

The line of men, women, and children made their way forward toward the central hatch. Two Ghatazhak soldiers stood guard on either side of the hatch, along with several members of the ship's crew who were checking everyone's identity and baggage before they left the hangar bay.

A young girl stood close to her mother's skirt clutching a flowered book bag between her arms. She looked about suspiciously at the strange place, being careful to stay next to her mother when the line moved forward. She looked up at the Ghatazhak soldier nearest her, with fear and trepidation.

A technician suddenly stepped in front of her and her mother, giving the little girl a start.

"I'm going to have to ask you what you have in the bag, miss," the young man said in as non-threatening a voice as he could muster.

"It's nothing," the little girl's mother assured him. "Just some clothing and a doll."

"The bag is moving, ma'am," the technician said. "I'm sorry, but I have to look inside the bag. I'm under orders."

The Ghatazhak guard turned and looked down at the little girl. His expression was cold and menacing. She held the bag out for the technician to examine.

The technician opened the bag and found a cat and several kittens inside. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but you can't take these animals to Tanna. It's not safe for them, or for the animals on Tanna."

"But, they won't hurt anyone," the little girl said. "They're just kitties."

"I know, but Tanna is not Earth. If you take them to Tanna, they may not survive. They're not strong like you and me."

"But what will happen to them?" the little girl asked, on the verge of tears.

"I'll make sure they are well taken care of," the technician promised her.

The little girl reluctantly released the bag to the technician, looking up at the Ghatazhak soldier again. "Maybe he wants one?"

The Ghatazhak soldier looked down at the little girl again, still without emotion.

"Maybe not?" the little girl said.

"Maybe not," the technician agreed as he took the bag from her. "I'll find someone who's not so mean-looking."

The little girl and her mother disappeared through the door. The technician turned to Senior Chief Taggart, who had witnessed the entire exchange.

"That was mighty touching, that was," Marcus laughed.

"What am I supposed to do with these, Senior Chief?"

"Don't look at me. We didn't have such animals on Haven."

"I have to work this line, Senior Chief."

Marcus sighed and rolled his eyes at the technician. "Give the damned things to me," he said, taking the bag from him. "I'll figure out what to do with them."

"Don't eat them, Senior Chief," the technician said as Marcus turned away and left.

* * *

"How goes it, Master Chief?" Nathan asked as he entered the Aurora's main hangar bay and looked about. There were hundreds of men, women, and children lined up to board the four jump-equipped cargo shuttles parked in a row across the aft end of the bay. At the behest of both Lieutenant Telles and Jessica, the Ghatazhak stood at every exit, armed and armored, to ensure that no unauthorized personnel left the bay.

"Things are moving along rather smoothly, all things considered," the master chief said. "The biggest hang-up has been getting them all cleared through medical. You would've thought that would be better taken care of on the surface."

"Maybe, but the Tannans insisted that our people clear them. I guess they don't trust that it will get done properly on the surface, considering the conditions down there."

"Perhaps."

"Did the crew get to say goodbye to their families?" Nathan wondered.

"So far. They've been meeting in the port fighter bay. We don't move them in here until they've already said their goodbyes."

"I see."

"It's been a bit of a logistical challenge, but Lieutenant Commander Kovacic is pretty good at such things."

Nathan noticed Abby and her family as they came out of the port mid-bay transfer corridor that connected the port fighter bay and the main hangar bay. She carried her youngest, a little girl with blonde hair that mirrored her mother's. Beside her, the little man who was her son held

her trouser leg tightly, a deep sadness in his eyes. Abby's husband, a tall, slender man with dark brown hair stood near, hiding his own sorrows over their parting so that his children would not notice. The children cried as their mother said her goodbyes to them, as she told them to behave and do as their father said. She promised that she would see them again very soon, but it was obvious by their expressions that this was a promise they had heard before, one that was often stretched to the breaking point.

Abby stood tall and strong, waving at her children as they headed up the boarding ramp, looking over their shoulders at their mother all the while. Tears streamed down their innocent little faces as they clutched their father's hands. Abby's hands went over her mouth as her family disappeared into the cargo shuttle. She wiped her eyes, then turned to exit. She noticed Nathan and the master chief standing near the forward hatch and moved toward them, wiping her tears as she approached.

"Thank you, Captain," she said as she approached.

Nathan felt as if his heart were about to break. "Abby, are both jump drives operational?"

"Yes, sir, they are," she answered as she wiped the last of her tears from her eyes.

"Is there anything else that you need to do to them, to check? Anything at all?"

"Not really. The Takaran scientists are pouring over the Celestia's drive in the hopes of improving on its design. All I'm doing is fielding their questions at this point."

"Then there is no reason for you to stay here," Nathan told her.

"What?"

"You've sacrificed enough, Abby. All of us have, but then again, we signed up for this. You did not. Go, be with your children. Be with your husband. They need you way more than we do."

"But Captain, what if something goes wrong? What if you need..."

"I'm sure the Takaran and Corinairan scientists can take care of it, Abby."

Abby started to cry again.

"Go, before I change my mind," Nathan added.

Abby slowly pulled her comm-set off her ear to give to Nathan.

"You'd better keep that for now. We may need to consult with you from time to time."

Abby smiled as the tears ran down her cheeks.

"But don't tell anyone who you really are, or what you know about the jump drive."

"I won't," Abby promised. "My husband already has a different identity. I'll use his family name."

"Of course," Nathan said. "You'd better get going, or you'll miss your shuttle."

Abby stepped forward and kissed Nathan on the cheek. She placed her right hand on the side of his face. "You *are* a gift from God, Nathan Scott."

Nathan said nothing, only watched as Abby turned and ran across the hangar bay and up the boarding ramp to join her family already on board the cargo shuttle.

"Nicely done, Na-Tan," Master Chief Montrose said under his breath. "Of course, both Telles and Nash are going to give you hell over this."

Nathan glanced at his chief of the boat out of the corner of his eye. "Carry on, Master Chief," he said as he turned to exit.

* * *

"Tilly has an idea on how to give our current plasma torpedo cannons more room to gimbal," Cameron said over the view screen on Nathan's ready room wall. *"It involves widening the tube doors and moving the gimbal points forward. It would decrease the need to put our nose on a target before firing."*

"How much of an increase in gimbal angle are we talking about?" Nathan asked.

"As much as five degrees in all directions. I know at the closer ranges from which you prefer to fire that doesn't seem like much, but from a few hundred kilometers it could mean firing on two ships at once. It could also give us the ability to concentrate our fire on a single point, even when using tubes on opposite sides of the ship."

"That might improve our ability to overpower their shields," Nathan said. "How long does he think it would take to do this?"

"A few months at least," Cameron said.

Nathan looked frustrated. "Why doesn't that guy ever come up with something that can be done in a few weeks?" he snapped.

Cameron drew back at Nathan's reaction. *"Why are you so grumpy?"*

Nathan sighed. "It's this damned evacuation thing. Have you been watching the news lately?"

"You knew it wasn't going to stay a secret for long, Nathan."

"Yeah, but it's only been five days, Cam."

"What's that, about twenty thousand people?"

"Something like that, I guess."

"People notice when people suddenly start disappearing."

"From all over the world?" Nathan wondered, his frustration still evident. "The people of Earth can't pull it together over a two and a half month period for something as important as preventing their own annihilation, but they can spot a secret government plot to flee a dying world in less than a week. Why am I not surprised?" Nathan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, at least this will probably put an end to the evacuations."

"I wouldn't count on it," Cameron warned him.

The intercom beeped. *"Captain, Comms,"* Naralena called over the intercom.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"You're wanted in the intel shack, sir."

"On my way," Nathan answered. He looked at Cameron on the view screen. "Duty calls. I'll talk to you later." Nathan turned off the view screen with the remote, leaving it on his desk as he exited his ready room. "We're relocating, Sergeant," he told his body guard at the door as he walked past him.

"Where to, sir?" Sergeant Weatherly asked.

"Around the corner and down the hall," Nathan said. "The intel shack." Nathan exited the transfer airlock from the bridge into the main corridor and turned left. It was only about twenty paces to the door to the compartment they called the intelligence office, and the entire journey took less than a minute.

Nathan stepped inside the intelligence office and found Lieutenant Telles standing next to one of the analysts, both of whom were watching a live vid-feed from the surface. "What's going on?" Nathan asked as he approached. He looked up at the view screen. The view was from an airborne camera, probably one of the remotely operated hover-cams used by the news agencies of Earth. It showed a large, fenced-in compound surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands of people, all trying to force their way in. The fencing was swaying with the weight of the people pushing against it as the protesters pushed and pulled at the fence, arguing with the guards on the inside.

Nathan's head turned sideways as he looked closer at the screen. "Oh, please tell me those aren't our shuttles in the middle of all that."

"I'm afraid so, Captain," Lieutenant Telles answered.

"Is that the evacuation facility?"

"Yes, sir," the analyst confirmed. "Somehow, its location leaked out and hit the net a few hours ago. People started showing up early this morning. It grew into this in only a few hours."

"Why haven't those shuttles taken off?" Nathan wondered.

"They are afraid their thrust wash will injure the protestors, further angering them, possibly causing them to storm the facility," the analyst explained.

"If they should do so, the shuttles might become damaged," Lieutenant Telles said. "Or worse, there might be Jung operatives among the protesters."

"Those shuttles have jump drives," Nathan said, suddenly realizing the depth of the problem. Nathan looked at the view screen again. "Why haven't the local security forces done anything to control the situation?"

Lieutenant Telles looked at Nathan, one eyebrow raised. "I am assuming your question was of a rhetorical nature."

Nathan sighed. "Oh, God." He looked at Telles. "Mount up, Lieutenant. We need that compound secured, ASAP."

"Understood, sir," Telles answered. "Force level?"

Nathan sighed again, his head drooping down momentarily. He looked up at the view screen. "I know this is a shitty position to put you and your men in, Lieutenant," he said as he turned his head to look at the lieutenant, "but do what you have to do."

"I do not have a problem doing just that, Captain. It is why the Ghatazhak were created... To do that which other men cannot do. However, given the situation, I shall require more concise orders from you."

Nathan sighed one last time. "Maximum force is authorized, Lieutenant. That compound, and those jump drives, must remain secure. Is that clear enough for you?"

Lieutenant Telles did not smile. In fact, he showed no emotion at all. "Perfectly clear, sir."

* * *

The angry, desperate mob surged in and out against the six-meter tall, heavy-duty wire fencing that surrounded the makeshift compound. Guards posted in all six towers scanned the pulsing crowds with bright spotlights. Water cannons mounted on smaller towers inside the compound

took aim on people trying to scale the fence, knocking them down onto the crowds a few meters below.

There was no organization, no control, no common cause among those who had somehow managed to make their way across hundreds of miles of open plains. There was only chaos. There was only panic. There was only desperation. Each and every one of them only wanted one thing. To get onto one of the four shuttles before they left.

Four brilliant blue-white flashes of light suddenly appeared directly over the compound, not more than ten meters above the ground. They arrived with a tearing sound, followed by the whine of engines and a whoosh of displaced air.

No sooner had the four combat shuttles appeared over the center areas of the compound, than soldiers dressed in black and gray combat armor started dropping to the ground below. In less than a minute, twenty-four Ghatazhak soldiers were on the ground and were forming a line of evenly spaced pairs of men only twenty meters within the perimeter fencing.

The four combat jump shuttles ascended and took up positions circling overhead as Lieutenant Telles and his master sergeant walked confidently toward the buildings at the middle of the compound. They quickly located the security building and disappeared through the door, followed by three more Ghatazhak soldiers.

"Can I help you?" a man bellowed at the lieutenant as he stormed into the control room.

"Are you in charge?" Lieutenant Telles asked without emotion.

"I am Major Franklin of the NAU sec..."

"I did not inquire as to your name or rank," the lieutenant interrupted. "I asked if you were in charge."

"Yes, I am. And who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing on my..."

"We are here to restore order to this compound, to ensure the security of those four shuttles out there, and to

guarantee the ongoing operations of this facility.”

“You can’t just drop in here and take...”

“I can, and I have,” Lieutenant Telles told the major. “Order your men to withdraw from their positions, and fall back to this building.”

“I’m not going to let you just...”

Lieutenant Telles turned to face the major, ending up no more than centimeters from the man’s face. “If you cross me, I shall end you here and now. Is that understood?”

The major looked puzzled for a moment. No one had ever challenged his authority in such a way.

“I shall ask but once more. Is that understood?”

The major looked the lieutenant up and down one last time. “Yes, I understand. May I ask what you intend to do?”

“I shall order the crowd to disperse immediately, or they shall be dealt with using deadly force.”

“You can’t do that,” the major began to object.

“I can’t?” Lieutenant Telles wondered. “And why is that?”

“Those are innocent civilians out there. They’re scared, they’re hungry...”

“And they are threatening the ongoing security of this evacuation. They will be given fair warning. If they choose not to heed that warning, that is their decision.”

“I can’t let you do this,” the major objected, stepping toward the lieutenant.

The major stopped short, finding the barrel of the lieutenant’s handgun suddenly pressed against his skin directly between his eyes.

The major’s men inside the control room all reached for their weapons, but stopped short when they heard the whines of multiple handheld energy weapons being charged. The four Ghatazhak soldiers who had followed the lieutenant into the control room had not only drawn and activated their energy weapons, but their shoulder-mounted laser turrets as well. The security guards looked around at one another, taking note of the fact that multiple red laser-

sighting dots were trained on the foreheads and chests of each and every one of them.

"You have two choices, Major," Lieutenant Telles said, appearing impatient. "Comply, or die."

The major stared at the lieutenant's eyes for several seconds. "Mister Wilky, order our men to secure their weapons and fall back to the security building."

"Yes, Major."

Lieutenant Telles raised one eyebrow. "You are most fortunate," he told the major as he slowly lowered his weapon. "I do not generally give people so many chances." The lieutenant stepped over to the control console. "Is this the public address system?" he asked pointing at the console.

"Yes, it is," the security guard at the console answered.

"I assume it is on, and at maximum volume?"

"Yes."

The lieutenant picked up the microphone and pressed the button. "This is Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak. You are hereby ordered to disperse immediately, and leave the area. Failure to comply will result in the use of deadly force. You have one minute. This shall be your only warning."

"This is wrong," the major objected. "You do realize that, don't you?"

"I am fully aware of just how wrong it is," Lieutenant Telles told the major. "However, I am also aware of its necessity."

The lieutenant turned and exited the control room, his men following behind him. He walked outside and surveyed the crowd, looking all along the fence line for as far as he could see. The crowd was not dispersing. "Master Sergeant. Have the shuttles been loaded?"

"Yes, sir. For more than an hour, sir."

"Order the shuttles to spin up their engines for departure."

"Please, people. I beg of you," the major's voice pleaded over the loudspeakers. *"These people are not bluffing. They*

will kill you if you do not leave..."

"I'll deal with him," the master sergeant said.

"Leave him be. We shall let him beg if it makes him happy." The lieutenant shook his head. "A pity, really."

"What's that, sir?" the master sergeant asked.

"That so few of them are brave enough to do what must be done. It has become quite clear to me now why Prince Casimir sent us here."

The lieutenant looked at the crowds pushing in on the fence as the shuttles fired up their engines. The sound of the shuttles' engines sent the crowd into an even greater frenzy, as they began climbing the fences by the dozens.

"Look at them," the lieutenant said. "They are like a swarm of insects. They are not worthy of evacuation." The lieutenant drew in a deep breath as he pulled his weapon again. "Ghatazhak! Stand ready!"

All around the perimeter, the twenty-four Ghatazhak soldiers raised their energy rifles and deployed their shoulder mounted laser turrets. The whine of energy packs was lost to the maddening roar of the crowd and the rising pitch of the shuttles' engines.

Lieutenant Telles paused, hoping that the sight of his men raising their charged weapons to fire would cause the crowd to change their minds, but it was not to be. If he did not order his men to fire, within minutes the fences would collapse under the pressure of the surging crowds, and all would be lost. The shuttles would lift off, and he and his men would probably escape to the rooftops to be picked up by the combat jumpers. However, the evacuations would be over, and at least eighty thousand of the Earth's best would perish needlessly. It was simple math.

"Ghatazhak! Fire!"

Red bolts of energy leapt from two dozen Ghatazhak energy rifles, while pinpoint reddish laser beams spat out from two dozen shoulder turrets in rapid succession. The automatic targeting systems, all linked together, instantly selected targets and fired at a rate of six times per second.

The manually operated energy weapons were far less precise, spewing searing hot plasma energy into the crowds. Clothing and hair were set ablaze. Bodies melted and fused together in grotesque forms. Blood sprayed everywhere as lasers cut through clothing and skin with incredible accuracy.

The compound lit up with the Ghatazhak weapons fire, causing it to glow like the fires of hell itself. The shuttles quickly lifted off in the hopes of sparing the passengers from the horrific scene below. They turned as the Ghatazhak continued to fire into the crowds, picking up forward momentum before jumping away in brilliant flashes of blue-white light.

The firing lasted less than a minute. No cease-fire order was given. They had simply run out of targets. Those who had chosen to call their bluff now lay in a ring of death and dismemberment that surrounded the compound. Those who had been smart enough to turn and run when the firing began would surely tell others. Many more might come, angered by what had happened here this night. More likely, they would stay away. Their world was falling apart. They all knew, deep in their hearts, that the Earth they knew was coming to an end.

"You bastard!" the major screamed as he came charging out of the security building. He stumbled clumsily, his rage causing him to lose balance. He searched for and quickly found the lieutenant standing not more than twenty meters away, his back still to him. "You fucking bastard!" the major repeated as he started toward the major, drawing his own weapon from its holster as he charged.

In one smooth motion, Lieutenant Telles drew his knife from its sheath on the left side of his pelvic armor, spun to his right, and flung the blade toward the major. The knife found its mark, landing in the major's throat.

The major stumbled, dropping his weapon and reaching for his throat as he fell to his knees. Blood gurgled from his wound and his open mouth as he fell forward.

Lieutenant Telles finished turning back toward the security building where the NAU security guards watched in horror. He walked over to the major's dead body, rolling him back over with his foot. He reached down and pulled out the knife, wiping the blade on the major's tunic before placing it back in its sheath.

The lieutenant stood again, looking at the major's men. "You have three choices. You can leave through that gate, and return home to your families. You can stay here and help secure this compound and then board the last shuttle for Tanna, or you can join your leader, face down on the ground. The choice is yours."

Master Sergeant Jahal stepped up beside his leader.

"I want this place locked down tight, Master Sergeant. Nobody comes within a kilometer of this compound without my authorization."

"Understood," the master sergeant acknowledged. "What shall we do with the bodies?"

"Cold fire," the lieutenant ordered. He looked down at the major. "Him as well." The lieutenant looked at the security guards still staring in shock and disbelief. He sighed, and mumbled to himself. "That which other men cannot do."

* * *

Jessica came hobbling into the Captain's ready room without warning. "Skipper," she greeted as she made her way to the couch. "There's my old friend." She carefully squatted down and sat, then turned and lay down, putting her feet up to get comfortable.

"Get tired of the hospital bed?" Nathan asked.

"Oh, they already released me to my quarters. I'm right around the corner now, in case you want to visit."

"Is that what you came by to tell me?" Nathan wondered.

"Nope. I figured you'd be all weepy-eyed about what happened on Earth tonight."

"Weepy-eyed? I don't get weepy-eyed."

"Okay, poor choice of words," Jessica admitted. "How about, melancholy?"

"Am I not supposed to feel sorrow for the needless deaths of two thousand civilians?" Nathan asked.

"Regret, sure, but not sorrow. Telles warned them, and they ignored his warning."

"You know full well that those people did not believe he would actually fire on them. They were unarmed, for crying out loud."

Jessica sat up rather quickly, wincing in pain at the sudden movement. "No, they were not 'unarmed.' The mob itself was their weapon, and it was one over which they had little control."

"They didn't go there with the intention of creating a weapon. They went there because they wanted to get evacuated to Tanna as well."

"Oh, come on!" Jessica argued. "What kind of idiots think they can just show up and charge their way onto a top-secret government evacuation shuttle?"

"Desperation often clouds the minds of even the most scholarly of men," Nathan said.

"God, Nathan, you have got to be the dorkiest captain in EDF history. I swear, if you quote one more person from history."

"Look, Jess, the bottom line is that I sent Telles and his men down there knowing full well what they were capable of. I even gave them explicit authorization to use maximum force."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Wow. I didn't know you had it in you." Jessica leaned back onto the couch again. "You had good reason to do so, you know. If there had been a Jung operative among that crowd, and he managed to take control of that shuttle..."

"I know," Nathan interrupted. "That's why I gave the order. It doesn't mean that I don't feel bad about it, though."

I am not allowed to feel guilty that so many people died at my command?"

"No, you're not. You're the captain! So suck it up, history boy! You're our fearless leader!" Jessica turned and lay down again, putting her feet back up on the couch. "Command sucks, doesn't it?"

Nathan laughed. "I've missed you, Jess."

"Of course you have, Skipper."

* * *

"It is filthy in here," Vladimir said as he walked down one of the Aurora's two port-side fighter launch tubes.

"No one has been cleaning the launch tubes since we stopped using them," the Corinairan flight deck technician stated. "We've all been so busy repairing the starboard fighter bay..."

Vladimir shined his flashlight from side to side, noting the debris on the floor. "Is that food?" He looked at the Corinairan technician, a displeased look on his face.

"We had gravity failure during the last battle, remember? There was all kinds of stuff floating around. I guess someone had some snacks stashed away somewhere and they floated in here. We just haven't gotten around to cleaning the tubes yet."

"Well, they need to be cleaned now. We cannot install the new plasma cannons in dirty launch tubes."

"Yes, sir."

Vladimir suddenly spun his head to his right, looking forward down the long, dark launch tube. He swung his light around as well. "Did you see something?"

"No, sir."

"I thought I saw something move." Vladimir squinted his eyes, shining his light down the launch tube as he searched. "Ah! There it is again. Something moved... an animal. Behind the third vertical brace, on the left." He looked at the technician. "Maybe it's a rat."

"Rat?" the technician wondered, unfamiliar with the term.

Vladimir moved down the launch tube, keeping his light trained on the base of the vertical brace. He slowly moved past the brace, and shone his flashlight on the backside, but there was nothing there. "Where did it go?"

"Where did what go?" the Corinairan technician wondered, dumbfounded.

Vladimir's head perked up. "Did you hear that?"

The technician looked around, looking more confused than ever. "Are you playing with me, sir?"

Vladimir shone his light on the technician's face.

"I guess not."

A faint squeak was heard.

"There it is again," Vladimir whispered, crouching down lower.

"I heard it that time," the technician admitted, crouching down as well in imitation of his chief engineer.

The squeak repeated. Vladimir moved toward the noise, shining his light along a conduit and into a hole in the next brace through which the conduit passed. Two green eyes reflected his flashlight.

"Da, eto zhe kotyonok!"

"Huh?"

"A kitty cat," Vladimir explained as he squatted down and slowly approached the opening.

"What's a kitty cat? Is it the same thing as a rat?" the Corinairan wondered.

"Are you crazy?" Vladimir turned back to the tiny kitten which was only now beginning to poke his head out from the hole. The kitten meowed in a weak, squeaky voice.

Vladimir made faint shushing noises in an attempt to calm the tiny animal and coax it into coming out into the open. "Come on," he whispered as the kitten came out of the hole. "It's okay little one. It's okay. Come to Vlad. I will not hurt you."

The kitten came all the way out of the hole, carefully approaching Vladimir's outstretched fingers. The kitten sniffed the stranger's fingers, then rubbed his cheek against them and meowed again.

Vladimir reached out and grabbed the kitten, gently picking him up. He stood and held the kitten up in front of him to take a closer look as the technician shone his light on the tiny creature.

"You are cute little girl," Vladimir said. "Oops, I mean guy."

The kitten was black from head to toe, with tiny speckles of white scattered about his face and shoulders, as well as his back.

"What the hell is going on in there!" Marcus bellowed from the aft end of the launch tube.

"Cheng found a kitty cat!" the Corinairan technician answered.

"A what?" Marcus asked as he walked down the launch tube toward them. As he grew nearer, he recognized the type of animal the technician was describing. "Oh, crap."

Vladimir was already holding the tiny creature against his chest, stroking the side of his face as the kitten purred. "How did you get in here?" he asked the kitten.

"I'm sorry about that, Lieutenant Commander," Marcus apologized. "Some little girl tried to smuggle a bunch of them creatures to Tanna. Had to take them away and send them back down to Earth. The Tannans aren't allowing any animals, just humans. I gave the mess of them to one of the shuttles heading back down to the surface. I guess one of them got away."

"I wonder how long he has been in here," Vladimir said. He looked at the kitten's sunken eyes. "He looks dehydrated."

"A week or two," Marcus answered. "I'm surprised he's still alive. Ain't much water in here, other than from leaks and such. Can't be too clean, either."

"You poor little thing," Vladimir said as he walked past the senior chief toward the aft end of the tunnel.

"I can take care of that thing for you, sir," Marcus offered. "Put him on the next shuttle to the surface."

"I will take care of him," Vladimir said as he snuggled his nose into the kitten's black fur on his way out of the launch tube. "I think I'll call you 'Cosmos'," he whispered to the kitten.

Marcus and the Corinairan technician watched Vladimir walk out of the launch tube and into the port fighter bay. Marcus turned to the Corinairan. "A week's pay says that animal never leaves this ship."

The Corinairan nodded his agreement. His eyes suddenly squinted and an inquisitive look came over his face. "We get paid?"

* * *

Synda came out of the galley and walked across the mess hall toward Jessica. "Hi. You wanted to see me?" she asked as approached.

Jessica looked up from the table at Synda. She was wearing an apron that was soiled from working in the galley. Her hair was tied back, and she looked tired, but healthy. "Yeah. Sit down."

Synda took a seat across the table from Jessica. "Something wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking. I was thinking that maybe you should go to Tanna, with all the other evacuees."

"Why?"

"Well, you can't stay here forever."

"Why not?"

"You want to work in the galley? Is that the kind of job you wanted?"

"It's not so bad. Chief Dorig is not so bad, once you get used to his accent. Besides, it's no worse than slopping drinks for grabby guys in business suits. Besides, I was

hoping that once you guys defeat the Jung, I would go back to Earth and try to find Tony."

"Synda, Tony's dead."

"But you said..."

"You were still weak from your injuries. I wasn't sure you could handle the truth."

"What truth?" Synda demanded.

"That Tony's chute didn't open. He died on impact."

"You lied to me," Synda said, her voice dripping with disappointment.

"I was only trying to protect you."

"How do I know you're not lying to me now?"

Jessica rolled her eyes. "You don't, I guess, but I'm not."

"What am I going to do on Tanna?" Synda wondered. "At least here I have a job, such as it is. I have a bed to sleep in, clean clothes, hot showers, food, medical care."

"And the threat of a fiery death in the cold of space," Jessica added.

"You've all managed to survive, haven't you?"

"So far, but the odds are rapidly stacking up against us. At least if you go to Tanna, you'll have a chance at a normal life."

"Like what? Getting married and popping out babies?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know."

"I won't know anyone there."

"You don't know anyone here, except for me. And you'll be with a hundred thousand people from Earth, all of whom are going through the same thing."

Synda looked lost, unsure. "Will I ever get to come back?"

"To here?"

"To Earth."

"If by some miracle we actually do defeat the Jung, then I don't see why not. Then again, you may like it on Tanna. From what I heard, it seems like a nice place, and, it's about as far away from the Jung as you can get, and still be in this sector."

Synda sighed, looking about the room. "I guess, if you think it's for the best."

"I do."

Synda looked at Jessica. "You shouldn't have lied to me though."

"You're right."

"I don't need your protection, you know."

Jessica smiled. "Actually, you do, Synda. You really do."

* * *

Jessica and Synda walked down the main corridor running aft toward the Aurora's main hangar bay. Jessica had a bag slung over her shoulder, and Synda carried a small duffle.

"So, there won't be any problem with your nanites?" Jessica asked as they walked.

"No," Synda answered. "Doctor Chen said they turned the last of them off, so they should just come out in my urine."

"Then you're all healed up?"

"Almost. She said I could've used another week or two of nanite therapy, but what's left will heal up on its own over time."

"I wouldn't mind losing the last of mine a few weeks early, that's for sure." Jessica stepped through the hatch from the central corridor into the main hangar bay. The last of the evacuees were making their way up the boarding ramp onto one of the jump cargo shuttles.

"I wish I didn't have to go," Synda said. "I was just starting to feel at home here."

"I waited as long as I could," Jessica promised. "That is the last shuttle to Tanna. You may end up with the distinction of being the last person evacuated from Earth before..."

"Don't say it," Synda insisted. "It's not going to happen."

"But..."

"My mother used to tell me, 'If you think bad things are going to happen, they will.'"

"You don't seriously believe that..."

"No, but why take the chance?" Synda insisted. They reached the bottom of the boarding ramp, and Synda paused and turned to face Jessica. "You'll come back and get me after it's over, right? You'll bring me back to Earth?"

"Synda, maybe you should just stay on Tanna," Jessica began. "The Earth is already fucked up, and even if by some miracle we do defeat the Jung, it's going to be an ugly place to live for a long time. Make a life for yourself on Tanna. Find a husband, start a family, be happy."

"That's exactly what I was trying to avoid back on Earth," Synda objected, "the whole 'get married and have kids' thing."

"Give it a chance," Jessica urged. "It's made people happy for thousands of years. There must be something to it."

"Then why didn't you do it?"

"Because I wanted to be a bad-ass spec-ops bitch." Jessica looked around briefly. "To be honest, sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice."

"Really?"

"Really. Being in spec-ops may look cool... Okay, it pretty much is cool. I'm just saying, don't be so quick to dismiss the possibilities. Life happens, no matter how much you try to plan things out, it just happens however it's going to happen."

"You're not making a lot of sense, Jess," Synda said.

"Yeah, that's what *my* mother used to tell me."

"Sir?" the shuttle's crew chief called from the top of the boarding ladder. "Is she coming aboard?"

"Yeah, one minute," Jessica answered.

"I guess I have to go," Synda said.

"Listen, I've got a little going away present for you," Jessica said, handing her the bag.

Synda opened the bag and looked inside. "A dress?"

"Yeah. I wore it last Founders' Day. Got lucky in it, too. Don't ask with who, though. Anyway, I don't think I'm going to need it anytime soon. I thought maybe you might."

"Thanks."

"You'll need to have it altered a bit."

Synda put the bag into her duffle. "Thanks, Jess. For everything." Synda leaned forward and hugged Jessica.

"You're welcome, Synda. Be safe."

"You too," Synda replied as she turned and headed up the ramp.

Jessica stepped back and waited as the shuttle's boarding ramp retracted into its hull and its boarding hatch closed.

"Nice kid," Marcus said as he paused in passing. "Bet you're glad to see her go, though."

"Not really."

Marcus looked surprised. "Josh told me she talks too much. Drove you nuts."

"Yeah," Jessica said with a slight laugh, "she did. But she's probably the closest thing to a little sister I'll ever have."

"You never had a sister?" Marcus wondered. "I thought I heard you came from a big family. I figured..."

"All brothers," Jessica said, "lots of them."

Marcus nodded. "Still, it's a good thing you did, sending her to Tanna. She'll be better off there. They all will."

"Yup. I'm going to miss her, though."

"Goodnight, Lieutenant Commander," Marcus said as he continued on.

"Goodnight, Senior Chief," Jessica answered. "Good luck tomorrow."

"To us all," he answered. "To us all."

* * *

Vladimir sat eating an apple, his feet up on Nathan's desk.

"Where did you get an apple?" Nathan wondered.

"I have connections," Vladimir answered, his left eyebrow bouncing up and down in sinister fashion. "I have some more in my quarters, if you'd like one."

"Maybe later. You were saying something about the plasma cannons?"

"*Da*. They are installed and ready to go. We have run simulations and even charged them up to fifty percent, but we need your authorization to test fire them."

"Do you think they'll work?"

"Of course, they'll work," Vladimir insisted as he took another bite. "It still would be better to test fire them first."

"I don't think so," Nathan disagreed.

Vladimir looked at him like he was crazy. "You want to fire them for the first time in battle?"

"Not really, but I don't have much choice. If we fire them here, we'll be tipping our hand to the Jung. So far, they *know* of our plasma torpedoes and of their capabilities. They *don't* know about the mega cannons, though. I'd prefer to keep it that way."

"That is a stupid name, 'mega cannons'."

"What should I call them?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know," Vladimir admitted, "but not 'mega cannons.' Why don't you just jump away and test fire them elsewhere?"

"I can't take the chance that they won't suddenly accelerate and arrive while we're gone," Nathan explained. "We're still not sure if twenty light is their top FTL speed." Nathan leaned back in his chair. "I guess we're just going to have to trust that you installed them correctly."

"You have nothing to worry about," Vladimir promised. "I hope."

The desk intercom beeped.

"*Captain, Comms*," Naralena called over the intercom.

"Go ahead."

"*President Scott on the vid-comm, sir.*"

"Put him up on my wall screen," Nathan ordered.

"*Yes, sir.*"

The view screen on the wall lit up and President Scott appeared, sitting at his desk in his underground office under the NAU capitol in Winnipeg. "*Captain, Lieutenant Commander.*"

"Mister President," Vladimir greeted, his feet coming down from Nathan's desk.

"Mister President," Nathan greeted. "How may I help you, sir?"

"I was hoping you could spare a moment?"

"Of course." Nathan looked at Vladimir.

Vladimir looked from side to side, then pointed at the exit with his finger.

Nathan nodded.

"I should be going," Vladimir said, getting up from his seat. "I still have much work to do, before tomorrow."

"Good luck to you, Lieutenant Commander," President Scott told him.

"Thank you, Mister President," Vladimir answered before he turned to exit.

Nathan waited for Vladimir to close the hatch behind him before he continued. "So, what did you wish to talk about?"

"Well, Nathan, I wanted to personally wish you luck tomorrow."

"You called to wish me luck?"

"And to tell you how proud I am of you," his father said. His tone suddenly turned more serious. "You've grown into an amazing young man, Nathan. Intelligent, decisive, responsible, and with amazing instincts. What you've accomplished since you assumed command of the Aurora is nothing short of incredible. You have surpassed even my wildest dreams, and believe me, I can dream pretty big."

Nathan was at a loss for words. Deep down, although he would never admit it, he had always wanted his father's respect. "Thank you, sir, but I only did what had to be done, and believe me, it wasn't by choice."

"I expect not. Regardless. I am quite proud of you. It makes it so much easier to accept my own demise knowing

that you have turned into such a capable young man.”

“What are you talking about? What demise?”

“This situation, these events, no matter what happens tomorrow, or the day after, month after, year after... they will be my undoing.”

“I’m not following you...”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why presidents always look so old after they’ve served?” his father asked. “It’s because of the job, son. The responsibility, the stress. Surely you feel it yourself. Do you not feel ten years older by now?”

Nathan looked around briefly, thinking. “Now that you mention it.” He turned back to the screen. “I expect you’ll be around longer than you think, Pop.”

His father smiled broadly. “You haven’t called me ‘Pop’ in at least a decade, Nathan.”

“I figured you were due,” Nathan said, “seeing as how you’re talking about your demise and all.”

His father nodded.

“So, is that all you wanted to talk about?” Nathan asked, already expecting more. “To wish me luck and tell me you’re proud of me?”

“I wanted to ask what you think our chances are tomorrow.”

Nathan sighed. “Honestly, sir, I just do not know.”

“Is there even the slightest chance that you and the Celestia can defeat that battle platform?”

“Any sane person, when presented with all the evidence, would probably answer no,” Nathan admitted. “However, one could have said the same about many of our past engagements. You yourself said it. There is always hope.”

“Indeed,” his father agreed. “There always is.” This time, his father sighed. “However, if you see that you are fighting a losing battle, do not sacrifice yourselves to save the Earth.”

“What?”

“We are already at the brink, Nathan. It will take very little effort by the Jung tomorrow to push us over the edge.”

"But..."

"You have to understand, son, that this is bigger than just the Earth. It's bigger than just the core. The Jung must be stopped. They cannot be allowed to expand beyond the core sector. You must promise me that, if you cannot defeat the battle platform, you and the Celestia will depart. Live to fight another day."

"Father, we can't just leave the Earth to burn at the hands of the Jung."

"You may not have a choice, Nathan. It may become a necessary sacrifice. For that which will be born of the ashes of Earth may be the key to defeating the Jung, and possibly saving an entire galaxy from domination and enslavement."

"Pop..." Nathan pleaded.

"Promise me, Nathan," his father insisted.

"You realize what you're asking me to do?"

"You think I don't?" His father looked at him more sternly than ever. "I'm giving you an order, Captain Scott. Are you willing to obey that order?"

Nathan's head hung down for a moment. He then raised his head and sighed. "Yes, sir."

There was a long pause, after which his father finally said, "Thank you, Nathan. Good luck, son."

* * *

Nathan sat silently eating his breakfast in the captain's mess. As usual, Vladimir sat across the table from him, wolfing down his food. Today, however, Vladimir was silent as well.

"More coffee, Captain?" the cook offered.

"Yes, please." Nathan looked at Vladimir as the cook refilled his coffee as well. "How come you're not asking me why I'm so quiet this morning?"

"Because I already know," Vladimir said between bites. "It is why I am quiet as well."

They went on for several more minutes, eating their morning meal in silence, contemplating what lay ahead for

them.

Nathan finished his food, pushed aside the empty plate, and began to sip his second cup of coffee. "You know, he so much as ordered me to abandon the Earth and let it die, if it looks like we cannot win."

"Not surprising," Vladimir said as he finished up his second helping of blini.

"I was surprised," Nathan said solemnly.

"That is because you are an idealist," Vladimir said as he pushed his empty plate aside.

"Maybe," Nathan admitted. After another few minutes of silence, he added. "I don't know if I can do it."

Vladimir sighed as he leaned back in his chair. "I'm not going to lecture you about how this is bigger than one world, and about living to fight another day—I'm sure your father already said these things to you. However, I will say this to you..." Vladimir leaned forward again, as if to emphasize what he was about to say. "In situations such as this, you cannot allow yourself the luxury of thinking with your heart. You must use your head. You must do the math. If one plus one equals two, it will never equal three, no matter how much you want it to."

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena called over the intercom in the captain's mess.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"*We're picking up a broadcast from Earth. President Scott is addressing the entire planet, using every communications medium still in operation.*"

"Pipe it through here," Nathan ordered.

The intercom crackled slightly as Naralena patched the transmission through.

"*Today, our meager yet capable space forces shall face the greatest threat the Earth has seen since the great bio-digital plague. Although we are unable to provide them with tangible support, we can offer them our hopes, our prayers, and our respect. Most of all, we can offer them our thanks. They have fought bravely each and every time that the Jung*

have assaulted our way of life, and they have won every battle. They will win this day as well. We all shall win this day..."

Cameron sat in her ready room on the Celestia, President Scott's speech playing over her intercom.

"Are you listening to this?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked as he entered the captain's ready room.

Cameron gestured for him to be quiet as she continued listening.

"...Even if we, as a people, do not survive the onslaught, what will be born of the ashes of Earth will feed a fire that shall not be ignored, a fire that shall not be extinguished."

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic quietly took a seat across the desk from Cameron as he too listened.

"It is said that humans are a violent species. We kill for passion, we kill for greed, we kill for power. At times, we have even been known to kill for sport. While all that may be true, we are also intelligent enough to know that these tendencies must be controlled in order for our species to survive and flourish. We all want peace and prosperity, we all want to see our children mature to experience the same joys as we ourselves have come to know..."

Jessica and Lieutenant Telles sat in the Aurora's intelligence shack as they listened to the president's speech.

"...The Jung, for whatever reason, believe that they are destined to rule the galaxy. They have systematically conquered every inhabited world in this sector of space, and they have destroyed every world that has opposed them. Is their way better? Perhaps, but it is not our way. Our way is the way of freedom. The freedom to choose our own destinies, the freedom to believe and worship in whatever way suits us..."

Marcus sat in his office on the Aurora's flight operations deck, Josh and Loki sitting across the desk from him.

"...We did not solicit this fight. The Jung attacked without provocation, without warning. More importantly, they attacked without need. What they fail to realize is, that despite their overwhelming military might, try as they will, they cannot take that which makes us human... Our souls..."

"...On the eve of our possible destruction, I wish you all good luck. I wish you all the blessings of whatever deities you choose to worship. I urge you to take shelter in any way that you can. For once the storm passes, we shall need each and every one of you to help rebuild..."

"Captain, Comms," Naralena interrupted.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered over the intercom in his private mess.

"Jung battle platform just came out of FTL, sir," Naralena reported.

"Range?" Nathan asked.

"One point two million kilometers and closing."

"Sound general quarters. Notify the Celestia."

"General quarters, aye," Naralena answered.

Nathan rose from his chair as the lighting in the compartment took on a red tint around the edges of the room, and the alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship.

"Nathan," Vladimir called as he too rose to report to his station. "If it comes to it, you can make the call. I know you."

"I hope you're right," Nathan answered.

* * *

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard at the hatch to the Aurora's bridge announced as Nathan passed.

"Report," Nathan requested as he moved past Naralena at the aft comm station.

Lieutenant Eckert rose from the command chair, moving aft as he spoke. "Contact is decelerating hard. They'll pass lunar orbit in twenty minutes."

"Any signs of aggression?"

"Not yet, sir," Lieutenant Eckert answered as he moved to his usual station at the tactical console.

"Helm, break orbit, all ahead full," Nathan ordered.

"Breaking orbit, full power on the mains," Mister Chiles answered.

"Plot an attack jump, ten kilometers in front of the target, five kilometers below."

"Plotting attack jump," Mister Riley acknowledged. "Ten in front, five below."

"Celestia has been notified and is also going to general quarters," Naralena reported. "All department heads report stations manned and ready. XO is in combat, Chief of the Boat is in damage control."

"Reactors at full power," Mister Riley reported. "Attack jump is plotted and loaded. Jump drive is fully charged and ready."

"Main propulsion and maneuvering are answering normally," Mister Chiles reported.

"All weapons deployed, charged and ready," Lieutenant Eckert announced. "The ship is at general quarters."

"Comms, transmit the same message to the contact," Nathan ordered. "'Surrender, withdraw, or die. Those are your only options.' End message."

"Aye, sir."

"Breaking orbit now," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Contact has raised their shields," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "They're powering weapons as well."

"Comms, any answer?" Nathan wondered.

"Negative, sir."

"Contact the Celestia, verify our tactical data link and tell them to follow us in."

"Yes, sir."

"Target is firing missiles," Mister Navashee announced. "Lots of them."

"I've got forty-eight incoming tracks," Lieutenant Eckert announced. "They're evenly spread out, Captain, but they're moving awfully slowly."

"What do you mean, slowly? How closely spaced are they?" Nathan wondered. "Can we jump between them?"

"Ten kilometer separation," the lieutenant reported. "Slowly as in not much faster than the battle platform. At their current speed it will take them fifteen minutes to reach us."

"What the hell?"

"Jump point in twenty seconds," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan shook it off. "Forward tubes, Lieutenant. Full power, triple shots, all four tubes at once. Jump, shoot, jump. Then the Celestia follows."

"Forward tubes, full power, triple shots, simultaneous," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"We'll be ready to jump out again, sir," Mister Riley added. "Five seconds to jump.....four..."

"Detonations!" Mister Navashee reported.

"...Three..."

"All forty-eight missiles just detonated!" Lieutenant Eckert exclaimed.

"...Two..."

"Hold jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Holding the jump," Mister Riley answered.

"More detonations!" Mister Navashee added. "Again!"

"Captain, the missiles! They must have multi-staged fragmenting warheads! I'm now tracking four thousand eight hundred projectiles headed our way."

"What the hell are they?"

"They're miniature warheads, Captain!" Mister Navashee realized. "Not terribly powerful, but enough to put a dent in

our hull, that's for sure!"

"It's a flak wall," Nathan realized. "They're trying to block our jump. Helm, pitch down relative, hard, ninety degrees..."

"Pitching down hard, ninety relative," the helmsman answered.

"...Jump us two light minutes along the new course," Nathan continued. "Comms relay to the Celestia. Same tactic opposite direction. We attack passing bottom to top in three, they attack top to bottom in four."

"Plotting new jump, two light minutes, aye," Mister Riley answered.

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby answered from the navigator's station at the Celestia's helm.

"Pitch down ninety, Mister Hunt," Cameron ordered.

"Ninety down, aye."

"Prepare to jump us ahead, to a point directly above the target," Cameron added.

"Plotting new jump," Mister Jakoby answered.

"Those warheads were spaced closely enough that we couldn't jump through that field without hitting at least a few of them," Luis said. "They're no longer traveling away from the battle platform. They must have some kind of thrusters and guidance systems. They're still traveling parallel to the platform, however. It's like they've put up a fence to keep us away from them."

"Which means they've received advanced intel about our jump drive and battle tactics," Cameron added.

"That's going to make them a lot harder to attack, sir," Luis pointed out.

"As if it wasn't hard enough already," Cameron said.

"Sir, they could literally surround themselves with a mine field that moves with them."

"They don't need to," Cameron pointed out. "All they have to do is close off a few angles, forcing us to make our attack runs down known available corridors. They fire down those corridors and we jump right into incoming fire."

"Turn complete," Ensign Hunt reported from the helm.

"Ready to jump," Mister Jakoby added.

"Execute the jump," Cameron ordered.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The blue-white flash washed over the Celestia's bridge as she jumped forward.

"Jump complete."

"We're directly over the target's last known position," Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. "Two light minutes out."

"Pitch down again, toward the target," Cameron ordered.

"Pitching down ninety," Ensign Hunt answered.

"We'll pass aft of the target, Mister Jakoby," Cameron continued. "About ten kilometers, starting two kilometers above. Yaw as we pass, firing continuously. Let's see if we can weaken their shields any."

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

The ship suddenly rocked as explosions pounded their hull in rapid succession.

"What the...?"

"Impacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "All across our bow! We just flew through another minefield, Captain! They must've launched another one along their ventral side just before we jumped!"

"Why didn't we see it?"

"We were two light minutes out, sir! They could've fired a minute fifty-nine ago and we wouldn't have seen it!"

"I have a firing solution!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Fire all tubes!"

"Firing all four tubes!" the lieutenant reported.

"Damage report!" Nathan demanded.

"Hull breaches, sections alpha seven through ten."

"Multiple impacts!" the lieutenant announced.

"Pitch up to pass her starboard side!" Nathan ordered.

"Forward dorsal maneuvering pod is offline!" Mister Chiles reported. "I'm compensating with laterals for now!"

"They're firing guns!" Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge shook violently as rail gun rounds began striking the Aurora's armored hull.

"Jesus!" Nathan exclaimed as he held on tightly to the sides of his command chair. "How big are those things!?"

"Twice the size of our quads!" Mister Navashee answered.

"Clear jump line!" Mister Chiles reported.

"Escape jump, plotted and ready!" Mister Riley added.

"Jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Yawing to hold target!" Ensign Hunt announced as the Celestia came out of her jump.

"Fire!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing one!" Luis reported.

"Multiple contacts!" Ensign Kono reported. "Target is launching ships!"

"Firing two!" Luis continued.

"What kind of ships?" Cameron asked.

"I don't know, sir," Ensign Kono admitted. "They're bigger than gunboats, but smaller than frigates."

"Firing three!"

"They're launching fighters as well," the ensign added as she studied her sensor displays.

"Firing four!"

"Apex of our pass!" Ensign Hunt reported from the helm.

"Firing one!"

"I think they're escorts," Ensign Kono reported.

"Firing two!"

"Yes, they're following the first contacts out."

"Firing three!"
"Course?"
"Earth."
"Firing four!"
"Missile launches!" Ensign Kono announced.
"Escape jump!" Cameron ordered.
"Jumping!" Mister Jakoby replied as the blue-white flash of the jump began to wash over them.

"They'll make Earth orbit in five minutes," Mister Navashee answered from the Aurora's sensor station.

"They've got to be some kind of orbital bombers," Lieutenant Eckert said. "They're too small to carry landing forces, and they only have minimal defensive turrets."

"Hence the fighter escorts," Nathan added.

"Should we send our fighters after them?"

"Negative," Nathan answered. "We've only got twenty left, and there has got to be at least one hundred Jung fighters in that flight alone."

"One hundred and forty-four," the lieutenant corrected.

"We'll have to deal with them ourselves."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Execute next jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three..."

"Captain, that battle platform now has a flak wall up on four sides," Mister Navashee reported.

"Two..."

"She's forcing us to attack only from port or starboard," Nathan explained.

"One..."

"It gives them the most guns on target with the least amount of turret movement," Nathan continued.

"Jumping."

"Maybe they're trying to protect their weaker areas?" Lieutenant Eckert suggested as the jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Doubtful," Nathan said as the flash subsided. "It's nearly symmetrical. More likely they're trying to corral us into easy kill zones."

"Starting next turn," the helmsman reported.

"Any chance we can withstand those mini-warheads they're laying out like mines?" Nathan wondered.

"Not for long," Mister Navashee answered. "If we lose too many jump field emitters..."

"Yeah," Nathan said with a sigh. Lieutenant, let's break out the big guns this time. Fifty percent power, all four cannons at once. Single shot and jump away. I don't want to be in their sights for more than ten seconds."

"Yes, sir."

"Any damage?" Cameron asked.

"Didn't weaken their shields at all, sir," Ensign Kono answered with disappointment.

"First turn complete," Ensign Hunt reported.

"First jump in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"They've now got minefields up on four sides," Luis reported from the tactical station. "Fore, aft, top and bottom."

"Initiating next turn," the helmsman reported.

"So we're stuck with port and starboard," Cameron surmised.

"That puts us passing through their best fields of fire," Luis pointed out, "and their biggest guns."

"So we can pass through a mine field, or a field of heavy rail gun fire," Cameron said. "Nice choices."

"Second turn complete," Ensign Hunt reported.

"Attack jump is plotted and ready, Captain," Mister Jakoby added.

"Jump flash, near the target!" Ensign Kono reported. "It's the Aurora. She's firing her big cannons! She's jumped away!"

"The same side as us?" Cameron said, somewhat surprised.

"Yes, sir. From their trajectory, they were below the target, passing upward."

"Any effect on the target's shields?"

"One percent drop in the area targeted," Ensign Kono responded, "and that was at fifty percent power."

"Same target area, Mister Delaveaga," Cameron said. "Big guns, full power. Plasma torpedoes as well. Triplets at full power. Everything at once."

"Yes, sir," Luis responded enthusiastically. "Big guns are fully charged and ready. Ready, triple shots at full power, all forward tubes."

"Execute attack jump," Cameron ordered.

"Jumping in three.....two..."

"Let's see how much their shields can withstand," Cameron continued.

"One.....jumping."

The jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby reported as the flash subsided.

"Nose on target," Ensign Hunt added.

"I have a firing solution, all weapons," Luis reported.

"Fire all weapons," Cameron ordered.

"Firing all weapons!" Luis answered.

"Target is firing guns!" Ensign Kono reported.

The reddish-orange light from the barrage of departing energy blasts was blinding. The Celestia shook violently as massive rail gun rounds slammed into her hull.

"Hull breaches!" Ensign Souza reported from the comm station. "Deck D, forward of primary bulkhead! Sections four through twelve are open to space!"

"Impacts!" Luis reported as all sixteen plasma shots impacted the battle platform's port shields at the same instant.

"Fire in forward maneuvering pod!" The systems officer reported.

"I've lost all forward maneuvering!" Ensign Hunt reported. "Nose is going to be sluggish to pitch, sir!"

"Is our jump line clear?" Cameron demanded.

"Yes, sir!" Mister Jakoby answered as the ship continued to shake from the incoming rail gun fire.

"Jump!"

"Four percent drop in their shields," Mister Navashee reported.

"That means we *can* defeat their shields, if given enough time," Lieutenant Eckert said.

"If we can survive their guns long enough," Nathan added. "Spin up the combat jumpers, Lieutenant. Let's see if they can get inside that battle platform's shields the same way that the Falcon did with those battleships."

"Yes, sir."

"Comms, order the Celestia to break off her attack on the battle platform while the jumpers give it a run. Have her attack those ships entering orbit over Earth instead."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Combat One, departing," the copilot announced as the shuttle lifted off the Aurora's flight deck.

"*Combat Two, departing,*" the second shuttle announced over comms.

"First jump in five seconds," the copilot announced as the shuttle's pilot climbed up over the Aurora's main propulsion section and turned slightly to port. "Three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Neither pilot paid any attention to the blue-white jump flash as it washed over them and quickly dissipated.

"Coming to attack heading," the pilot announced calmly as he turned his shuttle hard to port.

"On course," the copilot reported.

"Accelerating to attack speed," the pilot said as he advanced his main throttles.

"Target velocity in five seconds," the copilot reported. "Relative velocity in twenty seconds."

"I sure would like to be going faster while we're close in," the pilot said.

"Me too," the copilot agreed, "but we wouldn't be able to translate down fast enough in this thing."

"If ever there was a mission that had suicide written all over it," the pilot mumbled.

"*What?*" the gunner asked from the back of the shuttle.

"He asked if you're ready back there, Chief."

"*Yes, sir,*" the crew chief answered. "*All weapons are hot. Let's go emitter hunting!*"

"Attack velocity achieved," the copilot reported. Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Translating down!" the pilot announced as the jump flash washed over them. He slid the control yoke backward, firing the topside thrusters and holding them open. He watched the display in the center of the console, as the line indicating the approaching edge of the battle platform's shields slowly raised up.

"Damn! Three meters!" the copilot said. "We're clear."

"*Firing!*" the chief reported.

"Keep translating down!" the copilot urged. "The closer we get to her the harder it will be for her to track us with her point-defense guns!"

"I know! I know!"

The combat shuttle continued descending toward the starboard side of the massive battle platform, all three of her laser turrets firing away. Her two more limited outboard turrets swept back and forth, hoping to hit as many emitters as possible, while the crew chief attempted to manually target any emitters he spotted with their center turret.

"Exit jump point in twenty seconds!" the copilot announced.

"Pitching up two degrees," the pilot answered. "Lining up to jump out."

"That's it, right there! Hold it! Hold it! Jumping!"

The jump flash washed over them as their shuttle jumped through the gap in between the battle platform's shield layers, safely emerging from their jump more than five light minutes away.

"Jump complete," the copilot said with relief.

"*Please* don't tell me we have to do *that* again," the pilot exclaimed. "I'll take the Ghatazhak missions over that any day of the week!"

"Damn!" the crew chief exclaimed from the back of the shuttle. "That was fun!"

"How many did you get, Chief?" the copilot wondered.

"I have no idea! Let's do it again!"

Both pilots looked at each other.

"At least twenty emitters are down," Mister Navashee reported. "No change in their shield strength yet."

"Combat Two just jumped in and has started their attack run," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Battle platform is firing point-defense guns again," Mister Navashee announced. "They're targeting Combat Two."

"Come on," Nathan mumbled.

"They're taking out more emitters, sir!" Mister Navashee reported.

"The scans from Combat One's first pass must have helped with targeting, just like it did with the Falcon," Lieutenant Eckert commented.

"Come on," Nathan repeated.

"They've taken out at least thirty... One of their inner shields, starboard area, midship, just along their lateral line,

has just failed!”

“What about their primary shields in that area?” Nathan asked.

“Still holding... Oh, God. Combat Two is hit. They’re losing control.” Mister Navashee hung his head down and moaned. “Combat Two is gone, sir.”

Nathan paused for a moment then rotated his chair slightly aft toward Naralena at the comm station. “Comms, tell Combat One to queue up for another run. Tell them to concentrate on that same area.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Targets have spread out all over the planet,” Luis reported from the Celestia’s tactical station. “They’re launching ordnance at the surface. A lot of it.”

“I’m detecting nukes, Commander,” Ensign Kono announced.

“All weapons, lock onto any ships in range and open fire. Lasers, quads, plasma cannon... Pound them, Mister Delaveaga!” Cameron ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

“Helm, bring our nose onto the furthest target.”

“Yes, sir. The helm is still sluggish, sir,” Ensign Hunt warned.

“Are you compensating with the lateral thrusters?” Cameron asked.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Tactical, forward tubes, single shots, full power. Fire on the furthest target as soon as you get a firing solution, while you continue firing guns at the near targets.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fighters are turning toward us, Commander,” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station.

“I have a firing solution on one of the bombers,” Ensign Delaveaga reported. “Firing one!”

"The first group of fighters will intercept us in thirty seconds," Ensign Kono reported.

"Which side?"

"Port side."

"Tactical, retarget port lasers onto the incoming fighters."

"Retargeting. Firing two!"

"First torpedo weakened their shields by thirty percent," Ensign Kono reported. "Recommend triplets, sir."

"Switch to triplets and continue firing," Cameron ordered, realizing she should have ordered the use of triple shots from the beginning.

"Switching to triplets," Luis answered. "Firing tube three!"

Three red-orange balls of plasma streaked over their heads on the main view screen as they went racing toward the distant target that was about to disappear over the horizon. Seconds later, the torpedoes found their mark, announcing their detonation with three brilliant flashes of yellow-orange light.

"Target destroyed," Ensign Kono reported.

"First wave of fighters has been eliminated," Luis added. "Those laser turrets are fast."

"Very well. Helm, put us on the next furthest target."

"Two targets to port are turning toward us," Ensign Kono reported. "They may be attempting to engage us."

"With their point-defenses?" Luis questioned.

"They could always take out a few emitters," Cameron said, "make us lame. Who knows what else is inside that battle platform." She turned back to the helm. "Come about and bring our tubes on the targets to port, Mister Hunt. If they want to play, we'll oblige them."

"Yes, sir."

"Combat One is down!" Mister Navashee reported. "I think he broke apart as he jumped, sir."

"What about that primary shield?"

"It's down to twenty percent, Captain."

"That's our target, then. Mister Riley, plot a jump. Put us twenty out, two high. We'll pass over the top, under their dorsal mine field."

"Plotting jump," Mister Riley answered.

"All tubes, full power, triple shots. All cannons full power. All weapons, simultaneous fire."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"As little time in the kill zone as possible, gentlemen."

"I have two firing solutions," Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station. "Tubes one and three on target two, two and four on target three."

"Fire!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing one and two," Luis announced. "Firing three and four."

Cameron watched again as the plasma torpedoes streaked overhead, reaching their targets only a few seconds later.

"Impacts!" Ensign Kono announced with glee. "Both targets destroyed."

"Let's keep it going people," Cameron urged. "There's still twenty-one more ships in orbit, and they're dropping nukes on our world. Every second we take equals tens of thousands of lives. Next target."

"Recommend contact eight," Luis announced. "Come four degrees to starboard and accelerate."

"Jump comp..."

The Aurora suddenly lurched to starboard as she came out of her jump. Mister Riley was thrown to his left, landing on the floor at Mister Navashee's feet.

"Big guns!"

"I have a firing solution!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" Nathan ordered as he moved to help Mister Riley back to his chair.

"Firing all weapons!"

"Next jump, Mister Riley."

"I've got it, sir. I'm all right."

"Weapons away!"

"Jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three....."

"What the hell happened?" Nathan demanded.

"Two....."

"Torpedo impacts!" Lieutenant Eckert announced.

"Their big guns, sir!" Mister Navashee answered.

"One....."

"Their starboard midship shields are down!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Jumping."

"They were firing in all directions, Captain," the sensor operator finished as the jump flash washed over them.

"Executing first turn," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"They're trying to put as much crap in our way as they can," Nathan realized. "They've probably got a ton of ammo for their guns. They can just run them non-stop, fill the space around them with slugs so that no matter what angle we attack from, we'll take a pounding." Nathan felt the frustration boiling up inside him. "Damage report!"

"Targets destroyed," Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia's sensor station.

"No more targets on our side," Luis reported.

"Mister Jakoby, jump us ahead one light minute, then come hard about and jump us back to the far side."

"Yes, sir," Mister Jakoby answered.

"I've managed to reroute some of the damaged control circuits in the forward maneuvering pods, Commander," Ensign Hunt reported. "It's still sluggish, but better."

"Good work, Ensign," Cameron said.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Execute."

"Heavy casualties in the forward portions of both C and D decks," Master Chief Montrose reported over the comms. *"Life support has failed in all sections forward of bulkheads twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine. Fires are out on both decks. All crew on the lower decks are donning pressure suits, just in case."*

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Lieutenant, how are our weapons holding up?"

"We're down two laser turrets on our port side, and the plasma cannon is down, but all our torpedo tubes and big cannons are still fully operational."

"How's medical doing?" Nathan asked his comm officer.

"Forty-two wounded, eighteen dead. Forward rescue crews estimate another twenty still unaccounted for, sir," Naralena reported.

"Second turn is complete," Mister Chiles announced.

"Attack jump is plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Captain," Lieutenant Eckert began, "We can only withstand so many passes, and we're out of combat jumpers. This may be our only chance to get a clean shot at them."

Nathan sighed. "I know, Lieutenant. Comms, contact the Celestia, tell her to follow us in and attack the target's unshielded area. Warn her to expect heavy rail gun fire."

"Yes, sir."

"Stand by all weapons, Lieutenant. We're going to keep hitting them with everything we've got for as long as we can."

"All weapons are charged and ready, sir."

"Very well. Mister Riley, execute the next attack jump."

"Jumping in three....."

"Flash traffic from the Aurora, Sir!" Ensign Souza reported. "We've been ordered to disengage the targets over Earth and rejoin the attack on the battle platform."

"Are they aware that the Earth is being nuked from orbit?" Cameron wondered.

"We've been transmitting our tactical data to them," Luis assured her. "They know what we know."

"How many targets are left?" Cameron inquired.

"Eleven bombers are still actively attacking the surface," Ensign Kono reported.

"Damn it," Cameron exclaimed in frustration. After a moment, she gave in to the unpleasant reality. "Helm, change course. Prepare to jump us back to engage the battle platform again."

"Jump complete!" Mister Riley announced as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

The ship began to violently shake once again as they plowed forward through waves of rail gun fire.

"We're taking multiple hits!" Mister Navashee reported.

"I have a firing solution!" Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Her starboard midship shields are still down!"

"She is firing every gun on her starboard side at us!" Mister Navashee exclaimed.

"Fire all weapons!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing all forward torpedoes! Firing cannons!" Lieutenant Eckert acknowledged.

The bridge of the Aurora was set ablaze in red-orange light as sixteen more blasts of highly energized plasma left her weapons tubes and began their short journey toward their target.

Nathan watched the main view screen as the red-orange balls streaked away from them, driving forward toward the massive battle platform that filled their entire view screen. He could see rail gun slugs plowing into the forward sections

of his ship's hull at the bottom edges of the main view screen. Occasionally, he could barely make out one of the massive rail gun slugs as it streaked past, barely missing them.

"Weapons away!" the lieutenant added.

"Impacts!" Mister Navashee reported.

The main view screen filled with brilliant flashes of yellow-white light. Then, in the blink of an eye, something appeared at the center of the main view screen. Within a second, it had grown to fill the entire screen, blocking out everything behind it. The main view screen suddenly went black, leaving nothing but the four tactical windows displayed along its bottom edge.

"Just lost forward camera!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley answered as the blue-white jump flash washed over them once more.

"Bring us back around, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered. "Same side, same target point, but at an angle fifteen degrees aft and ten degrees high of our last run."

"Aurora has jumped away!" Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia's sensor station.

"Damage to the target?" Cameron asked.

"Multiple outer hull breaches in the impact areas. Damage to surface systems, all of her point-defenses in the starboard midship area are down."

"What about surrounding shields?"

"No change," the ensign reported. "She's got a really thick hull, sir. Those hull breaches are at least five meters deep, and I'm still only seeing minor systems exposed in the breaches. No open decks or critical systems."

"Attack jump plotted and ready," Mister Jakoby announced.

"All forward tubes and cannons are charged to full power and ready to..." Luis began.

"Missile launches!" Ensign Kono interrupted.

"Forty-eight of them," Luis added from tactical. "She's putting up another wall!"

"She's trying to protect her unshielded side," Cameron realized. "Jump! Now, before those missiles separate!"

"Jumping!" Mister Jakoby acknowledged.

The Celestia's jump flash lit up the bridge.

"Jump complete."

The ship began to shake violently as enemy rail gun rounds pounded against the exterior of the Celestia and drove into her hull.

"Heavy rail gun fire!" Ensign Kono reported.

"I have a firing solution!" Luis announced.

"Fire!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing all weapons!"

The entire bridge suddenly seemed to roll to the left. Cameron felt her body jamming into the right side of her command chair as a muffled explosion rumbled through the framework of the ship.

"Explosion! Port outboard plasma cannon!" Ensign Souza reported.

"Both port plasma cannons show offline!" Luis reported.

"Jump! Jump! Jump!" Cameron ordered.

"Final turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Attack jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"She's put up another mine field, starboard side," Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora's sensor station.

Nathan felt his hope fading.

"There's no way we can jump through that without taking major damage, Captain," Lieutenant Eckert warned.

"If we jump in again, we may not get out."

"Captain! I just spotted the Celestia!" Mister Navashee reported. "Her port forward side is open to space, from just forward of her cannon doors to the middle of her port fighter

bay." Mister Navashee turned to face Nathan. "Their cannons must have overloaded."

"Comms! Contact the Celestia and get a damage assessment. Find out if she can still jump."

"Yes, sir!" Naralena answered.

"Target is approaching orbital insertion," Mister Navashee announced.

"She can start bombardment at any moment!" Lieutenant Eckert warned.

Nathan felt sick. His world was about to be destroyed. Everyone and everything he knew was about to be wiped from existence by a brutal, merciless enemy. The planet would survive, but it would never again be the planet he once called home. Abby's father had been right, albeit in ways he couldn't possibly have imagined. Everything was about to change for the worst, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Celestia reports both port plasma cannons are down, fifteen dead, twenty-eight injured," Naralena reported. "She's lost several emitters on the port side, but she can still execute short range jumps. Maneuvering capabilities decreased but still operational. Main propulsion, power generation, and life support are all functioning. Plasma cannon is offline, half her laser turrets are down. All other weapons are operational. She's awaiting orders, sir."

"Give me any camera that shows the Earth," Nathan requested, desperation in his voice.

"Port side, forward camera twelve," Lieutenant Eckert reported as the view screen lit up.

Nathan looked at the image of the Earth before him, its beautiful blue, brown, and green surface curving across the main view screen from top left to bottom right. In the distance, the massive Jung battle platform was settling into high orbit, preparing to finish the job that its bombers had already begun.

"Captain?" Lieutenant Eckert urged.

Nathan ignored him, his thoughts on the world on the screen before him.

"Captain? Your orders?" the lieutenant urged again.

Nathan took in a long, deep breath as he remembered his friend's words. *You can make the call. I know you.* He took one last look at his home and breathed out. "Helm, come about," he said. His tone had changed from desperation to resignation. "Set course out of the system and prepare to jump."

"Coming about, aye," Mister Chiles answered without hesitation.

"What?" Lieutenant Eckert responded in shock.

"You know as well as I, Lieutenant," Nathan said, "the Earth is done for, and this is much bigger than one world, even if that one world is our home."

"But Captain," Lieutenant Eckert pleaded.

Nathan could tell by his tactical officer's tone that he too understood the situation. It was simply his emotions and his frustrations that were speaking for him now.

"We shall prevail," Nathan stated with conviction, "the Earth shall be avenged... Only not on this day."

Lieutenant Eckert said nothing. He only looked down at his console as if searching for an answer.

"Plotting jump route out of the system," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan turned slowly, looking back over his shoulder toward Naralena. "Comms, pass the word to the Celestia. We're withdrawing. Once we clear the system and are out of their sensor range, we'll head for Tanna."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered in a near whisper, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Flash traffic from the Aurora!" Ensign Souza announced from the Celestia's comm station. His expression suddenly changed, horror on his face. "Commander," he said, looking at Cameron. "We've been ordered to break off and head out

of the system. We're going to Tanna." Ensign Souza looked up from his console. "We're retreating, sir."

No one on the Celestia's bridge said a word. They all knew what it meant, and they all knew the reason they were leaving.

Cameron sat very still, fearing the slightest movement would cause her to break down and cry, which was something that she could not allow herself to do, especially now. She swallowed hard. "Helm, match the Aurora's course and stand by to jump."

Ensign Hunt had already turned to face his commanding officer. After a moment, he answered. "Yes, sir." He slowly turned his chair back around to face forward and carry out his orders. "Coming to port, setting course for Tanna."

The bridge remained silent for several seconds.

"Sir," Ensign Kono started in a broken voice, "the battle platform is starting her bombardment."

"I know," Cameron answered in a near whisper. "I know."

"Ship is on course and speed to exit the system," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"First jump is plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Very well," Nathan said. "Comms?"

"Celestia reports ready to jump, sir," Naralena answered.

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Execute when ready, Mister Riley."

"Aye, sir," the navigator answered. "Jumping in five seconds....."

Nathan held his head down.

"Four....."

Turning his back on the Earth and allowing her to die was the most difficult thing he had ever been asked to do.

"Three....."

He only hoped that it would not be in vain.

"Two....."

Nathan closed his eyes.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee announced. "Multiple jump flashes!"

"Hold the jump!" Nathan snapped as he jumped to his feet. "Comms!" he called over his shoulder.

"On it!" Naralena answered.

"Ten, fifteen... I've got twenty jump flashes, dead ahead!" Mister Navashee reported.

"What the hell are they?" Nathan demanded.

"Celestia has canceled her jump and is standing by," Naralena announced.

Mister Navashee studied his sensor display in disbelief, then turned and looked over his right shoulder at his captain, a grin on his face. "They're Falcons, sir!"

"Incoming transmission," Naralena announced. "It's from the lead Falcon!"

"Put him on," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"*Aurora, Strike Leader,*" the voice called over the comms.

"Strike Leader, Aurora Actual, identify."

"*Aurora Actual, Strike Leader. Major McCullum, formerly of the Corinari, leading a flight of twenty, heavily armed four zero twos, courtesy of Commander Dumar, leader of the Karuzari Nation. I take it you are Captain Scott?*"

"Affirmative," Nathan answered, "and I must say that I am glad to see you... All of you."

"*We apologize if we're late, Captain. Based on your call for help, we expected to be arriving well ahead of the festivities. I hope the party is not yet over?*"

"It's just getting started, Major."

"*Excellent. We await your attack orders, Captain.*"

Nathan spun around, a fresh and determined look on his face. "Lieutenant, transmit the scans and jump parameters we received from Combat One to those—what did he call them—four zero twos?"

"Yes, sir!" the lieutenant answered.

"Major, we're transmitting jump parameters and targeting information to you now. You see that big bitch blasting the hell out of Earth? We need you and your ships to jump inside their shields, and take out every emitter and every rail gun you find, preferably on her starboard side."

"*Understood, sir,*" the major answered.

"You get her shields down and her big guns out of the way, and we'll do the rest," Nathan promised.

"*We shall start our attack run momentarily, Captain,*" the major answered. "*Strike Leader, out.*"

"Hot damn!" Nathan exclaimed. "Comms, pass the word to the Celestia. Stay outside the mine fields. Once their shields are down and their guns are silent, we blast the hell out of them with everything we've got."

Major McCullum rolled his interceptor to port and pulled his nose up as he brought his main propulsion to full power. "Strike One to Strike Flight. Follow me in, wedge formation. We jump between their shield layers, translate down, then accelerate. Odds target shield emitters, evens target gun emplacements. Let's get it done in a single pass, gentlemen. I seriously doubt they'll allow us a second."

"Twenty seconds to jump," the major's weapons officer announced from the rear seat. "All weapons are ready, nose turret is hot."

"I'm lined up. Speed is on the numbers," the major reported.

"Jumping in ten."

"Here we go," the major added.

The last of the ships formed up into a wedge-shaped formation. Beginning with the lead ship and working outward and back, one by one and in rapid succession, the Karuzari interceptors were enveloped in flashes of blue-white light as they disappeared.

"Jump complete," the major's weapons officer reported.

"Strike One, on the attack. Translating down," the major announced as he fired his topside thrusters. The interceptor began to descend rapidly toward the starboard side of the massive battle platform as the voices of the other nineteen pilots announced their arrival in the attack area. "Accelerating," he added as he pushed his throttles forward.

"Acquiring targets," his weapons officer said. "Firing nose turret. Launching missiles."

Major McCullum looked out the starboard side of his canopy at the massive rail guns passing by. "Whoa," he exclaimed. "Did you see the size of that rail gun?"

"You could fit my house inside one of those barrels," his weapons officer said. "All missiles launched. Jump point in ten seconds."

"Pitching up for escape jump," the major announced calmly.

"They are tearing the hell out of the side of that battle platform," Mister Navashee exclaimed from the Aurora's sensor console.

"They've started jumping out," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"How many did we lose?" Nathan wondered.

"Sixteen ships escaped," the lieutenant answered. "We lost four, sir."

"Damage assessment?"

"Four shields on her starboard side are completely down!" Mister Navashee reported with excitement. "The rest are down to ten percent strength or less. More importantly, she's got nothing but point-defense guns left on her starboard side!"

"Mister Riley, jump us in, just short of that damned mine field," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"Lieutenant, stand by to fire all torpedoes and all plasma cannons, full power, continuous fire."

"All tubes and cannons, full power, continuous fire. Yes, sir," the lieutenant answered gladly.

"Jumping in five seconds," Mister Riley warned.

"Comms, tell the Celestia to do the same."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Three.....two.....one.....jumping."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Aurora's bridge, and with it, a chill of excitement ran up Nathan's spine. The tables had finally turned.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced.

"I have a firing solution," the lieutenant announced.

"Open fire! All weapons!" Nathan ordered.

Red-orange bolts of plasma shot out in rapid succession from the Aurora's forward torpedo tubes located along the outboard leading edges of her main propulsion section. At the same time, massive balls of red-orange plasma spewed forth from her four plasma cannons that had recently been installed in what were once her fighter launch tubes. Seconds after the Aurora had opened fire, a blue-white jump flash was seen not more than two kilometers off the Aurora's starboard beam, and the Celestia appeared, opening fire with all her remaining weapons as well. From their positions beyond the mine fields that lay between them and the Jung battle platform, it took nearly ten seconds for their weapons to impact the target. Mines exploded as plasma energy impacted them on accident, slowly clearing an opening in the protective layer of miniature warheads.

"Multiple impacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "I'm starting to pick up secondary explosions from within her

hull. We have to be overloading her systems with all the energy we're dumping into her hull right now!"

"Target is no longer bombarding the surface," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"I'm picking up new contacts, coming over the horizon," Mister Navashee added.

"It's the bombers and her escorts," Lieutenant Eckert realized.

"They're coming after us," Nathan said.

"Do those bombers even have guns?" the lieutenant wondered as they continue to fire on the battle platform.

"Not that can hurt us," Nathan said, "but they can ram us. Comms! Tell those four zero twos to engage those incoming bombers."

"Yes, sir!"

"Lieutenant! Green Deck! Launch all fighters to intercept their escorts!"

"Battle platform is losing the rest of her shields!" Mister Navashee announced. "They're dropping all around her. She's attempting to leave orbit! She's on the run, Captain!"

"Comms! Order the Celestia to target their engines! We can't let her get up to minimum sub-light speeds for FTL conversion!"

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Swinging to starboard, aye," Ensign Hunt answered from the Celestia's helm.

"Selecting new targets!" Luis reported. "Targeting the battle platform's main propulsion! Firing solution in five seconds!"

"Roll us onto our port side so we can get our quads on those incoming bombers," Cameron ordered. "Don't fire unless they get close, though. We don't want to hit any of our own fighters if we can avoid it!"

"Rolling to port, aye," Ensign Hunt answered. "Nose is on their engines!"

"I have a firing solution!" Luis added.

"Fire!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing!"

"I'm reading massive power failures all over the battle platform!" Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora's sensor station. "She's still moving away, but she's no longer accelerating! I'm pretty sure she's dead stick!"

"Captain!" the lieutenant called out, "with that change in course, she's lost her mine field walls! The must not have the ability to track her course change! She's a sitting duck, sir!"

"What about her weapons?" Nathan asked. "What about her big guns?"

"She's not generating enough power to fire anything, Captain!" Mister Navashee insisted. "She's dead and adrift."

"Comms, tell the Celestia to continue firing," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Captain," Lieutenant Eckert began to object, "if we could take her in..."

"We don't have the time or resources to deal with that right now, Lieutenant. Continue firing, I want that thing destroyed!"

"Yes, sir!" Lieutenant Eckert answered. "Continuing to fire with all forward tubes and cannons!"

Nathan watched as plasma torpedoes and shots from the big plasma cannons streaked overhead toward the now helpless battle platform. Flashes of yellow-white light were seen all over the platform as the balls of highly energized plasma struck the platform's hull. The target's hull blew apart, section by section, as plasma torpedoes from both ships drilled deeper into the platform's interior sections. Secondary explosions began to go off as the target's critical systems were finally exposed.

"She's starting to come apart," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

Nathan continued to watch with great satisfaction as the massive battle platform came apart. One by one, her six massive arms began to break away from her core as dozens of secondary explosions went off deep within its hull. The explosions became more numerous by the second, until finally the entire platform was engulfed in explosions. Then, a few seconds later, it was over. No more explosions, no fires. Just debris, big and small, spreading out in all directions.

"Target is destroyed!" Lieutenant Eckert exclaimed.

Nathan closed his eyes and tilted his head forward, thankful that it was over.

"Captain, the Celestia is requesting permission to join the four zero twos in cleaning up the last of the Jung forces over Earth," Naralena reported.

"Permission granted," Nathan answered. He sat back down, a wave of relief washing over him as he leaned back in his command chair. "*Now, the war begins.*"

Thank you for reading this story.
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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