

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 6

**HEAD OF
THE
DRAGON**

Ryk Brown

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[End Page](#)

Chapter One

“Captain,” Jessica called as she entered the captain’s ready room at the rear of the bridge. “Mister Dumar has some concerns that I think we should consider,” she continued without waiting for permission to enter.

Captain Nathan Scott was accustomed to his security chief’s abrupt demeanor. She took everything head on without hesitation, which was one of the qualities that made her so adept at her new position. In addition, she had become a trusted friend, as had everyone else currently in the ready room with him, everyone except Mister Dumar. There were still some lingering doubts in Nathan’s mind about the Corinairan commodities consultant turned intelligence analyst—especially after learning that he was actually some sort of Karuzari deep cover agent. Mister Dumar appeared to have the unwavering trust of Tug, the leader of the Karuzari. However, until Nathan learned more about Travon Dumar, he felt unsure about how best to deal with the man.

Nathan glanced at Tug who had taken a seat on the couch. Still dressed in the lower portion of his flight suit, he appeared nearly as emotionally drained from the events of the last few hours as Nathan did. His first officer had already taken on an air of suspicion, presumably in regards to Mister Dumar as well. Nathan expected such reactions from Commander Taylor, as it was in her nature to question and analyze everything. He was somewhat surprised that Jessica seemed so willing to put her faith in Mister Dumar, as it was in her nature to distrust everyone.

Under normal circumstances, Nathan knew he should cut the Lieutenant Commander short for barging into his ready room. The situation, however, was still fluid, and time was short. In fact, Nathan's hands were still shaking slightly as the adrenaline from the monumental battle they had just concluded continued to fade from his body. Nathan offered no encouragement to his security chief or her analyst, knowing she would continue without his permission. He simply leaned back in his chair—his eyes on Mister Dumar—and waited for them to speak.

Jessica noticed the annoyed look on her captain's face. "Sorry, sir, but this really is important," she promised.

"Then let's hear it," Nathan stated.

"We must board the Loranoi immediately," Jessica pronounced.

"And why is that?" Nathan wondered aloud. "She is currently not a threat to anyone. Her main power is down, and most of her emitters are damaged, which means she has neither shields nor FTL, let alone weapons. Hell, she barely has life support."

"If I may, Captain," Mister Dumar interjected. He waited for Nathan to nod his approval before continuing. "You are correct; the Loranoi is not a direct threat at the moment. But think as her captain for a moment. He is dead in space and blind. At this point, he must assume the Wallach has either quelled the uprising and will be coming to her rescue, or she

has been similarly disabled or destroyed. If the Loranoi's captain decides it is the latter, he will seek to escape in the Loranoi's command lifeboat."

"I'm still not seeing the problem," Nathan insisted, growing impatient.

"The Loranoi is of the newer line of warships, Captain," Mister Dumar continued. "Her command lifeboat is more than just an escape pod. It is basically a small FTL ship."

"They have an FTL lifeboat?" Cameron asked in disbelief.

"Yes, they do."

"We found no such lifeboats on the Yamaro," Nathan challenged.

"The Yamaro is of an older design," Mister Dumar explained. "Previously, only the battleships had command lifeboats. It was considered a privilege of rank. However, as the Karuzari became a bigger threat to the empire, it became necessary to include a command lifeboat on all warships in order to secure the loyalty of the nobles that were facing even greater risks in their service of the empire."

"I suspect it was also less expensive than giving them greater compensation," Tug added.

"Indeed," Mister Dumar agreed. He looked back at Captain Scott, who still didn't appear to comprehend the urgency of the situation. "Captain, the comm-drone that the Loranoi sent at the start of the battle contained little useful information. It was probably little more than an announcement that the Darvano system had declared its succession from the empire and that they were going to battle. Even if they had transmitted their action telemetry to that point, they would have seen only a few jumps on your part—enough for the Ta'Akar to recognize the jump drive's existence, but not enough to determine its true capabilities, let alone your battle tactics. If the Loranoi's captain and his command staff escape and make it back to Takara, the

entire imperial fleet will soon know of your tactics and will be prepared to counter them.”

“I see your point,” Nathan conceded, “but I’m not sure I want to risk a boarding party just yet. Couldn’t we just park some fighters around her and intercept her command lifeboat if they launch it?”

“Put yourself in her captain’s shoes,” Mister Dumar continued. “After seeing what the Aurora is capable of, you would take measures to avoid capture.”

“Like going FTL immediately after launch,” Jessica interrupted.

“And taking a different route home,” Cameron added, “maybe even doing multiple FTL hops, just to cover your tracks.”

Nathan sighed. “We should have cracked that ship wide open when we had the chance.”

“No,” Mister Dumar insisted, “that ship has only been on patrol for a few months, which means her command staff probably has firsthand knowledge of the current state of the Empire. And if her captain is well connected within the Ta’Akar nobility...”

“He could know even more,” Tug interrupted, “fleet strength, ship positions, maybe even the ZPED upgrade schedules.”

“Wouldn’t that information be compartmentalized?” Jessica asked.

“Yes, but you would be surprised at how much the upper levels of nobility discuss such things,” Mister Dumar insisted. “It’s a matter of pride with them, as if knowing something the other does not proves you are of higher status.” Mister Dumar shook his head. “They are an arrogant bunch, both intelligent and ignorant at the same time.”

Nathan considered Mister Dumar’s words, as well as those of everyone else in the room. He remembered the last time the Aurora had sent a boarding party to an enemy

ship. That had been just outside of the Sol system after doing their first test jump out from the orbit of Jupiter. After destroying the first Jung gunship, Captain Roberts had severely crippled the second gunship. He had then decided to board the disabled ship. That had not turned out well, as the crew of that gunship had purposefully overloaded their anti-matter reactor in a desperate effort to destroy the Aurora along with their own ship. That explosion had led to their super-jump all the way to the Pentaurus cluster, over a thousand light years away from Earth.

That had been several months ago, but the moment still haunted him. He had been at the helm at the time and had always wondered if he had made some small error, or if some tiny delay on his part had made the difference that had hurled them so far from home. The idea that the Jung might have been tipped off about the jump test—an idea that had only come to him later—also haunted him.

Nathan contemplated their situation. They had suffered considerable damage during the battle to defend the Darvano system, but they were still space-worthy and ready to fight. Unfortunately, the Darvano system's primary planet, Corinair, had been bombarded once again, and they had lost all contact with Corinari Military Command. He had no doubt that the situation on Corinair was once again chaotic and that soon the crew of the Aurora would need to do what they could to help. At the very least, they needed to reestablish contact with their new allies.

As much as he didn't like the idea of a risky boarding action, he agreed it had to be done. "Any idea how we're going to get on board?" he asked Jessica.

"The Corinari brought breach boxes with them," Jessica stated.

"Breach boxes?" Nathan wondered.

"They clamp onto the hull of a ship to create a pressurized seal," Mister Dumar explained. "The ones used by the Ta'Akar have plasma cutters that can usually breach

most hulls in a relatively short amount of time. However, the ones used by the Corinari are somewhat older and are most effective when placed over an existing hatch."

"And the Corinari brought these breach boxes with them?" Nathan asked, somewhat surprised.

"I thought they might come in handy," Cameron defended. "Since we had no idea how the battle might progress, I wanted to be ready for every possible contingency."

"How many of these things did they bring?"

"Six of them," Cameron answered.

"I suggest we use them all," Jessica stated. "With their sensors down, they won't even know we're out there. If we crack them open from all sides at the same time, they won't have a chance."

"Perhaps," Nathan agreed, "but I'd prefer not to commit all our boxes at once. We still don't know what resources will be available to us from Corinair. Hit them with three boxes: forward, amidships, and aft. Their command, control, and engineering should be your priorities."

"That'll work," Jessica agreed. "We can put two teams through the amidships box, send them forward and aft. That way we can box them in on both ends and prevent them from reinforcing either side."

"Do we have any idea of the internal layout of the Loranoi?" Cameron asked.

"I believe I can be of some assistance with that," Mister Dumar promised.

"Very well," Nathan said. "Let's get it done."

"Yes, sir," Jessica answered, turning to exit along with Mister Dumar.

"Lieutenant Commander, if you'll remain a moment," Nathan asked. "Tug, will you and Mister Dumar draw up a basic layout of the Loranoi for us?"

"As you wish, Captain," Tug promised, rising to follow Mister Dumar out of the ready room.

Nathan waited a moment for Tug and Mister Dumar to exit the room and get out of earshot, gesturing for Cameron to remain as well. "Jess, I want you to lead the boarding teams."

"Yes, sir," she responded, although she was unsure why. "Is there a problem I should know about?"

"The Corinari just had their homeworld bombarded again, and we've lost all contact. Naralena already reported that communications signals coming from the surface indicate that conditions on the planet are chaotic and unorganized. Things down there may be even worse than after the Yamaro's attack."

"And you're afraid the Corinari will be looking for revenge?"

Nathan didn't answer.

"Sir, I don't see them popping off like that," Jessica defended. "They're far too disciplined to..."

"Nevertheless," Nathan interrupted, "I'd prefer that you lead the team that goes after the nobles. We need their intel, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Jessica answered, becoming slightly more rigid and formal in her stance and tone.

"Good luck, Lieutenant Commander."

"Thank you, sir," she responded as she turned to exit.

"I hope this works," Cameron stated after Jessica left the room. "You know they've got to be expecting it."

"Yeah, the thought had crossed my mind," Nathan admitted. "Have the CAG park some of his fighters nearby with orders to disable any pods or lifeboats that try to get away."

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered, also rising to leave.

"And tell Prechitt to get a flight to Corinair. I want to know what's happened to Corinari Command."

Cameron nodded and exited the room, leaving Nathan alone. He raised his hands up in the air in front of him. While they had been resting on the desk, they had not been

shaking. When he held them up in the air, they began to shake once again, although not as much as before. He knew that, once the adrenaline was completely gone from his system, an overwhelming fatigue would soon follow. That was something that he needed to avoid, as there was still far too much work to do. He reached down, opened up a drawer in his desk, and pulled out a bottle of stimulants, popping two of the stims in his mouth and swallowing hard. He didn't much care for the use of artificial stimulants, as they only delayed the inevitable crash that he knew was coming. At the moment, however, he had little choice.

* * *

"Senior Chief!" Jessica hollered, trying to be heard over the flurry of activity in the Aurora's main hangar bay.

Marcus looked about, trying to determine who had called him. It had been a woman's voice; of that he was sure. His eyes grew wide and a look of surprise washed over him when he realized that the only female around that could be calling him was Lieutenant Commander Nash.

"Yeah, dumbass! I'm calling you," she bellowed.

"You called me Senior Chief," Marcus said with surprise. "You sick or something?"

"Don't push it!" Jessica warned as she approached. "You got those breach boxes loaded?"

"Yes, sir," Marcus assured her. He turned and pointed to the top of the three Corinari troop shuttles. "They're mounted on top of the shuttles, over the topside hatch. They have wireless remotes inside."

"Don't suppose they've been tested," Jessica said.

"No time. But the Corinairan techs assured me they'll work."

"What do you think?" she asked as she watched the boarding teams assemble in front of the three shuttles.

"Don't be the first one to go through them," Marcus responded, "nor the last."

Jessica smiled. "Copy that, Senior Chief," she answered as she moved past him toward the boarding teams.

"Good luck, sir," Marcus called from behind her.

Jessica gave him a thumbs-up without looking back. She had not been happy when the captain decided to enlist Marcus and bestow the rank of Senior Chief on the man. She didn't feel he had earned it, not like the chiefs she had known before him. In fact, she had been bound and determined never to give him the respect due a senior chief, regardless of her captain's orders. However, the man she had despised had saved seven men from suffocating when one of the Wallach's fighters had smashed into the Aurora's port side and ruptured her port fighter alley. The men had been clinging to anything they could hold onto in order to avoid being sucked out into space through the breach. Marcus had risked his own life sealing that breach and had prevented the last of the air from being sucked out into space. That deserved at least some modicum of respect in her book. He still wasn't a real senior chief in her eyes, but he had shown potential.

As Jessica approached the boarding teams and looked at the man's name patch, she asked, "Lieutenant Waddle, is it?" She was pretty sure she was reading the Corinairan name incorrectly. "Are your men ready?"

"It's Waddell, sir," the lieutenant corrected with obvious annoyance, "and yes, they are."

"We're going to need to breach in three places," Jessica began.

"If you don't mind, sir, I've already got it all mapped out," the lieutenant insisted.

"Really?" Jessica challenged, eyeing the man from head to toe. He was old enough to be her father, but was tall and lean with a head full of scraggy blonde hair and a week's worth of stubble. He reminded her of the surfers she had known during her youth—the ones that roamed the Florida beaches—only he was older and more serious.

“We’ve rehearsed boarding actions before, Lieutenant Commander,” the lieutenant assured her.

“Very well, let’s see what you’ve got in mind,” she said, gesturing for him to go ahead and address his troops as to the details of the mission.

“Attention on deck,” the lieutenant called out without pause. He tossed a small, black box onto the deck in front of him. It hit the deck with a metallic thud and immediately activated, projecting a holographic, three-dimensional image directly in between him and his men. The image was a line drawing showing the Loranoi’s exterior. It was nearly two meters long and a meter high, floating more than a meter above the small device on the deck. The clarity of the image was impressive, and it caught Jessica slightly by surprise.

“Sweet,” Jessica mumbled to herself.

“This is our target,” the lieutenant began, “the imperial frigate Loranoi. She is currently adrift without power, weapons, shields, or sensors. However, we do not know how long she will remain in that condition. We do know that, if left alone, one of two things are likely to happen; she will either make emergency repairs—after which she will either bug out or continue her attack—or her command crew will seek to make their escape using their FTL command lifeboat. Gentlemen, we cannot allow either to occur.”

The lieutenant reached up to point at the image as he spoke. “We will take three shuttles, each fitted with breach boxes, and make contact with the Loranoi at her forward boarding hatch, her midship topside EVA hatch, and her stern maintenance hatch. This will allow us to cut off either end of the ship, preventing them from reinforcing one another should they offer resistance.”

“You really think they won’t?” Jessica challenged.

“Anything is possible,” the lieutenant said. “It depends on the number of surviving nobles and the composition of

their enlisted crew. The more Corinairans on their crew, the less resistance we are likely to encounter.”

“Seriously? You expect to see friendly faces in there?”

“As I said, anything is possible,” the lieutenant repeated, turning back to his men. “The rules of engagement are: do not fire unless fired upon, and attempt to subdue rather than kill whenever possible. If someone surrenders, quick-tie them and leave them where they lie. Others will come behind you and secure them.” The lieutenant looked at his men for any questions before continuing. “Our objectives are to take control of her command deck, here,” he said as the image changed from an exterior view to show the interior layout of the ship. He pointed to a large room marked in red, located between the forward and midship entry points. “Also the engineering deck, located here, just forward of the aft entry point. Team one will enter at the forward point and head aft to the command deck. With this hatch being the logical point of breach, it will probably be the most heavily defended. Teams two and three will enter from the midship breach, team two heading forward and team three heading aft. Team four will come in from the aft. Teams five and six will also come in through the midship breach point and will hold that position, in case any enemy forces manage to slip past. Any questions?” The lieutenant looked around, scanning the faces of his men once more. “Remember, people, we do this by the numbers, just like we’ve practiced. Low power settings. Disable and detain. Do not eliminate. Is that understood?”

The men responded with a simultaneous, “Yes, sir!”

“Team leaders, review your primary and alternate routes to your targets. I want them memorized by the time we breach, which should be in about fifteen minutes.” Lieutenant Waddell turned to his corporal, one of the few Corinari that appeared to be young enough to never have served the empire before enlisting. “Let’s get them loaded up, Corporal.”

"I have a question, Lieutenant," Jessica stated. The lieutenant looked at her. "Where did you get that cool intel?"

"You mean the layout of the Loranoi?" he asked. "Hell, we've got layouts of nearly every ship in the imperial fleet," he bragged. "Remember, many of us have served aboard imperial ships, and many of us were smart enough to bring back as much intel as we could. We've been preparing for this for decades, sir."

"Great," Jessica said, "that's good to hear. But I was talking about that sweet, little holo-projector. That thing is nice."

The lieutenant grinned. "I'll see to it that you get one, sir."

"One more question, Lieutenant," Jessica said. "Which shuttle do I ride in?"

"You are going with us?" the lieutenant asked, somewhat surprised.

"You bet. Is there a problem?"

"Yes, sir, there is. These men have trained for this mission."

"Trust me, Lieutenant; I've trained for this as well," Jessica insisted.

"Not with us you haven't," he protested as politely as he could manage. "And you of all people should understand that, sir."

"I do, Lieutenant, but I'm afraid you're just going to have to suck it up and deal with it." Jessica could see the frustration in Lieutenant Waddell's face. She had worked with the Corinari long enough to know that they took their jobs seriously and that they had the skills to get the job done. "I promise; I'll hang back and let you run the show."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Waddell agreed. "Just don't get yourself killed, sir, or the captain will have my ass."

Jessica smiled again. "I'll do my best, Lieutenant."

“Shuttle two then,” the lieutenant instructed, pointing toward the appropriate shuttle. “You’ll go in the midship hatch with me.”

* * *

“Captain in CIC!” the watch officer announced. Nathan made his way over to the center display table where Cameron, Tug, and Mister Dumar were examining the holographic image of the Loranoi provided by the Corinari. It, too, was being displayed not by the holographic systems built into the CIC’s display table, but rather by one of the little black portable holo-units used by Corinari field teams.

“The detail in this image is amazing,” Nathan observed as he stepped up to the table. “We really have to see about getting some installed for our own use.”

“I’ve already inquired,” Cameron told him. “It can be done, but it will require tearing the entire podium apart. But it’s not just the image that we need; it’s the entire system. All these black boxes are synchronized through a real-time tracking system. The thing will even calculate and display time lags due to distance. It’s like having a CIC-in-a-box.”

“Then it definitely would be worth the effort,” Nathan commented. “Maybe after we get back to Earth.”

“Commander,” one of the Corinari technicians reported, “the shuttles are ready for departure.”

“Any change in the Loranoi’s status?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir,” Cameron answered. “As far as we can tell, she’s still without power and adrift, and there are still no indications of active or passive sensors in use. Her arrays haven’t moved a centimeter since she went dark.”

“Very well, let’s get this over with,” Nathan ordered, trying to hide his nervousness.

The shuttle rocked slightly, tilting briefly to port as it lifted off the Aurora’s flight apron and rotated to starboard

before thrusting forward away from the ship. The small assault shuttle barely had enough room for the two five-man assault teams, the breaching box technician, and Jessica. As it was, they all had to stand in order to fit inside the small passenger compartment. Jessica was the only one carrying a projectile weapon. The Corinari had offered her an energy weapon, but she had chosen to stick with what she knew. Thus far, her guns had served her well enough, and she hadn't the time to become proficient with an entirely different type of firearm.

As she scanned the faces of the men in the shuttle, she could tell by the look in their eyes that most of them had seen action before today. They had not seen it while serving in the ranks of the Corinari, but rather while serving the empire. She wondered how many of these men might have killed members of the Karuzari during their time in the ranks of the Ta'Akar. She also wondered how these men might react if they suddenly found themselves staring down the barrel of a weapon held by a familiar face in a Ta'Akar uniform: an old schoolmate, a childhood friend... a brother. It was a chilling thought, one that she hoped none of them would have to face. She had read of such events from Earth's history. Over the last thousand years while the Earth was recovering from the great bio-digital plague, there had been many wars, both big and small. Most of them had been local conflicts: clans against clans, tribes against tribes. Some of them had escalated into full-blown regional conflicts. In some rare cases, they had even become continent-wide wars. But since the plague, the Earth had never experienced another world war, and certainly not a interstellar war.

"Five minutes!" the copilot called from the cockpit.

"Faceplates down and locked," Lieutenant Waddell ordered. "Everyone to internal life support and comms."

Jessica closed the faceplate on her helmet and activated the locking mechanism. There was a small hiss of air as the

suit adjusted its pressure. She could feel the breathable air blowing through her helmet. She was wearing the same boarding suit as the Corinari, the only piece of unfamiliar equipment she had been willing to use on short notice as their suits were far superior to those carried by the Aurora.

Lieutenant Waddell squeezed past one of the men standing near Jessica to get in front of her. *"Sir,"* he called over the suit comms, *"I've set your visor display to show the tactical view. You can control it by tapping the visor and sliding your finger around on the outside of it."* The lieutenant tapped Jessica's faceplate visor where he knew the image would be displayed, not being able to see what was displayed on the inside of her faceplate from the outside. He dragged his finger across it, causing the map to scroll, then used his thumb and forefinger, first spreading them apart and then drawing them back together to cause the map displayed inside her visor to zoom in and out.

"Sweet," Jessica exclaimed. *"What else does it do?"*

"It's extremely intuitive," he insisted.

"Play with it for a few minutes; you'll get the hang of it."

"How do I make it go away?"

"Double-tap to switch it on and off."

Jessica did as he suggested, double-tapping her faceplate and causing the image to disappear completely. Repeating the action brought the image back again. *"Sweet. I'm assuming the green dots clustered around me are friendlies."*

"Correct. Enemy targets will show up as red," the lieutenant answered. *"We won't see them until we breach. Our suit scanners aren't powerful enough to penetrate the hulls. But once we're inside, they'll work great."*

"We're gonna need some of these as well," Jessica joked.

"I'll add it to the list," Lieutenant Waddell responded with a smile.

"One minute," the copilot announced over the suit comms.

"The shuttles are moving into position to breach now, sir," Cameron reported.

Nathan stared at the holo-graphic display hovering in front of them. "How are they going to get through those hatches?"

"It depends. Sometimes they can be bypassed electronically from the outside," Mister Dumar explained. "They can also use a chemical that melts the hatch seals, then inject an explosive foam into the empty space that will blow the hatch free."

"The problem is that if the crew of the Loranoi knows they're coming, they might blow the hatch outward," Tug added. "If they do, it could knock the breaching box off the hull. It could even damage the shuttle. We have lost many men this way."

"And we have no real way to be sure whether or not they know we're coming," Nathan commented.

"We'll know in a moment," Cameron stated.

The Corinari technician rapidly ascended the ladder through the shuttle's topside hatch into the breaching box, the hatch closing behind him after he passed. As he peered through the small windows on either side of the breaching box's main hatch, he could see the hull of the Loranoi passing by less than a meter away. A moment later, the shuttle's maneuvering thrusters fired once more, and the shuttle came to a stop. Another small blast and it moved closer to the Loranoi, the apron of the breaching box bumping against the Loranoi's hull.

The shuttle rocked slightly with the contact, despite the pilot's best attempt to be gentle. The hydraulics hissed as the walls of the breaching box's sealing apron adjusted their shape to conform to the minor variations of the enemy

frigate's outer hull. A few moments later, a green light came on next to the hatch. "Good seal," the technician reported. "Opening the hatch." The hatch split down the middle and slid to the sides, disappearing into the walls to reveal the outer surface of the Loranoi's topside, midship EVA hatch. It was considerably smaller than the breaching box hatch, but more than adequate in size to allow them to pass through with ease.

The technician immediately attached an electronic device over the digital control pad for the Loranoi's hatch. "Attempting to override hatch controls now." The technician began furiously punching buttons, his brow furrowing as he concentrated on his task. If he failed to open the doors electronically, they would have to either cut them open or blast them open, both of which carried significant risks as well as delays which might allow the crew of the Loranoi to prepare for the assault. "The entire system is down," he reported happily. "The control system doesn't even have backup power."

"Maybe they didn't think it was necessary on an EVA hatch," Lieutenant Waddell's voice commented over the suit comms. *"Or maybe they have a manual activation system inside."*

"Who cares," the technician stated. *"All I know is that this is going to be easy."*

"Maybe the other hatches will be just as easy," Jessica wondered aloud.

"Doubtful," the technician disagreed. "The aft hatch, maybe, since it is just a maintenance hatch. But team one is going through the main forward boarding hatch. That one is bound to have its own backup power, not to mention a much better encryption on the control system."

"Why is that?" Jessica asked over the suit comms.

"That's the hatch used when they're in port or when ships dock with them," Lieutenant Waddell answered.

"That's it," the technician reported. "I've got control of both the inner and outer hatches here."

"Great," Waddell stated. "Rig it so I can pop them both at the same time with a single button."

"Already on it, sir," the technician promised. A moment later, he was done and coming down out of the breaching box and back into the shuttle. Despite the fact that the breaching box was securely sealed to the hull of the Loranoi using extremely powerful electromagnets as well as negative pressure seals, until the box was hard-fastened to the enemy frigate's hull, it could still dislodge.

As soon as the technician was down, the first two Corinari troops went up the ladder, followed by two more.

"Remember," the lieutenant reminded them, "as soon as you cross the threshold, the direction of gravity will change and will be Takaran standard, so make sure your feet are oriented in the right direction."

The lieutenant moved into the breach box, squeezing past his four men to get to the control panel next to the hatch. He looked back at his men to ensure they were all in position. *"Charge weapons. Safeties off,"* he ordered. A moment later, all four of his men had their weapons fully charged and ready, all aimed at the hatch that the lieutenant was about to open. If there were armed Ta'Akar troops on the other side of the hatch, they had little chance of surviving. Their only hope was to hug the walls of the breaching box and hope no one on the other side would have a clear shot.

"Opening the hatch," the lieutenant reported as he hit the button. The outer hatch moved slightly, dust from the numerous light years of space the frigate had traveled through breaking free of the hatch seals and falling to the floor. The outer hatch retracted away from them before sliding into the hull. A moment later, the inner hatch swung inward, giving them direct access into the ship. There were

no shots fired from within the enemy ship, no signs of commotion.

Lieutenant Waddell peered in through the hatch. The space between the outer and inner hatches was nearly two meters, creating a tunnel they would have to traverse. There was a ladder leading through the tunnel into what appeared to be a small chamber. He took a carabiner from his belt, unclipped it, and tossed it gently forward through the Loranoi's outer hatch. As soon as it crossed the hatch threshold, the Loranoi's artificial gravity grabbed it and accelerated it toward the deck of the small chamber at what apparently was the bottom of the ladder.

"Down is that way," the lieutenant advised his men, pointing in the direction the carabiner had fallen. *"First two,"* he ordered waving them past.

The first man moved feet first through the tunnel, using the ladder as the frigate's gravity pulled at him. Just before his feet were about to clear the tunnel and enter the chamber at the bottom, he paused, took his energy weapon in his right hand, and jumped free from the ladder, dropping the last three meters to the deck. Realizing he was facing the wrong way, he quickly spun to his right to face the inside airlock hatch. It, too, was locked.

"Hold," he told the second man who was waiting for the first man's signal to descend. *"Hatch is locked, Lieutenant,"* the first man reported.

"No time to get fancy," Lieutenant Waddell said. *"Blow it."*

The first man let his snub-nosed assault energy rifle hang from his shoulder as he pulled a small canister from his thigh pouch and sprayed a foam-like substance along one side of the hatch. The substance quickly hardened into a firm paste, into which he inserted a small, flat, electronic device. He flipped the small switch on the device, turned, and quickly ascended the ladder until he was back inside the transfer tunnel between the inner and outer hatches.

With his right hand, he pulled out another electronic device, a remote detonator, from his thigh pocket. He armed the device and called out over his suit comm, *"Set."*

"Do it," Lieutenant Waddell ordered.

"Fire in the hole," the first man announced.

From inside the shuttle, Jessica smiled. It seemed that some Earth expressions still managed to survive over a thousand light years of space and a millennium of time.

There was a small explosion in the distance. Jessica could feel a slight wave of air pressure as it translated through the transfer tube, the breaching box, and into the shuttle. It wasn't much, but it was noticeable. She wondered if it were enough to shake the breach box loose from the hull of the Loranoi, but immediately dismissed the thought, knowing that if it were, the lieutenant would not have used it. It was undoubtedly some sort of specialized explosive compound that directed its explosive force in a predetermined direction. *"Add that to the list,"* she muttered to herself.

"You'd better start writing them down," she heard the lieutenant say over the suit comm.

The first man dropped into the chamber once more, immediately advancing forward through the blown open inner airlock hatch to make room for the next man coming down the ladder behind him. He stepped through the hatch and moved to his left, dropping to one knee with his energy rifle held high against his shoulder. He scanned quickly back and forth, peering through the lingering haze left over from the explosion and finding no opposing forces. *"Clear,"* he reported.

The second man appeared through the blown inner hatch next, moving to his right and dropping to one knee in similar fashion. Both men remained alert and ready, their weapons in firing position, as the remaining eight Corinari troops made their way from the shuttle, through the breaching box, and into the enemy frigate. Jessica was the

last one through, closing the hatches on either side of the breaching box so the next shuttle carrying teams five and six could dock with the box and make their way in to join them. "Breaching box is secure," she reported over the comms to the flight crew of the shuttle.

"Shuttle two-four moving off," the copilot's voice reported.

Jessica quickly descended the ladder and made her way through the chamber at the bottom to join teams two and three. She double-tapped her visor to call up the tactical display and immediately noticed that, although team four appeared to have already entered through the aft maintenance hatch, team one no longer appeared on her display. "Where'd team one go?"

"They're probably still trying to get through the hatch," Lieutenant Waddell told her. *"If they're still outside the ship, we've got the hull between us and them."*

"Oh yeah," Jessica remembered.

"Shuttle two-two moving in," a voice reported over the suit comms.

"Team one! Contact! Taking fire!" another voice reported.

Jessica looked at the tactical display inside her visor. All five green dots representing team one were showing on the display again. She touched her faceplate with her thumb and forefinger and moved them apart to zoom in, sliding the map over as she did so. There were at least a dozen red dots just down the corridor from them, and team one appeared to be trapped in the entry airlock of the main forward boarding hatch. "Why was someone waiting for them and not for us?" she asked.

"Their internal sensors are probably down," Lieutenant Waddell surmised. *"Looks like they're running on emergency battery power only, which means gravity, life support, and minimal lighting, nothing more. They didn't know we were*

coming. They just surmised that the forward boarding hatch was a likely target."

"They're trapped," Jessica warned. "They'll get torn apart in seconds."

"They know what to do," the lieutenant stated confidently.

"Shuttle two-two docking," a voice reported.

"Team three, head aft," Lieutenant Waddell reported.
"Team two, forward."

"Lorentz is hit! He's down!" one of team one's men reported, the sound of multiple energy weapons' blasts sounding in the background.

Nathan winced at the report. Someone he had never even met was wounded, maybe even dying, because of an order he had given less than an hour ago.

"How bad?" the team leader's voice asked.

"I don't know, but he's in the open!" More weapons fire was heard. *"Oh shit! They shot him again!"*

"Can anyone see if they're wearing full gear?" another voice asked as the energy weapons fire continued to sound.

"I can't tell for sure," the first man answered. *"I don't think so."*

"Everyone! Ear-busters! On three.....two.....one..... NOW, NOW, NOW!"

"What's an ear buster?" Nathan asked.

"Sonic grenades," Tug explained. "They send out a sudden burst of high frequency sound that disrupts the inner ear. It kills your hearing for several minutes and throws you off balance for ten to twenty seconds. If you're close enough to it when it goes off, it can completely incapacitate you for nearly a minute."

"Is that safe to use in such close quarters?" Cameron wondered.

“Normally, no, as the metal corridors tend to create acoustic bounce-back which intensifies the effect. But our men are fully suited, so the effects will be minimal if anything. However, if the enemy is not suited, the effect will be quite severe for them.”

There were several seconds of silence as they waited to hear the results.

“Wilkie! Go right! We’re going left!” the team one leader ordered.

“Going right!” Wilkie responded, the sound of his weapon firing nearly drowning his voice out.

Ten more seconds passed without a word. Nathan literally held his breath as he waited. He knew that, right now, those men were running out into the open corridor, hoping to get the drop on what they expected were disoriented and ineffective opposing forces. But they were outnumbered three to one, and at least half of those enemy numbers were farther down the corridor and might not have been affected by the sonic grenades. If that were the case, those three men would be killed.

“I tossed another sonic farther down the corridor! Take co...” Before the man could finish his sentence, the radio transmission was overwhelmed with a blast of static as a result of the sonic grenade.

“Christ,” Nathan mumbled. Another fifteen seconds went by with no communication at all from team one. They could hear the other teams reporting their advance without resistance. Team three had encountered several men, all of which immediately gave up without resistance. As expected, only the Loranoi’s designated security forces were armed, all of which were probably Takaran citizens. That would make their job much easier.

Finally, after an agonizingly long minute, team one reported in. *“Forward breach secure. Team one advancing.”*

Nathan felt a wave of relief wash over him. All four teams were safely inside the enemy frigate and on the

move, and the second wave of shuttles was moving into position to reinforce the entry teams and secure the breach points. Those teams would not only securely fasten the breach boxes to the Loranoi's hull to ensure they would not break free, but they would also set up data telemetry relays so that the CIC on board the Aurora could get a real-time tactical display of the situation as it unfolded. The danger was not yet over, but the worst part, the entry, was now behind them.

Jessica followed team two as they quickly advanced down the corridor. The men moved in pairs with precision that showed their training. At each intersection, the lieutenant would toss up a small sensor that would stick to the ceiling. The sensor would send them real-time data of any movement within its range, giving them the ability to see if their escape route was cut off behind them.

Having entered the frigate from a topside hatch, they had needed to move down three levels before advancing forward. Now that they were on the main level, they avoided the main central corridor, choosing instead to take side corridors in order to avoid as much contact with the enemy as possible. Their goal was to secure the ship's command center. They could deal with her crew later.

Jessica was relieved to see on her tactical map displayed inside her helmet visor that team one had managed to defeat the security forces defending the forward boarding hatch and were advancing toward the command center from their end of the ship. She made a mental note to find out more about those ear-busters they had used to overwhelm a force numbering three times their own. *I am going to have start writing this stuff down*, she thought.

She glanced at her tactical map again. The sensors that the lieutenant had been deploying as they advanced were also linked into her display. She could see the other teams

as well. Team one was moving toward the command center from the forward end of the ship. The command center would undoubtedly be guarded as well. Team seven had already moved into the forward boarding area to hold that position, and soon another shuttle would be docking with the forward breaching box to transfer another ten men into that area of the frigate. Teams five and six were already through the same breach box they had used at the midship EVA hatch, and team five was moving into position to reinforce teams two and three. Soon, more teams would be entering through the aft breaching box situated over the maintenance hatch and would move to reinforce team four as they attempted to capture the engineering section.

"One leader, two leader," Lieutenant Waddell called over the comms as they continued their advance.

"Go for one," the team one leader responded.

"Status?"

"Lorentz is dead. Wilkie is wounded but still in play. Two minutes from target."

"Copy that," Lieutenant Waddell answered. *"Two is also two out."*

"Two leader, three leader," the team three leader called.

"Go for two leader," the lieutenant answered.

"We just passed medical, Sarge. You'd better tell command to get the med teams ready," team three's leader reported solemnly.

"Bad?"

"Very bad."

The lieutenant paused a moment. *"Anybody see you?"*

"Doubtful, and if they did, I'm sure they didn't care."

"Copy that," Lieutenant Waddell responded. *"Continue advancing."*

"All three breaching boxes have been secured, and the last of the tactical data relays are coming online now,"

Cameron reported. Green dots with numbers floating next to them began showing up in the hovering holographic display in front of them. Immediately after that, the sensors the teams had been planting throughout the frigate began transmitting the location of any warm bodies within a 10 meter range of the sensor that were not members of the boarding parties. Most of the Loranoi's decks were still not visible to their sensors, but most of the areas around each of the boarding teams, as well as their routes of ingress, were clearly displayed.

"That's a lot of red dots," Nathan commented. "Hell, they're everywhere."

"Yeah, but we don't know how many of them are actually combatants," Tug explained. "The sensors will mark any warm body that isn't sending a friendly ID signal as a red dot, but that doesn't mean that dot is armed or interested in defending their ship."

"It looks to me like most of them have taken shelter in whatever safe corner they could find," Cameron observed.

"Control, two leader," Lieutenant Waddell called over the comms.

"Go for control," the communications technician answered.

"Three leader reports enemy medical is overflowing with wounded."

"Tell them that as soon as they secure their primary objectives to secure the hangar deck. We'll send medical teams over as soon as they have a safe place to land," Nathan told the comm-tech.

"Yes, sir."

"Captain, our medical is pretty busy right now as well," Cameron warned.

"They'll have to do what they can," Nathan told her. "Don't forget: most of her crew are not there by choice, Commander."

"Two leader, four leader," the comms sounded.

"Go for two leader," Lieutenant Waddell responded.

"Engineering is secured, no resistance, fifteen prisoners."

"No resistance at all?"

"None. Not that there is much left to protect. This place is wrecked."

"Copy that," Waddell answered. "We'll be on station in fifteen seconds. Hold fast."

The point man on team two came to a squatting position just before the next intersection, holding up his left hand in a fist to signal the others to stop their advance. Jessica and the rest of the team immediately dropped to one knee. She watched as the point man peeked carefully around the corner, then ducked back, turning and moving back toward them. *"Four guards," the point man reported. "Two on either side of the door, two on the side access corridors."*

"Shots?" Lieutenant Waddell asked.

"The two on our side are easy enough. Team one will have to take the other two on their side."

"You're sure there's only four?"

"That's all I saw, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Waddell checked his tactical map. It showed just what his point man had reported, four red dots. But there were several others in nearby compartments. Although they could have been unarmed crew taking shelter, they could just as easily have been armed security forces waiting in ambush, using the four visible guards as bait for their trap. *"Alright, you two take the shots. You two watch for an ambush from the opposite end of the main corridor. I'll let team one know."*

While Lieutenant Waddell informed team one of his plan, Jessica took a moment to zoom in each of the groups of red dots clustered inside some of the neighboring compartments. Most of them were back as far away from

the door as possible, just like they would be if they were sheltering in place. But one group was standing just behind the door, as if they expected to leave the room in a hurry.

"Lieutenant," Jessica called over the comms, "check the guys to the right, just inside the door." The lieutenant tapped his face shield sliding his fingers about as he moved his own tactical map and zoomed in. "Odd position for someone sheltering in place, don't you think?"

"Yeah, kind of." He tapped one of the men that he had assigned to watch for an ambush. *"That hatch over there, that's where they'll come from."*

"One leader, two leader. Ambush coming from opposite side. We've got it covered. You call the go."

"One copies. Stand by."

Lieutenant Waddell crouched down next to his other two men, going to one knee as he raised his weapon and took aim.

"Go, go, go!" team one's leader called out over the comms.

Two shooters from each team stepped out into the open from their positions on either side of the main corridor, opening up on the guards and instantly taking down all four of them. Immediately afterward, the four shooters advanced on the entrance to the command center. As expected, the hatch at the other end of the central corridor flew open, and several armed Ta'Akar security troops came charging out, but Lieutenant Waddell and his men were ready for them, unleashing a hail of energy weapon blasts as they cut down the attempted ambush with ease. *"Check them out!"* the lieutenant ordered his men as he rose to follow his first two shooters who were headed for the command center entrance.

Jessica paused momentarily at the edge of the intersection, watching as the lieutenant, his first two shooters, and three men from team one charged forward into the entrances to the command center. The fourth man

from team one, Wilkie, waited at the opposing intersection, tasked with holding the outer position secure.

Flashes of light and the screech of energy weapons fire erupted from the entrance to the command center. Jessica charged off across the corridor, running headlong for the entrance, but before she could get there, the exchange of weapons fire had stopped. She paused at the entrance just long enough to pull up her close-quarters automatic weapon into firing position and flick off the safety before she swung herself into the room.

The command center was smaller than she had expected, but slightly larger than the Aurora's bridge. There were at least three enemies dead, one of which appeared to be a technician and not a combatant. There were also two dead Corinari, and Lieutenant Waddell was wincing in pain due to a still smoldering wound to his left thigh.

On the far side of the command center stood the captain of the ship along with four of his command staff, all of them presumably nobles. A wall of shimmering light that was only visible because of the slight haze it caused separated the four Ta'Akar officers from their Corinari aggressors.

"Surrender yourselves, now!" Lieutenant Waddell ordered using the loudspeaker built into his helmet, his weapon still held ready despite the severe pain he was experiencing.

"I think not," the captain of the Loranoi responded.

Jessica noticed an open hatch behind them. Beyond it was a tunnel that led into another room. Her tactical map was still actively displaying information on the inside of her helmet visor. At the other end of that short tunnel was the command lifeboat, the one that was FTL equipped.

"Surrender or you will die," Lieutenant Waddell insisted.

"Doubtful," the captain sneered. "You see, this energy shield was designed to absorb all energy weapons. It will prevent you from harming us, at least until we make our escape."

Jessica let loose a round from her weapon, the bullet tearing through the thigh of the officer standing next to the captain and sending him screaming to the deck. The captain jumped, stunned at what had just happened, the smug look suddenly disappearing from his face.

"I'm guessing it doesn't work so well against projectile weapons," Jessica called out over her helmet's loudspeaker. Two of the officers started to make a move for the escape hatch, but found several more rounds from Jessica's weapon ricocheting off the hatch itself. "Turn off the shield, drop your weapons, and put your hands on your heads," she instructed them calmly. "Do it now."

Lieutenant Waddell turned and looked at Jessica. Somehow, through the pain, he managed to smile.

* * *

Jessica led the detail escorting the Loranoi's captain and command staff from the transport shuttle and across the hangar bay on their way to the detention block on the Aurora's lower decks. Although two Corinari had died and several more had been injured, the capture of the Takaran frigate had gone better than she had expected.

"Lieutenant Commander," Mister Dumar called as he and Tug approached, "a moment if you will?"

Jessica turned to the guard next to her as they walked. "Take them to detention and secure them. I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, sir," the guard promised as she fell out of step and stopped to speak with Mister Dumar and Tug.

"What is it?"

"I believe it would be best if I interrogated the prisoners," he stated without hesitation.

Jessica was a bit surprised by his statement. "And why is that?"

"You don't speak their language, for one," Tug stated.

"I'd be willing to bet at least a few of them speak Angla," she stated with a hint of sarcasm. "In fact, I'm quite sure the captain does."

"You may be right," Mister Dumar agreed, "but there are nuances to any language, and such nuances can reveal important information, or give clues to the interrogator as to which direction to go with his questioning. As Angla is not their first language, these nuances will not be present. Besides, I have been among them for decades now. I know how they think. I know their politics, their society, and their ambitions, *and* I know their fears."

'Their fears' was the part that got her attention. She looked him in the eyes. "How do you plan to play it?" she asked. She did not want another fiasco like the one they'd experienced when Jalea took control of an interrogation. After the protestations she had hurled at her captain over that incident, the last thing she wanted to do was to give him a chance to hurl them back.

"I will discover their fears and use them to extract the information we need," Mister Dumar explained.

Jessica stared at him for a moment, then looked at Tug. After a moment, she looked back at Dumar.

"I swear, no harm will come to them," Dumar promised.

"I get to be there," Jessica insisted.

"You do not trust me?" Mister Dumar challenged.

"No, actually, I don't," she admitted. "But don't take it personally. I don't trust most people."

"Do you trust me?" Tug asked.

"You, I do trust. But I still have to be there."

"Very well," Mister Dumar agreed, "but you must promise not to interfere. If the prisoners believe they have a sympathetic person in the room that might intervene on their behalf, it will strengthen their resolve."

"It won't be my first interrogation," Jessica stated as she strode off toward the exit. *It will be my second*, she thought.

* * *

Mister Dumar calmly entered the interrogation room, followed by a man dressed in a lab coat, Tug, and Jessica. The four Ta'Akar noblemen, including the captain of the Loranoi, sat in a row on the opposite side of the secured table, their hands and feet securely fastened to the arms and legs of the bolted down chairs in which they sat. Dumar scanned their faces briefly in passing, taking note that, while the first three noblemen appeared somewhat nervous, the Loranoi's commanding officer did not, or at least he was keeping his apprehension well hidden.

Tug and Jessica took their positions standing against the far wall beside the exit. As he began to unpack the utility bag carried in by the man in the lab coat, Mister Dumar began to speak calmly to the prisoners in their native language of Takaran, with Tug translating every word in a barely audible whisper for Jessica as the interrogation began.

"Gentlemen," Dumar began as he set an electronic device on the table facing away from the prisoners, "I regret that circumstances do not allow us the time needed for a normal interrogation."

The man in the lab coat placed several electrodes onto the head and neck of the first, most junior of the four prisoners, connecting them to leads that came from the electronic device Mister Dumar had set up on the table.

"I usually enjoy the process immensely," Dumar continued as he opened up a medical kit and withdrew two vials and two pneumo-jet syringes. "Unfortunately, due to the dispatch of your new, ZPED equipped communications drone, time is of the essence." Dumar had not yet looked at any of the men directly as he had spoken. Instead, he had focused his attention on the preparation of the pneumatic syringes. Finished with his task, he looked up at the row of prisoners, his eyes fixing on the one on the left to which the

electrodes were currently attached. "We shall begin with you," he stated calmly.

"I am Ensign Garamond Dentone, of the house of Dentone," the first prisoner volunteered in earnest, "son of Garrick Dentone, lord of the..."

"I care not who you are," Dumar interrupted with an obvious degree of irritation, "nor from which noble lineage you hail." Dumar placed the pneumo-jet syringe against the prisoner's neck, moving it until the positioning light changed from red to green. "I only care about the number, position, and strength of the ships in the imperial fleet, and what ships, if any, have been equipped with the new zero-point energy device." Dumar pressed the button on the syringe. There was an almost inaudible hiss as the pneumo-jet syringe delivered its payload into the prisoner's external jugular vein.

"What was that?" Ensign Dentone demanded. "What did you give me? I demand to know..."

"There is no need to make demands, Ensign," Mister Dumar stated. "I have just injected you with a rather fast acting poison," he explained as he walked around the table and placed the syringe down. "You now have three, maybe four minutes before it begins to take effect." Dumar looked the prisoner over in a glance, adding, "In your case, perhaps four. You do seem a bit *over-nourished*." Dumar almost smiled as he pointed at the other syringe on the table. "This syringe contains the antidote, which acts just as quickly if not more so. Again, in your case, even slower with your additional mass." Dumar set the syringe down and looked the prisoner in his eyes. "Tell me what I want to know, and you will have your antidote."

"But I don't know anything," the ensign insisted. "I'm just a sensor operator. You probably know more about the imperial fleet than I do."

"How many ships already have the ZPED installed?" Dumar asked.

“I don’t know!”

Dumar looked at the screen of the electronic device, as if the young ensign’s answer were being tested. He turned his head toward Jessica and Tug, casting a disappointed look their way.

Jessica held her ground, not yielding to the temptation to intervene. However, Mister Dumar had promised not to harm any of the prisoners, and Tug had sworn that Mister Dumar would keep his promise. It had to be a bluff.

Dumar turned back to the ensign. His color had grown pale, and he had begun to perspire. “How many ships are currently in the Takaran home system?”

“I don’t know! We’ve been on patrol for three months! How would I know that?”

“How many were stationed there when you left?”

“I don’t remember! Oh God!” The ensign was sweating even worse than before, and his skin was beginning to take on an ashen hue as he fidgeted in his seat, trying in vain to wiggle out of his restraints. “Please, you have to believe me!”

Dumar again looked at the electronic device. “I’d love to do just that, Ensign, but I’m afraid my little electronic friend here tells me otherwise.”

“Please, give me the antidote!” the ensign pleaded.

“Tell me how many ships there are!” Dumar demanded.

“I.....I.....uh...” The ensign began to look around the room as if he had forgotten where he was. Without warning, his torso convulsed once, tightening up suddenly, and his head flipped backward with his jaw clenched tightly closed. His breathing quickened and all the color seemed to drain from his face and hands. His body convulsed several more times, after which he went limp, sliding down in his chair, his restraints preventing him from falling all the way down to the floor.

The prisoners next to him continued to stare straight ahead, not wanting to look, not wanting to witness what was

bound to be repeated with them.

Jessica started to move forward, but Tug's hand on her arm closed tightly, communicating his objections.

"Trust him, Jess," Tug whispered, "as I do."

She watched, still not having lost her composure, as Mister Dumar removed the electrodes from the first prisoner's now still body, being careful to avoid the saliva now oozing from the ensign's mouth. He sniffed the air, his face cringing at the foul aroma. "Uh oh," he stated, "it seems our young ensign's final act was to lose control of his bodily fluids." He sniffed the air again. "Perhaps his solids as well, eh?" he added with a lilt. "Most embarrassing, but then again, I guess that is to be expected."

"You cannot do this," the next prisoner objected as Dumar attached the electrodes to his head and neck.

"Oh, but I can," Mister Dumar insisted. His voice was so relaxed, it appeared as if he were enjoying himself. He picked up the syringe with the poison from the table and injected it into the next prisoner's external jugular vein. "And I will, until one of you tells me what I want to know." Dumar set the syringe back down, picking up the one with the antidote. "Your turn, Lieutenant. How many ships have had the ZPED installed?"

"There were eleven ships in the Takaran system when we departed," the lieutenant immediately answered.

"Lieutenant!" the commander, who was the next prisoner over, objected.

Dumar looked at the electronic device again, then turned to the third prisoner and smiled. "Nice try! You almost had me convinced. But surely, it cannot be that easy to extract information from a Takaran nobleman. After all, you are honorable men, loyal to the empire and to your leader, Caius the Great, are you not?"

"I swear to you, I am telling the truth!" the lieutenant insisted. He, too, was beginning to get pale and sweaty.

"How many ships are currently using a ZPED?"

"There was only one, the Campaglia. But she was destroyed in the battle of Taroa. The Avendahl was just arriving for her refit when we left."

Dumar looked at the electronic device's screen on the table and once again shook his head in dismay. "Do you really think me a fool? Do you truly believe I am so easily deceived?"

"I am not lying; I swear it! To the best of my knowledge, I have spoken only truths!" The lieutenant suddenly became pale, broke out in a cold sweat, and then vomited. A moment later, he too was limp, hanging to one side of his chair and held in place only by his restraints, the smell of his urine and feces being added to that of the first prisoner to fall.

"It is so difficult to get the correct dosing with this poison," Mister Dumar said to Tug. "Clearly, this man was in much better physical condition than the previous one." His face seemed unaffected by the acts he had committed or by the two men that had just fallen victim to his poisons.

"This isn't working," Jessica mumbled.

"Please," Tug began to object.

"No, this is wrong."

"Jessica, please," Tug pleaded.

"No, this stops now!" Jessica ordered.

Dumar quickly grabbed the pneumo-jet syringe and moved behind the third prisoner. "This does not end, not until we get the information we need!"

"You cannot simply kill indiscriminately this way!" Jessica demanded.

"These people have killed thousands, perhaps millions, in the last few months alone!" Dumar argued. "I will kill them all one by one if I must. I will get answers!" He injected the third man with the poison.

"Jesus!" Jessica exclaimed, turning from side to side. "Nathan's gonna have my ass for this!" She turned to Tug.

"You, you son of a bitch, you promised this wasn't going to happen!"

"How many ships are in the Takaran system," Dumar asked the third prisoner.

The third prisoner, a commander, looked Dumar calmly in the eyes. "There were eleven ships in the Takaran system when we left nearly three months ago. The Avendahl was just beginning her refit. The Campaglia took just under four months to complete hers, and the Avendahl is identical in design to the Campaglia, so I suspect it will take the same amount of time to complete the Avendahl's refit. That is all I know; I swear. Now please give me the antidote. I do not wish to die."

"Give me the makeup of the fleet in the Takaran system," Dumar ordered.

"Give him the antidote, Dumar!" Jessica ordered.

"Besides the Avendahl, I am not sure. Maybe two cruisers and seven frigates."

"That's ten, not eleven!" Dumar objected.

"Give him the fucking antidote now!" Jessica repeated.

"NO!" Dumar shouted.

Jessica drew her sidearm and pointed it at Mister Dumar's head. "Give it to him, or I'll splatter your fucking head across the wall!" She quickly stepped to her left, getting clear of Tug as she sensed him trying to position himself to respond. "Make like a statue, Tug," she threatened, "or so help me, I'll drop you as well!"

The third prisoner began to convulse as his color left his face. A moment later, he too was limp and leaking bodily fluids.

"God damn it, Dumar!" Jessica swore. "You promised me no harm would come to them!"

"I was doing what must be done!" Dumar argued fervently. "Brutality is the only thing these people understand!"

“Jesus, even a first year cadet knows this isn’t the way to get good intel from a prisoner!”

“Why do you care so much about them!” Dumar wondered.

“Because they’re humans, you dumbass, just like us!”

“They would not afford you the same respect!”

“That’s it!” Jessica decided. “I’m placing the both of you under arrest! We’ll let the captain sort this shit out,” she said, waving her gun, gesturing for Mister Dumar to head for the exit with Tug.

“No, we must finish the interrogation!”

“He’s right,” the captain of the Loranoi stated in perfect Angla.

Jessica looked at the last remaining prisoner, dumbfounded. “What did you say?”

“I said you should finish the interrogation,” the fourth prisoner stated calmly. “But there is no need to continue with this charade. I assure you, I have every intention of giving my full cooperation. I will give you any information I possess.”

Jessica still looked confused, her gun hand lowering slightly. “What the fuck?” She looked at Dumar. He neither smiled nor frowned. However, one eyebrow did raise slightly. Tug was the one that was smiling. “These guys aren’t dead, are they?”

“I did not break my promise; they are not harmed,” Mister Dumar assured her. “They may have a few bruises on their wrists, and they will be somewhat embarrassed by their soiled uniforms, but they will suffer no permanent damage.”

Jessica holstered her weapon. Inside, she was furious at their deception, although part of her admired how well it had been played. They had even used her to complete the deception, knowing that she would eventually react. It didn’t work, of course, but it was still well played. More

importantly, they were going to get their intel and possibly even more than they had hoped.

"I am curious, Captain," Dumar said to the prisoner. "How did you know this was all a ruse?"

"Those men were telling the truth. If that device you kept looking at is supposed to be some type of lie detector, it is unbelievably ineffective. Besides, an intelligence officer for the Corinari would know that only an officer of command rank, such as myself, would have the type of information that you desire. So it makes sense that you would use these lesser officers as pawns in an attempt to frighten me into cooperation."

"You could have just told us you were willing to cooperate from the beginning. You could have spared their suffering."

"Simple logic, really," the Loranoi's captain explained. "If any of those men ever made it back to Takara and told command I cooperated with the enemy, my family would lose everything."

"You let them think they were dying," Jessica objected. "You let them shit and piss all over themselves."

"I never did care for them much," the captain responded dryly. "Now, before we begin, would it be possible to move to another room? The smell of my officers' excrement is becoming a bit overwhelming."

"Guard!" Jessica called out.

Tug shook his head at the captain's explanation and at his indifference to the well being of his officers.

"Take him to the next room," Jessica ordered. "We'll be there shortly."

"Yes, sir," the guard responded as he began to undo the captain's restraints.

"Nobles," Dumar mumbled, shaking his head as the guard led the prisoner out of the room.

"I will get even with both of you assholes," Jessica assured them. "You know that, don't you?"

"I am sure you will," Tug stated.

* * *

"The Campaglia was the first ship in the imperial fleet to be fitted with a zero-point energy device," Mister Dumar explained to Captain Scott in his ready room. "Her original mission was to conduct field tests of the device's performance under various conditions. However, when the empire learned of the location of the rebel base in the Taroa system, the Campaglia was dispatched to strike quickly before the Karuzari had a chance to move again. They had originally intended to refit their three main battleships with ZPEDs, believing that, once completed, they would be invincible. The Avendahl was the next to begin her refit, which is still in progress."

"How long until the Avendahl's refit is finished?" Nathan asked, concern showing on his face.

"Based on the time it took the Campaglia to complete her refit, I would guess a few weeks," Mister Dumar stated.

"Captain, we may have even less time than that," Cameron said. "The second time around is usually faster than the first."

"True," Nathan agreed.

"I would concur as well," Dumar said. "The Yamaro would have been the next ship to be refitted, followed by the Wallach."

"I thought you said they wanted to refit their battleships first?" Nathan wondered.

"Yes, but after the destruction of the Campaglia, Caius became enraged. Rumor has it he has become increasingly unpredictable as of the mysterious disappearing ship continue to plague him."

"The next message should really push him over the edge," Jessica quipped.

"There is more truth to that statement than you know," Dumar warned. "According to the Loranoi's captain, many of

the nobles are worried about the security of their own holdings. There has even been some discreet discussion amongst the nobles, mostly contemplation mind you, that it might be possible to overthrow Caius and allow the empire to fracture into many separate entities, with each noble ruling over their own lands.”

“Wouldn’t that be convenient,” Nathan said.

“Do not put too much stock in such discussions,” Tug warned. “The nobles have been talking in private about such ideas for more than a decade, ever since the empire was forced to abandon its outer worlds in order to maintain control over the original worlds of the Pentaurus cluster.”

“This is true,” Mister Dumar agreed, “but the main thing that prevented such a revolution has always been the presence of battleships commanded by the highest of the nobles, the Lords of Ta’Akar.”

“The Lords of Ta’Akar?” Nathan repeated. “These people really like their titles, don’t they?”

“Indeed they do,” Dumar agreed. “The Lords of Ta’Akar are the rulers of the four main worlds of the Takaran system.”

“Four? You mean there are four inhabited planets in the Takaran system?” Nathan asked, somewhat in shock.

“Including inhabited moons, there are actually eight,” Tug explained, “three planets and five moons.”

“You’re telling me that one system has that many hospitable worlds?”

“Actually, there were originally only two,” Dumar stated, “the planet Takara and the moon Liko. The others were reformed to better support human life early on, perhaps seven or eight hundred years ago.”

“How many people live in the Takara system?” Cameron wondered.

“Over forty billion,” Tug stated.

“Captain, the situation does present an interesting opportunity,” Dumar said. “With both the Campaglia and the

Wallach destroyed, if you were able to somehow destroy the Avendahl as well, the lesser nobles might see it as the perfect opportunity to fulfill their dreams and overthrow Caius."

"That could work in our favor," Nathan observed.

"Or it could lead to even more chaos, death, and destruction, as the nobles battle it out amongst themselves," Dumar added. "But those battles would likely take place in the Takaran system, and not here in the Darvano system. And it could take years for the dust to settle, during which time the Corinari might be able to produce adequate defenses of their own, especially now that they have the jump drive technology."

"Definitely something to think about," Nathan concluded. "Thank you."

"If there are no objections, I would like to continue my discussions with the Loranoi's captain," Mister Dumar announced. "I believe there is much more information I can obtain from him."

"Very well, continue your discussions," Nathan ordered. Mister Dumar bowed his head, turned, and exited the ready room.

"We're going to need to verify the intel he's giving us," Jessica warned Nathan.

"Agreed," Nathan answered, "at least as much as is possible."

"Shall I fly a recon mission through the Takaran system?" Tug asked.

"Do you think that's wise?" Nathan asked.

"No, but it is necessary," Tug admitted. "Besides, I believe that, if I keep my emissions low and stay cold, I can drift through the system without being seen."

"Very well, but play it safe," Nathan urged.

"Of course," Tug agreed, also exiting the ready room.

Nathan looked down at the interrogation report on his data pad. "Jesus, Jess. Did he really make them shit

themselves?"

"Yeah, it wasn't pretty," Jessica commented.

"And he had you fooled as well?" Nathan asked.

"Yup," she admitted. "He's good."

"But Tug knew what was going on."

"Yup."

Nathan could tell that Jessica was still a bit angry about being played along with the prisoners. "I'm glad I'm not Tug or Dumar," he mumbled.

"Damn right you are," Jessica responded.

A small laugh escaped his lips. "I've got another job for you, Jess," he began. "We need to reestablish contact with Corinari command. From what Naralena picks up through comm traffic, things are pretty chaotic on Corinair right now, even worse than after the Yamaro's attack. Put together a team and see what the hell is happening down there. We need to be able to speak to whoever is in charge at the moment."

"Yes, sir."

Chapter Two

"I'll be waiting for you, Mister Tugwell," Jessica stated as they walked across the hangar deck. She was in full combat field gear, and Tug was in his flight suit.

"I may just go straight to Karuzara upon my return," Tug joked.

"Chicken?" Jessica asked as they parted and she headed away toward her shuttle.

"Quite," he chuckled as he ascended his boarding ladder. Tug dropped himself into his seat and began to fasten himself in. He reached to his left to receive his flight suit helmet from the deck technician, only to find that it was Marcus handing it to him.

"I'm fairly certain senior chiefs aren't usually the ones to tuck pilots into their cockpits," Tug stated as he donned his helmet.

"And I'm fairly certain leaders of newly born nations don't go off on dangerous recon missions deep into enemy territory," Marcus countered. "Besides, last time, I brought you luck. I figure it's best not to break tradition."

"Last time, you brought me good advice," Tug corrected. "I'd welcome any you might have to offer this time around."

"How about keep cold and quiet, and keep your finger on the jump button at all times."

"I'll try to remember to do just that."

"See ya soon," Marcus told him as the canopy closed. Tug nodded his acknowledgment as he began firing up his interceptor. Marcus climbed down the ladder and rolled it away, and a few moments later, the interceptor began to move slowly toward the transfer airlock at the aft end of the hangar.

"That is one crazy, old coot," Marcus mumbled.

"Crazier than you?" Master Chief Montrose asked from behind him.

"Much."

* * *

The small Corinari tactical shuttle flew low over the city of Aitkenna. Between the Yamaro's attack a few months ago and the Wallach's massive bombardment only a few hours ago, there was not much left of the city.

Jessica leaned out the open starboard hatch, holding onto the hand rail above while she gazed at the devastation below. "Anything yet?" she asked over the comms.

"No, sir," the copilot answered, "nothing but civilian traffic and some local security band stuff. No high-powered Corinari signals yet, but we're still too far away from the command center to pick them up if they are using local comms only."

"Copy that," Jessica answered. She looked out at the horizon. Two of the six fighters that had escorted her flight of three tactical shuttles were flying cover for them. The other two pairs covered the other shuttles as they all searched for signs of an organized Corinari presence. Aitkenna was the fifth city her shuttle had searched. It was the most likely one to have a Corinari presence since it was

not only the capital but also close to the Corinari command center on the far side of the city.

"I don't understand," Jessica stated in frustration. "There should be somebody in uniform down there. They've got to see us flying overhead."

"Sir," the copilot began, "our shuttles look just like theirs. After all, they did come from the Ta'Akar. From below, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

"But you're squawking Corinari ID codes, right?"

"If by squawking you mean transmitting, then yes, we are. But if they don't have working comms, they will not hear us. If you'd just gotten the hell bombed out of you, you'd be lying low as well."

"How long until we get in comm range of Corinari Command?"

"Two minutes, sir."

Jessica continued to scan the city below. They were flying low enough that she could make out small groups of people here and there as they moved about, so she knew there were survivors. Although the Wallach had been able to bombard the surface of Corinair from orbit for over half an hour, there was no way she could exterminate the entire population in such a short time, not without using nukes, and if Tug were right and the Ta'Akar intended to colonize this world for themselves, nuclear strikes against the surface would be unlikely.

Still, the amount of devastation from a single orbit was immense. The Wallach had undoubtedly used orbital launched cruise missiles that were able to steer themselves to various targets within range of the Wallach's orbital path. With such weapons, she might have been able to level the planet within a few orbits.

"We're in radio range now," the shuttle's copilot announced over the comms. "Continuing to transmit Corinari ID codes."

Jessica shifted her position in order to get a better view as the shuttle cleared the edge of the city and descended slightly now that they were clear of the taller structures. There was a smoke plume directly ahead of them, a few kilometers yet distant.

"Uh oh," she mumbled. "Is that where the..."

"Yes, sir, it is," the copilot responded.

The smoke plume continued to grow in circumference as they flew toward it until, finally, it became clear that it was not a single plume, but several. In the middle of the plumes was a massive blast crater at least fifty meters deep and a few hundred meters in diameter. There were pieces of debris thrown out past the crater's edges, many of which had landed in the surrounding forest, setting it ablaze in several spots.

"Jesus," she exclaimed as the shuttle turned to starboard and began to circle what used to be the Corinari command center.

"I've got movement in the tree line," the copilot announced. The ship banked hard to the left and began to climb, putting distance between the tree line and the shuttle.

"Are they friendlies?" Jessica wondered aloud. With the Corinari command center down and the national security services barely functioning, there was a good chance there could be armed loyalists or even Ta'Akar operatives below them in the trees, and the pilot wasn't taking any chances.

"I'm getting hails. Issuing challenge," the copilot reported. The shuttle rolled back to the right as it continued climbing hard. Jessica looked back inside at the ten heavily armed Corinari troops sitting patiently inside.

"ID confirmed, sir," the copilot reported. "They're survivors from command."

"Put us down," Jessica ordered. "I want to talk to them."

* * *

"This will work," Cameron insisted.

"How can you be sure of that?" Major Prechitt asked.

Cameron felt herself getting annoyed in much the same fashion as Nathan used to annoy her when they first started working together in the flight simulators. "Look, it was designed to be able to function as an open deck," she explained. "We're just taking it one step further."

"But that one step is a rather big one," Master Chief Montrose reminded her. "Three-quarters of our deck crew will be operating in a vacuum. That's a lot of potential mistakes just waiting to be made."

"We'll have to beef up the deck monitoring," she suggested. "We can set up teams to keep an eye on everyone working the open decks. We can monitor their life support systems, bio-telemetry, the works. And we can keep extra guys on cameras to keep people from making mistakes."

"I suggest we have designated gear bosses to maintain all the pressure suits used by the deck crews, as well as having suit-techs to help people on and off with their gear and to check them over before they hit the airlock."

"What about the cargo shuttles?" Major Prechitt asked.

"They'll have to be loaded on the open deck," Cameron told him. "They're too big to fit through the inner airlocks."

"That's fine for cargo," Master Chief Montrose said, "but it's not going to work for passengers."

"We can always close up the deck to receive cargo shuttles," Cameron suggested, "but it would take about half an hour to repressurize the main hangar deck each time."

"Couldn't we rig up some kind of gangway?" Marcus asked.

Master Chief Montrose looked at Marcus, surprise on his face. "That's actually not a bad idea, Senior Chief. Perhaps we could modify one of the gangways used at the Aitkenna spaceport. We could set it up to lead from the forward hatch to the bay and shuttle."

"We'll need an airlock on it," Cameron reminded them.

"We still have a few breach boxes," the master chief stated. "We could use one for the airlock at the forward hatch, then we could put wheels on the other one."

"We'll need some kind of hydraulic lift system to adjust its height off the deck," Marcus added, "so we can line it up with any shuttle's height. They're not all the same, you know."

"Looks like you've got yourself a project, Senior Chief," Cameron stated.

"Could you wait until I rig something up before you go to an open deck, so I don't have to set it up in a vacuum?"

"Sorry, Senior Chief," Major Prechitt said. "If we are going to be ready to fight with an open deck, we need all the practice we can get."

"Agreed," Cameron said. "We set an open deck now."

"We need time to set the deck and get our crews into pressure suits," Master Chief Montrose stated.

"You should be able to go to an open deck in five minutes or less."

"And given the appropriate amount of time and training, we would be able to do just that," Montrose stated. "Under the current circumstances, I need an hour."

Cameron already knew enough about Master Chief Montrose to know that he had meant what he had said. More importantly, she knew he wouldn't have said it unless he really did need an hour. As chief of the boat, it was the master chief's job to make it work for the XO. It was also his responsibility to watch out for the welfare of the crew and to tell the XO when what she was asking for couldn't be done.

"Very well, Master Chief," Cameron resigned, "one hour."

"What about the tactical shuttles down on the surface of Corinair?" Major Prechitt wondered.

"They'll fit in the forward airlocks," Marcus told him. "And they can ride the elevator pad in the airlock down to the cargo deck. If we move stuff toward the back of the bay,

we can use it for a pressurized staging area while we're running an open deck."

"Good thinking, Senior Chief," Cameron said.

Master Chief Montrose smiled. Marcus Taggart was doing just fine at his new job as chief of the deck.

* * *

Jessica and a line of five Corinari troops, all of them heavily armed and armored, advanced slowly on the tree line where the copilot had originally seen the movement. Their weapons were held high and ready. Their safeties were off as they made their approach. Sending a false Corinari ID signal and using captured authentication codes was not beyond the realm of the possible. In fact, it would be a logical way for an enemy to try to get on board the Aurora, but with all the security measures currently in place, it would be practically impossible. Still, if it was an enemy in the tree line, they would have no way of knowing that the Aurora was so secure, so they had no choice but to approach the tree line as if it were the enemy hiding among the trees.

The Corinari to Jessica's right raised his fist signaling everyone to stop their advance. His next signal sent the two outermost men shuffling quickly to either side in order to box in whomever might be waiting for them. As soon as the two outside men reached their positions and readied themselves, the Corinari to Jessica's right called out to the tree line in Corinairan. A moment later, a voice from the trees answered in the same language. The man next to Jessica said something else to the voice in the trees, after which three men came slowly out of the forest. They were similarly dressed, wearing the same black and gray uniforms as the Corinari serving on the Aurora. They were also armed, though they did not hold their guns quite as rigidly as the members of Jessica's team. She wasn't sure if

they were trying to appear non-threatening or if they were just plain tired, but the looks on their faces were of relief.

More words were exchanged between sides, all in Corinairan, and the troops on Jessica's team lowered their weapons and relaxed to some extent.

"They're ours, Lieutenant Commander," the Corinari next to her announced.

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

"I went through basic with two of them," he explained.

"Good enough," she stated, lowering her own weapon. "Is this it? Are these guys all that survived?"

The trooper questioned the three men for a few more minutes before answering her. "No, sir. There are about ten more holed up deeper in the forest. They say they have made radio contact with a few other groups nearby. Reports are that there are small pockets of men scattered all over the place. But without any command and control, they're all just sitting tight, waiting for direction from someone in command."

"Very well," Jessica told him. "Have them round up their men, and report back here. I'm going to report in."

"Yes, sir," the trooper answered.

* * *

Major Jonas Prechitt had been a member of the Corinari since his return from imperial service over a decade ago. His imperial service had seen no action as he had been stationed at the Norwitt garrison, a small training outpost used for space fighters. It had been there that his interest in flying had been aroused. He had spent four years observing the Takaran-born officers as they went through their flight training, dreaming of being in the cockpit himself.

It wasn't until he had returned to his homeworld of Corinair and enrolled in the Corinari that he got his chance. Corinari Command had recognized the major's natural abilities, as well as the above average understanding of

flight dynamics that he had gleaned from all those years of observation. It was ironic that he was now killing the very pilots that had stirred his interest in flight so many years ago.

Although he had been training for over a decade, the battle of Darvano was the first time he had fired his weapons at an enemy. During the post-Yamaro chaos, he had been called upon to destroy two of their own missile bases, as well as to intercept and destroy the missiles that had targeted the Aurora, the latter of which had not only earned him his promotion, but had also landed him the assignment as the commanding officer of the Corinari fighter wing assigned to the Aurora. He was now what Captain Scott had referred to as 'CAG', an acronym that on Earth apparently stood for 'Commander of the Air Group'.

Major Prechitt entered the Aurora's flight operations center. The room was situated just forward of the main hangar deck. He really liked this room. It felt like a real command center to him. He could even see into the main hangar bay through a row of windows along the aft wall. Of course, the windows weren't really necessary, as there were so many cameras available with which to monitor the activities on the flight line. Still, it gave him a feeling of being connected to the flight line, which he liked. He wondered if that had been the original designer's intention all along.

The flight operations center was massive, spanning nearly the entire width of the hangar bay. On either side, there were rows of workstations where technical specialists monitored every aspect of operations. As simple as the process of launching and recovering spacecraft seemed, running such an operation was extremely complex, as everything had to work perfectly every time, or disaster could be the result. The Battle of Darvano had been executed perfectly from a flight operations perspective. In fact, it had gone a lot better than he and his staff had

expected, especially considering the limited amount of time they had been given to become accustomed to flying off the deck of the Aurora.

The forward wall of the room was covered with small cubicles from where various junior officers could work in semi-privacy while still being close by to monitor their areas of operations. This was where he could usually find his various staff members, either in their cubicles or walking the rows of tech stations for which they were responsible.

"How are we doing with preparations?" Major Prechitt asked the watch officer, Lieutenant Commander Iverson.

"Very well, sir," Iverson responded. "We are pretty much ready to go at this point. We are just waiting for Senior Chief Taggart to finish installing a mating collar around the forward hatch of the main hangar bay."

"He can't do that later?" Major Prechitt asked, somewhat annoyed at the delay.

"No, sir. He has to drill holes through the main forward bulkhead and weld them in place in order to attach the mating collar and ensure a proper seal. As the Chief of the Boat explained it, to drill those holes with an open deck, he'd have to seal off the main central corridor and both side corridors, which would put a serious crimp in our operations."

"More so that running with an open deck?" the major wondered.

"If the COB says it needs to be done..." the lieutenant commander began.

"Then we do it," Prechitt admitted. "How's it going to work?"

"Sir?"

"The mating collar."

"As I understand it, it is little more than a piece of I-beam bent around into a square designed to fit inside the walls of a breaching box. Senior Chief Taggart has a team removing the mating wall of one of the boxes now. Once

they're ready, they'll mount it to the mating collar, and that will give us an airlock on the forward hatch."

"I see," the major said. "You know, I'm surprised they didn't design an airlock there to begin with."

"According to the Aurora's flight operations procedures, the open deck was never meant to be used with such large shuttles."

Major Prechitt nodded. Although he wasn't too excited about having to operate from an open deck, he wanted as much time as possible for his crews and pilots to become accustomed to the idea. More importantly, he didn't want to anger the Aurora's executive officer, Commander Cameron Taylor. So far, she had seemed relatively easy to work with, but he knew she had been treading lightly while his people learned their way around the Aurora's flight decks. Members of the Aurora's original crew, the few that had survived, had all advised staying on her good side. As the CAG, he pretty much ruled the flight deck, but there was no sense in testing her limits at this point in time.

Major Prechitt glanced up at the wall clock. They had fifteen minutes left before it would be time to open the deck. "Just make sure they are done and out of the way in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant commander responded.

"CAG, Comms," Naralena's voice sounded over the major's comm-set.

"Go for CAG," he answered. Even though he had been the CAG for over a month now, it still felt odd to use the unfamiliar acronym.

"Sir, Lieutenant Commander Nash is reporting in from the surface, sir. The captain is also on the channel and requests that you be conferenced in on the report."

"Very well," Major Prechitt answered, moving away from the center of flight ops toward the forward wall where it was quieter.

"Major Prechitt is connected, sirs," Naralena reported.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant Commander," Nathan ordered.

"As I was saying," Jessica continued, "Corinari command is gone. There's nothing her but a crater and about a dozen survivors."

Major Prechitt felt his skin grow a bit paler as his pulse quickened. "Are you sure?" he asked. It was a stupid question and he knew it, but it was one he couldn't help but ask.

"I'm looking at a smoking hole where it used to be," Jessica reported. "From what we've learned from the survivors, it was probably one of the first targets to be hit. They think it was a cruise missile. They're also pretty sure the strikes were not random, that there was a target list. At least at first, anyway. They've been using short-range radio relays to establish contact with other units. So far they know of at least five or six groups in and around the area of Aitkenna, or what's left of it, that is."

"Any idea how wide spread?" Major Prechitt asked. "Are we talking local, continental, or planet-wide?"

"Unknown. From what we saw on our way in, I'm pretty sure it's more than just one continent. But I haven't heard back from the other two shuttles yet."

"What about the government?" Nathan asked.

"Also unknown, sir," Jessica answered. "The survivors we've spoken to said the government went into an underground bunker as soon as the battle started. No one here has heard from them yet."

"Captain, that bunker has full communications capabilities, just like Corinari command had," Major Prechitt added.

"Could they have been taken out as well?" Nathan asked.

"It is possible, but not likely," the major answered. "Their bunker is even deeper, and their comm-lines are as well. In fact, their transceivers are more than a kilometer away and have several redundant units. In order to cut

them off, the Ta'Akar would have to know the location of all those transceivers."

"We need to know, Major, one way or another."

"Yes, sir, we do. I recommend we send out fighters in pairs to do flyovers of all areas on the surface of Corinair and to transmit instructions to any surviving Corinari on how to report in."

"Can't we use the comm-sat network?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir," Jessica reported. *"Most of the comm-sats were taken out by the Wallach as soon as she entered orbit."*

"Very well, Major," Nathan agreed, *"make it happen."*

"Yes, sir." Major Prechitt had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He did not like where things were headed.

"Officer of the Watch," he called out. The lieutenant commander immediately turned his attention to the major. "Prepare to launch all fighters, low level reconnaissance and contact over Corinair."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant commander responded smartly. "Shall I open the deck first, sir?"

"No, we'll do that after we get our birds away. Tell the senior chief he gets an extra fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir."

A moment later, the status lights on the walls of the flight operations center turned blue, signifying that flight operations were underway, and an alert klaxon sounded through the corridors and the hangar bays. Major Prechitt worried about his pilots. Although they were not about to go back into combat, they were going to fly over the devastated cities of their homeworld. It was going to change them; of that he was sure.

* * *

"Captain on deck!" the Corinari guard at the entrance to the flight operations center announced. As flight ops was an active duty station, no one currently working a console was expected to acknowledge his entrance, and Nathan much

preferred it that way. He made his way aft toward the main windows, peering down into the hangar bay. Major Prechitt moved from the center of the room aft to join him.

"Captain," Major Prechitt greeted.

"Major Prechitt. You know, I've never been in here," Nathan admitted. Nathan felt a little odd about that fact, but then again, flight operations was not run by the captain of the ship. That was the CAG's domain. Nathan made a mental note to himself that, at some point, he should try to familiarize himself with every compartment on his ship.

"What brings you to flight ops, sir?" Major Prechitt inquired.

"Same as most of them I imagine," Nathan said, pointing to the numerous technicians and junior officers who were standing around trying to look like they were there for a reason. "I've never seen an open deck before."

"Apparently, none of us has," Major Prechitt stated.

"How long until you begin?" Nathan asked.

"We just finished depressurizing all bays. It took a while for us to override the safeties in order to begin depress while the doors were open between the main hangar bay and the fighter alleys, but with the help of Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy, we were able to manage. Now we're just waiting for clearance from the deck chief."

"Senior Chief Taggart?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir. Since the fighter alleys were not designed to run open to space, he's got teams locking down all the hatches that lead into the fighter alleys and painting them red to make sure no one accidentally pops open a hatch that leads to a vacuum."

"How are people going to get in and out of the alleys?"

"Through the tool rooms at the aft end of the alleys, sir. The Senior Chief has turned them into airlocks using breaching boxes. They'll serve as changing rooms for the deck crews as well."

"Makes sense," Nathan admitted, "but that's a long haul for someone to make in an emergency, especially if they're at the forward end of the bay."

"We'll have another breach box airlock forward, sir. We're also going to bring up a few passenger pods from Corinair to put along the sides of the hangars to be used as emergency pressure shelters. That way, unless someone has a complete visor breach, they should be able to make it to an airlock before they lose all breathable air from their suit."

"Good idea," Nathan agreed.

"Chief of the Deck reports all pressure doors are sealed and ready. Deck crews are suited up and standing by," Lieutenant Commander Iverson reported.

"Very well," Major Prechitt stated. "Notify the bridge that we're opening the deck, and stand by to open all inner doors."

"Yes, sir."

A moment later, Naralena's voice came across the ship-wide address system. *"Attention all hands. Stand by to open the flight deck. Repeat, stand by to open the flight deck."*

"Sound the warning," Major Prechitt ordered.

Nathan could hear the warning klaxons in the corridors. He knew they were sounding inside the hangars as well, but no one would hear them as all the bays were now in a vacuum.

"Open inner doors for transfer airlocks one, two, and three," Major Prechitt ordered.

Nathan watched as all three of the inner doors began to rise. Normally, they would rise just enough to allow whatever ship was in the bay to pass under them. This was actually the first time he had seen them lift all the way up.

"Inner doors up and secured, sir," Lieutenant Commander Iverson reported.

"Very well, open all outer doors."

"Opening outer doors."

The Aurora's current course and attitude had her back to the Darvano system's sun as they made their way toward Corinair. As the three massive outer doors rose, light from the Darvano sun came spilling into the main hangar deck, casting a pattern of light and shadow that the deck had previously never seen. It then occurred to Nathan that, although the main drive section blocked most of the direct sunlight from entering the hangar bay, they might need to pay attention to such angles in the future, especially during flight operations, as the unfiltered light in space could be somewhat blinding.

Everyone in attendance watched in awe as the final step began, and the two walls that separated the three transfer airlocks were lowered into the deck. A minute later, the entire aft end of the main hangar deck was open to space. Nathan thought about the pros and cons of operating an open flight deck. The flight decks on the Earth's larger Defender-class ships were all open design, with the deck opening from both the bow and stern of the ship with transfer airlocks and hangar bays on either side of the deck. Of course, those ships were much larger and had plenty of space for such an operation. His Explorer-class ship was considerably smaller, and her flight deck had been intended for primarily defensive and support operations.

As soon as the deck was completely open, deck hands in full pressure suits began to come out from the aft end of the flight deck on either side. Most of them went directly to their work, but more than one took the opportunity to walk out onto the flight apron and look out into space. Nathan understood their curiosity, as this might be the only opportunity they would ever have to witness the vastness of outer space first hand.

A minute later, two fighters landed on the flight apron and rolled into the main bay. The major had launched several fighters in order to run recovery drills. He had every intention of getting the bugs worked out of their open deck

procedures as soon as possible, which was just fine with Nathan, as they had no idea when another imperial ship might appear.

The two fighters split, one rolling to starboard and the other to port. They entered the mid-deck airlocks on either side, the doors closing quickly behind them. Nathan watched the monitors showing the view inside the mid-deck transfer airlocks as the platform descended to the lower level as it pressurized. By the time it reached the bottom, the atmospheric pressure within the tube was normal, and the door to the lower deck opened allowing the fighter to roll into the cargo bay below.

"We were able to move most of the cargo to other compartments," Major Prechitt stated, "so we have enough room in the cargo deck to use it as a hangar. We'll be able to use the fighter alleys for quick recycles during combat, which we'll be practicing fairly heavily for the rest of the day. Otherwise, we can do most of our work down below."

"Excellent work, Major," Nathan praised. "I'll leave you to it, then."

"Thank you, sir."

As he made his way out, Nathan watched the next two fighters roll in from the flight apron and immediately turn into the fighter alleys where they would be recycled and launched again. He wished he could jump into the cockpit of one of those Corinari fighters and go shooting out the launch tube, even if only to turn around and immediately land, but he was the captain now, and he had other responsibilities.

* * *

"Based on the time it took them to repair the hull breach in our bow, Vlad estimates it will take at least two weeks to patch the hole in our port side," Cameron reported. "And that's if we are docked inside the Karuzari asteroid base."

"I don't see that happening any time soon," Nathan said. "From Jessica's initial report, it sounds like we won't be getting any more help from the people of Corinair—at least not from their industrial sector, that's for sure."

"Well, we're still pretty good on rail gun ammunition," Cameron stated. "Simple slugs, but plenty of them. We've also got more than forty missiles and ten nuclear torpedoes."

"Yeah, those missiles didn't seem very effective. Their point-defense systems kept taking them down. We need torpedoes more than anything else. It takes at least two of them to take down one of their ships, and that's if the first two are lucky shots. With what we've got, we can take down five ships at the most, less if they're heavy cruisers. How many ships do the Ta'Akar still have? About a dozen?"

"I think they're down to fourteen now," Cameron clarified.

"So we can only take out about a third of their fleet," Nathan surmised. "I don't think that's going to be enough to bring them to their knees."

"Maybe we'll find something of use on the Loranoi," Cameron suggested.

"Doubtful," Nathan disagreed. "You saw her; she was all missile batteries."

"Nevertheless, we should send a team over to check out her armaments and weapons stores. We should check out her weapons targeting systems and electronic countermeasures while we're at it."

"Send Mister Willard along with them," Nathan ordered. "He knows the Takaran systems pretty well."

"Yes, sir," Cameron acknowledged.

The hatch alarm beeped. "Enter," he called out.

Major Prechitt stepped through the hatch, closing it behind him. "Excuse me sir, but we've completed our initial assessment of the Corinari forces still operating on Corinair."

Nathan could see the distress on the major's face. He could hear it in his voice. "What is it, Major?"

"They must have known exactly where to hit us, sir," Major Prechitt began. "They knew where every command center was located across the entire planet. As best we can tell, they hit them all at once."

"How bad is it?" Cameron asked.

"The most senior man to report in so far has been a captain running an ordnance disposal unit. According to the survivors on the surface, Corinari Command has been off the air planet wide since the initial attack. We've flown over all major continents on the planet multiple times and made contact with over a hundred groups of Corinari, but they all tell the same story. There are men left to fight and some equipment and weapons to fight with, but there is no one to lead them." Major Prechitt took a deep breath, looking the captain straight in the eyes. "Right now, I'm the most senior Corinari officer known to have survived the attack."

"What does that mean?" Nathan asked.

"It means, sir, that as of now, I'm in command of all remaining Corinari forces."

"You're kidding me," Nathan responded, his mouth agape.

"No, sir, I'm not."

"Any word on the government? Did anyone survive?" Cameron asked.

"Nothing yet. There's a rumor that the Aitkenna bunker survived the strike but is buried under the debris. A team is on their way there now to see if they can determine if anyone is still alive down there."

Nathan looked at the major, knowing full well how he felt. Having that much responsibility suddenly thrust upon you was not a pleasant feeling. Fortunately, Major Prechitt had over a decade of experience in the Corinari, so Nathan was pretty sure he could handle it. "We'll be entering orbit over Corinair in about ten minutes, Major. We can have

comms broadcast to all Corinari units on the surface. Let them know that you have taken command. It will take us a few orbits to get the word out to everyone, but it will be faster than flying around in fighters and shuttles, at least until some sort of communication network is re-established on the surface."

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Major Prechitt answered, turning to exit the ready room.

"It probably goes without saying, Major," Nathan continued, "but the first priority should be to your available forces and resources."

"Yes, sir."

"And quickly," Nathan added.

Major Prechitt nodded and continued through the hatch.

As soon as he had left the room, Cameron spoke again. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"What?"

"You're his commanding officer. That makes you indirectly in charge of all the Corinari."

"I did not need to hear that, you know," Nathan stated, casting a disapproving look her way.

Chapter Three

Tug sat in the dark, cold cockpit of his interceptor as he coasted through the Takaran system at eighty percent the speed of light. It had taken his interceptor five jumps to traverse the four point six light years that separated the Darvano and Takaran systems. After his initial journey, it had taken him three additional jumps in order to enter the system on a trajectory that would carry his stealthy spacecraft through the heart of the Ta'Akar Empire and allow him to gather as much intelligence as possible. He would then reach the far side of the system and begin jumping his way back to Corinair.

It had seemed an impossible mission to him at first, as the Takaran home system was protected by a vast network of sensor stations that could detect any ship headed toward the imperial homeworld long before it entered the system. However, the grid itself had been designed to defend against the known propulsion technology of the time. Since his interceptor had been equipped with the Corinairan's

prototype jump drive, he had been able to jump inside the sensor grid, thereby avoiding detection.

His course and speed at the moment of arrival had been precisely calculated. Now, more than sixteen hours later, he was passing between the orbits of Takara and her sister world, Davonmur. His course had taken him slightly above the system ecliptic, therefore keeping him out of the normal navigation corridors in order to avoid being spotted by civilian, or even worse, military traffic traveling between the two busiest worlds in the system.

His ship had previously been painted with a special, black, non-reflective coating that absorbed electromagnetic radiation and made the interceptor nearly impossible to detect. At the time, this had been done in order to avoid detection while making communication runs through the Savoy system to maintain contact with Jalea while she was there. His flight tactics in this mission were similar, keeping all of his systems powered down in order to remain cold so as to blend in with the frigid temperatures of outer space. His power plant was completely shut down, and all of his systems were inactive. In fact, there were only two things operating in his ship at the moment: his flight suit's portable life support system and the passive sensory suite that was gathering and recording signals and images of everything of interest as he coasted past the worlds and stations of the enemy's home system.

He had passed the primary planet hours ago and was just now passing Davonmur. He had kept his sensors focused primarily on Takara, as it was the capital of the system and the most likely to emanate comm signals of interest. Davonmur, on the other hand, was primarily a civilian world and was unlikely to yield any useful intelligence. Nevertheless, he had already focused his passive sensor array on the secondary world since it was now in such close proximity. Once past it, he would train his array elsewhere.

In fact, he was most interested in getting a peek at the shipyards of the moon Pallax. The biggest of the forty moons orbiting the system's biggest gas-giant, Hellek, its low gravity, complete lack of atmosphere, and rich mineral deposits had made it an ideal location for the construction and maintenance of the imperial fleet. Most notably, his interest was in the state of the Avendahl, the empire's last battleship that was nearing the completion of her upgrade to use the new zero-point energy device as its primary power source. If that ship were allowed to leave port powered by the ZPED, it was doubtful that the Aurora would be able to defeat her.

Unfortunately, Tug was not able to analyze or even view any of the images or signals being collected by his passive sensor suite, as to do so would require the use of his main computer system, which would require him to power up at least one of his fusion reactors. would make him instantly visible on Ta'Akar sensors which were constantly scanning the system to monitor the movement of ships between worlds. In his current configuration, if detected, he would appear to be nothing more than a rock of insignificant size. Even a closer imaging from a nearby ship would show him to be an abandoned, outdated interceptor that had probably drifted in from outside the system. He would not be big enough to be considered a threat to any planet, and his trajectory kept him free of the shipping lanes so that he would not be considered a collision threat that needed to be dealt with. Another ship would have to be within visual range in order to determine his true nature and intent, and if any ship began such an approach, he could still power up and jump away within a few minutes.

Of course, jumping away from deep within the system was the last thing Tug wanted to do. Not only would that immediately identify him as an intruder, but it would alert the Ta'Akar that the rumors of the mysterious disappearing ship were not only true, but that there was more than one of

them. More importantly, it would alert them to the fact that their home system was easy to penetrate, and that would make this the last recon mission they would ever run through the Takaran system.

Tug still had several hours before he would be within passive sensor range of Hellek. He only hoped his calculations of the orbit of Pallax were correct. If not, he would have to return for another pass in order to image the shipyards. As it was, this mission was already going to last more than twenty-eight hours.

He checked the mission time on his data pad. In two more hours, he would be passing Hellek. After that, he would have to coast for another ten hours to reach his safe departure point well beyond the heliopause on the opposite side of the system. Unfortunately, the positions of the other worlds beyond the orbit of Hellek would make it impossible for him to examine them during this pass. However, he was reasonably certain those worlds offered little in the way of intelligence. There might be a few frigates out doing maneuvers in the outer reaches of the system, but there was nothing he could do about that now. His mission was primarily to determine the current state of the Avendahl.

This type of recon was a true test of a pilot's resolve. Tug remembered the patrols he and Max had flown beyond the borders of the Palee system. Max was his former wingman and lifetime friend who now went by the name of Travon Dumar. They, too, had spent hours drifting and scanning, looking for signs of ships traveling at faster than light speeds. They had both been younger men then, full of pride and arrogance, and ready to prove themselves in their cockpits. Tug had determined that their commanding officer had assigned them the boring task of deep space recon as a way of teaching them patience and self control. On more than one occasion, they had both performed maneuvers during training sorties that were considered dangerous and unwarranted. The fact that they had performed them

flawlessly had not mattered to their superiors. They only saw Tug as the son of nobility who thought the rules did not apply to him, as well as his trusty sidekick who was willing to follow his arrogant leader anywhere. They had let him get away with his flight antics right up until he and Max were almost killed. That had been when the deep space patrols had begun.

He had run them alone at first, as Max had still been recovering at the time. He had always believed he had been sent out alone because no one other than Max had wanted to fly with him. It wasn't until later that he realized they were trying to teach him to understand the loneliness of deep space. He eventually did come to understand it, as it had taken Max several weeks to recover from his injuries.

Since then, Tug had flown many missions by himself. He certainly could have used some company on this trip, but it was too dangerous a mission to ask another to risk it. His subordinates in the Karuzari had begged him not to go, but Tug knew it had to be him. No one knew how to fly his ship better than he. No one knew how to use the interceptor's strengths to quickly get out of trouble. More importantly, none of them knew the Takaran system as he did. This was his home. It was where he had been born and raised. It was where his father, his father's father, and all their fathers before them had lived since the time it was first settled nearly a thousand years ago.

That was a very long time ago, and Takara had changed drastically under the rule of Caius the Great of the house of Ta'Akar. His world had once been a beautiful and peaceful world. It had been a beacon of hope that had united the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster only a hundred years after the great migration had ended. The worlds of the cluster, with the help of Takaran ships, had managed to work together to better the lives of all the worlds within the cluster. They had even begun to branch out and help the

worlds outside the cluster, including the Palee, who had been under threat by the Soo-Dani.

Tug tried not to think about how Caius had corrupted and destroyed his homeworld. Such thoughts could only distract him from his mission. Instead, he spent his time plotting and planning the various ways the Aurora and her jump drive could be used to take down the mighty Ta'Akar empire and restore his home to its former glory. That was where his energies needed to be directed, just as they had been for the last forty years.

* * *

"Captain on deck!" the guard announced as Nathan entered the compartment that had been set up as the main intelligence room and had come to be known as the 'intel shack'. As expected, no one even looked up from their consoles. There were too few individuals qualified for such work, and those few were too busy analyzing all the comm signals, images, and thermal scans that had been brought back by Tug to be distracted with the formalities of rank. That was fine with Nathan, who never much cared for such formalities, although he did understand the need. He knew that neither Tug nor Cameron—both of whom were hovering over the display table in the center of the room—approved of his disregard for such protocols. However, they both knew that things would eventually change—if they survived the current crisis and actually made it out of the Pentaurus cluster once and for all.

"Glad to see you made it back safely, Tug," Nathan stated as he stepped up to the table and patted Tug on the back. "That was one long recon flight."

"Indeed it was," Tug agreed, "but I believe it was worth it."

"What did we learn?" Nathan asked, turning his attention to the various images displayed on the table.

"It's still too early to be sure about anything," Jessica warned, "as we've only just begun to analyze the data. It will take hours for us to decrypt and sift through all the comm signals he recorded. It may even take days."

"Recruit as many people as needed," Nathan ordered. "We don't *have* days."

"Yes, sir."

"We got very lucky, Captain," Tug explained. "The position of Pallax was such that I was able to get extremely clear images of the Avendahl in the orbital shipyards." Tug tapped the image on the table and it enlarged to reveal a remarkably clear image of the massive battleship from above and slightly to her port side. "You can clearly see that she is already running on internal power from the zero-point device."

"How can you tell?" Nathan wondered, staring at the image.

"She only has a few backup power umbilicals attached," Dumar explained, "not nearly enough to power the entire ship."

Nathan looked at the thermal scans of the ship next to the visual image. It showed the same time code. There were not the usual large red balls in the center of the battleship's profile. "She's too cool to be running on fusion or anti-matter reactors," he commented unhappily.

"That was our observation as well," Dumar agreed.

"Then we're too late?" Nathan asked.

"Perhaps not," Dumar added. "Her ZPED may be installed and operational, but she is far from ready for deployment." Dumar pointed to several spots on the image. "Notice these sections where the hull has been opened. There are at least twenty of them visible on the topside of the ship alone. I believe they are still upgrading her shield emitters to handle the increased power provided by the ZPED."

"How long until they finish?" Nathan asked.

“That is difficult to assess,” Tug said. “Perhaps if we conducted another recon a day later and compared the images, we might be able to make a more accurate assessment.”

“Give me a best guess,” Nathan insisted.

“If they have just started, and the rest of the ship is in similar condition, it could be a few more weeks,” Dumar stated.

“Or they could have been doing one side at a time, and this is the last side,” Cameron said.

“That is also a possibility,” Dumar agreed. “If so, we could have a week or even less.”

“Can you do another fly by?” Nathan asked Tug. “Maybe this time traversing the system from above the ecliptic to below in order to get a different angle.”

“A good idea,” Tug agreed, “but there may not be enough time.”

“How much time do we have before the Loranoi’s comm-drone reaches Takara?” Nathan asked.

“Just under thirty-three hours,” Jessica reported.

“The last recon took thirty hours,” Cameron reminded them.

“That’s barely a day and a half,” Nathan stated. “We can’t mount an offensive in such a short time.”

“It may not be necessary,” Dumar told him. “They will receive the Loranoi’s message, yes, but that does not mean that any significant actions will be taken at that moment. Imperial command will undoubtedly wait for at least a day for a follow-up message from the Loranoi announcing that the uprising has been put down. Once no message is received, they will go to Caius with a report as well as a recommendation.”

“And what will their recommendation be?” Nathan wondered.

“They will undoubtedly insist on dispatching a battle group to Darvano with the intention of leveling Corinair,”

Dumar announced in a surprisingly calm fashion. Everyone in the room looked at him. "It is what Caius has always wanted to do in the first place. He now has an excuse to do so, and he will not hesitate to act."

"What about the Avendahl?" Cameron asked. "Wouldn't it be faster to complete her refit and send her instead of the battle group?"

"Indeed it would," Dumar agreed, "but the Avendahl is the empire's last remaining battleship. Caius will keep her close at hand to protect the homeworld. However, he may increase their efforts to complete her refit."

"Either way, it appears we need to attack Takara as soon as possible," Nathan concluded. "We cannot allow the Avendahl's upgrades to be completed." Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he scanned the images before him. "How long will it take that battle group to get here?" Nathan asked.

"If dispatched immediately from the Takaran system, about six months," Dumar stated. "However, if they have ships already in closer proximity, they might arrive considerably sooner."

Nathan contemplated the situation for a moment before speaking. "We cannot hope to mount a successful offensive against the Ta'Akar home system before the comm-drone delivers its message to imperial command. If we are lucky, we might be able to mount an offensive before the Avendahl is able to defend herself. We should concentrate our efforts on that premise."

"And what of Corinair?" Cameron wondered.

"If we worry about Corinair now and miss our opportunity to destroy the Avendahl, we may only be delaying their fate. If we are unable to destroy the Avendahl, we may still be able to escape and perhaps either mount a defense or at least evacuate as many people as possible from the surface."

"Captain, there are billions of people on Corinair," Dumar pointed out. "Even with your jump drive, it would take years to evacuate them all, maybe even decades. And where would they..."

"I would not even try," Nathan interrupted. "Any word yet on what, if any, resources are available to us?"

"I'm still trying to get an accurate assessment of existing operational forces on Corinair, sir," Major Prechitt answered. The Wallach appeared to have targeted major communications and command and control during her first orbit, as well as whatever major government targets came into range during that pass. She also struck many of the airfields and spaceports. Luckily, most of the interceptors based on the surface were already airborne and were on their way to engage the Wallach during the initial bombardment. More than half of the remaining interceptors were lost during the engagement before you ordered them off. At last count, there were about fifty interceptors left, but of course, they are all configured primarily for air and orbital intercepts."

"What about their ordnance?" Nathan asked.

"Whatever was stored at their operational bases is a total loss. However, a few munitions depots located in the polar regions escaped attack during the Wallach's first orbit. But it is only enough to rearm the remaining interceptors perhaps once. It is definitely not enough for a prolonged engagement."

"Would they be able to refuel and reload on the surface and make it to orbit?" Nathan asked.

"Uh, I suppose so," Major Prechitt answered. "May I ask why?"

"I intend to bring them aboard," Nathan explained.

"All of them, sir?"

"Yes, Major, all of them," Nathan stated. "Have your crews begin converting as many of them as they can to be launched via our launch tubes."

“That should be easy enough, sir, but they are still only capable of orbital or atmospheric operations, regardless of launch location.”

“We’ll deploy them as appropriate for their configuration, Major. But regardless of their mission profile, they’ll be more flexible and have a greater range if they do not have to climb out of Corinair’s gravity well before engaging the enemy.”

“Yes, sir. I’m just wondering where we’re going to put them all,” Major Prechitt admitted, “especially now that we’re operating with an open deck.”

“Move the remaining cargo out of the cargo bays below,” Nathan ordered. “We’ll need all of that space to operate your fighters.”

“Where are we going to put it?” Cameron asked.

“There’s a thousand nooks and crannies all over this ship,” Nathan pointed out. “Use them. Anything that isn’t essential, we can offload at Karuzara and store there.”

“Yes, sir,” Cameron agreed.

“What about the surviving Corinari?” Jessica asked.

“Let’s bring as many of them as we can aboard as well.”

“We’re already full up, Captain,” Cameron pointed out.

“Then find room for them,” Nathan ordered. “Turn the rec areas into dorms. Set up a hot rack schedule if needed. I have a feeling we’re going to need all the manpower we can get in the next few days.”

“It might be a bit premature,” Mister Dumar began.

“There’s one thing I’m sure of, Mister Dumar;” Nathan stated, cutting him off, “the next battle is not going to take place on Corinair.” Mister Dumar bowed his head in agreement, taking note of Nathan’s insistent tone.

“Bringing all those additional Corinari aboard is going to create additional security problems,” Jessica warned.

“I trust you’ll deal with it appropriately, Lieutenant Commander,” Nathan stated. He no longer had time to micromanage his departments, and if they were going to

trust him, he felt he needed to show them that he trusted them as well.

"Yes, sir."

"What about the Loranoi?" Nathan asked Cameron.

"Mister Willard and his team are going over the Loranoi now to determine what might be of use to us. So far, other than consumables, he has confirmed that there are at least one hundred ship-to-ship missiles on board that we could use. However, we only have room for about a third of them."

"Move the rest of them to Karuzara as well," Nathan ordered. "Since their base is well hidden, they should be safe even if the Ta'Akar do return."

"Yes, sir."

"Update Mister Willard as to our situation, and have him move anything that he thinks will be of use to us as soon as he discovers it," Nathan ordered. "Time is short," he reminded her, "and I want our readiness to improve with every passing hour."

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered.

"Meanwhile, we need more detailed information about the enemy's ships and positions," Nathan told Jessica and Mister Dumar. "I want to know where every one of the empire's ships are located. But first, we need another pass at the Avendahl to more accurately assess her estimated time to deployment," he told Tug.

"I'd like to make contact with Jalea, first," Tug stated. "She is still in the Savoy system and is unaware of the current situation. She may have useful intelligence as well."

"Agreed," Nathan stated. "Go ahead and make contact with her first. But as soon as you get back, we need that second pass at the Avendahl," Nathan reminded him.

"Yes, Captain," Tug agreed.

"And start teaching Josh and Loki to run these recon missions," Nathan ordered. "We need you here, not flying recon." Nathan smiled. "You are the leader of a nation, remember?"

* * *

Tug's flight through the Savoy system followed the same basic coast-through flight tactic as his previous recon of the Takaran system. However, since the Savoy system had nothing more than a basic garrison on its sole inhabited world of Ancot, his risk of detection was much lower. He still chose to run with his reactors cold, though, running only minimal systems on battery power alone.

By jumping in behind the system's gas-giant, he had been able to reduce his drift time to only a few hours. Since he had not taken a shower in nearly thirty-eight hours, he appreciated the short mission time. Despite the urgency of their situation, he would insist on a chance to shower and change before his next recon of Takara, as he did not believe he could withstand his own pungent body odor for an additional thirty hours.

As long as he was drifting through the Savoy system, he used his passive scanners to examine and record all images and comm signals within the system. There would not be anything of interest, of that he was sure, but it would be foolish to make the journey and not avail themselves of the opportunity, just in case.

As he had made his approach to Ancot, he had focused his directional laser communications array on the precise location of the Karuzari transmitter being used by Jalea and her new Karuzari cell in Ancot city. As planned, he had announced his presence in the system, receiving an acknowledgment in the form of an encrypted burst transmission. At the precise moment indicated in the first transmission, he had transmitted his encrypted information packet about the current situation in the Darvano system to the cell on Ancot. At the time, he had been passing the planet, but now, forty-seven minutes later, he was well beyond Ancot and rapidly approaching his jump point in the glare of the Savoy star.

Again, at the precise moment scheduled in the previous transmission, he received another burst transmission from the Ancot cell. As he ran the message through the decryption software, a smile began to form on his lips.

* * *

"We could fit several hundred more people on," Commander Taylor assured him. "The problem is providing for them. That many extra personnel would put a serious strain on our environmental systems, not to mention food, water, medical care..."

"And security," Jessica added.

"Of course," Nathan agreed as he leaned back in his chair behind his desk in the captain's ready room. "I was just hoping to have more hands in order to better prepare for what's to come."

"This ship was designed for a crew of three hundred, sir," Cameron elaborated. "Adding more personnel isn't going to make her more efficient. In fact, it will probably have the opposite effect."

"What about temporary transport accommodations?" he asked. "For example, how many troops could we transport if they were only going to be on board for a few hours?"

"As many as we could line up in the main corridors and cargo bays, I suppose," Cameron answered, "maybe a couple hundred more."

"Not exactly an invasion force," Nathan decided.

"Abby has been working on the idea of doing piggyback jumps," Cameron said.

"Piggyback jumps?"

"We have plenty of hard points along our hull," Cameron explained. "She believes that, theoretically, if another smaller ship or even a cargo pod of some sort were attached to us, she might be able to extend the jump field to include the extra piggybacked vessel."

"Like the way ships sitting on the flight apron are included in the jump," Nathan surmised.

"Exactly. In fact, that is where she got the idea. However, fighters and shuttles sitting on our flight apron are a bit different. First of all, they are considerably smaller. Second, they were inside the envelope created by the angle from the top of the transfer airlock canopy to the first set of emitters on the hull just aft of the flight apron."

"How long before she knows if it can be done?" Nathan asked.

"She'll know in a few hours if it can be done without having to place additional emitters on the piggybacked vessels themselves. She did warn me, however, that it was just an idea and not to get our hopes up."

"Still, it would be great if it worked," Nathan observed. "If we're going to bring the fight to the Ta'Akar, we're going to need to move a lot of resources into the area in a hurry."

"Have you given any thought to how we should go about this?" Cameron asked.

"You mean attack the Takaran homeworld?" Nathan sighed. "Short of slamming every comm-drone we can get our hands on into her and the shipyards, not really." Nathan turned to Jessica, who was making herself comfortable on the ready room couch as usual. "How about you, Jess?"

"I've already got Dumar working on it," she admitted.

"I'm not so sure the Corinairans' goals are the same as ours," Cameron stated.

"I'm not so sure Dumar's goals are the same as the Corinairans'," Jessica admitted.

"It's pretty obvious that he wants Caius gone just as much as Tug. That much is pretty clear," Nathan stated. "I just don't see how we can hope to invade their homeworld. Not with one ship and a few hundred troops."

"It might be safer to just take out the shipyards with comm-drones," Cameron noted. "At least that way we wouldn't have to worry about the Avendahl."

“Perhaps,” Nathan admitted, “but Tug may be right about the repercussions. The last thing we want is to fracture the empire into a bunch of warring houses. That could drag us into a long, drawn out conflict that could make things even worse in the end. I don’t think that qualifies as a viable exit strategy. Besides, I’ve been considering trying to capture the Avendahl in one piece. Can you imagine what we could do if we could fit her ZPED into our power systems?”

“You know, the Loranoi has the new comm-drones in her hold,” Jessica pointed out. “Those have working ZPEDs in them. Maybe we could do something with them.”

“Not from what Abby tells me,” Cameron stated. “The ones in the comm-drones, although powerful, would be quite different than the large scale devices.”

“What about using several small ones together?” Nathan said.

“I already suggested that,” Cameron told him. “Abby thinks that each ZPED would create some type of energy field, sort of like a gravity well, I think. It had something to do with other dimensions and stuff. By that time, she had me completely turned around.”

“Yeah, I had the same feeling when she tried to explain to me how the jump drive actually works,” Nathan said. “That’s when I gave her a standing order to never try to explain the physics of something to me, not even if I ask. What it can and cannot do is mind-boggling enough for me.” Nathan took a breath. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to try to force a regime change, and that means taking out as many ships as possible while an assault force storms the royal palace, or castle, or whatever they call the compound where Caius the Great resides.”

“And how do we do that?” Cameron asked.

“We don’t,” Nathan told her. “That’s probably going to be the job of Tug and the Karuzari. That is what they’ve been fighting for all these years. I suspect the Corinari will

back them up. Our job will undoubtedly be to jump about and keep their fleet otherwise occupied.”

“And if the Avendahl somehow manages to join the party?” Cameron wondered.

That was the one thing they did not want to happen. Nathan knew that, as much as he would like to capture the empire’s most powerful battleship intact in order to access her ZPED technology, he could not allow her to leave the shipyards at Pallax. “We’ll park some comm-drones reprogrammed as faster-than-light kinetic kill vehicles outside the system and target the shipyards with them. If the Avendahl so much as twitches, we launch every last one of them and obliterate her. We’ll take out the entire moon if we have to,” he added with conviction.

The discussion was interrupted by the hailing beep of the comm-system.

“*Captain, Comms,*” Naralena’s voice called over the speaker built into his workstation at Nathan’s desk.

Nathan had come to appreciate the calming effect that Naralena’s voice seemed to have on everyone. She had quickly become somewhat of a linchpin for the entire crew. Throughout the battle of Darvano, her calm demeanor and professionalism had helped to keep them all focused. When questioned about it, she had confided to Nathan that she had simply been trying to do her job as best she could and that she, too, had come close to losing her composure during the battle. Nevertheless, for someone that had only joined the crew a couple months ago when they escaped from Haven, she was performing her duties better than most academy graduates, and for that, she was greatly appreciated by Nathan.

“Go ahead,” he answered.

“*Tug is landing, sir. He requests that senior staff meet him in flight ops.*”

“Understood,” Nathan answered. “We’re on our way.” Nathan deactivated the comm-panel as he stood. “You

should probably have Mister Dumar join us," he told Jessica.

"Yes, sir."

* * *

"Captain on deck!" the guard announced as Nathan, Cameron, and Jessica entered the Aurora's flight operations center. The room was buzzing with activity as a full staff struggled to coordinate the movement of all the additional incoming spacecraft while still maintaining barrier patrols. In addition, Major Prechitt had wisely taken control of the six jump shuttles that Corinari command had been using as an early warning network, maintaining a watch for any incoming FTL ships. The last thing they needed was another Ta'Akar warship wandering in unannounced.

Tug and Mister Dumar were already at the center planning table as Nathan and the others moved toward the center of the room.

"What have you got, Tug?" Nathan asked, noticing the aerial views of a planetary surface that Tug, Dumar, and Major Prechitt were examining.

"It's the garrison on Ancot," Tug said. "Jalea has informed me that the garrison has not been at full staffing for several years now."

"Why is that?" Jessica asked.

"The people of Ancot have a lucrative arrangement with the Ta'Akar to provide them with food," Mister Dumar explained. "Although they have no love for the Ta'Akar, their lives have improved somewhat since the occupation."

"For this reason, Ancot has never been a decent recruiting environment for the Karuzari," Tug added.

"Some years back, as the Karuzari became a greater threat to the empire, the staffing levels at the garrison were probably reduced as the people of Ancot posed little threat," Dumar continued.

"Jalea reports that, although the garrison is not fully staffed, her armory is still quite full. In addition, there are

still more than fifty interceptors based on Ancot, most of which are configured for space combat operations. However, due to the decreased staffing levels, at least half of them are locked down in storage and would be unable to respond to an attack on short notice.”

“So you think we should launch an attack on this garrison?” Nathan surmised.

“Indeed,” Tug stated. “Jalea and her people can take out the power station just east of the garrison. This will leave it without sufficient power to use any of its energy based defenses.”

“No shields and no energy cannons,” Jessica stated.

“Precisely,” Tug confirmed.

“What about the airfield?” Cameron wondered. “There’s still, what, twenty or more interceptors they could scramble? That would put our ships one to one with theirs.”

“Not my favorite odds,” Major Prechitt stated, “but it is better than our last encounter.”

“I may be able to improve those odds somewhat,” Tug offered. “If I can jump into the atmosphere in a position to strike before they detect the Aurora’s arrival, I should be able to destroy most, if not all, of their ready-line.”

“The airbase has its own reactor,” Dumar warned. “It will only take them seconds to lock onto you with their own defenses, and your interceptor no longer has shields. A single hit from their energy cannons would obliterate you.”

“Then I will only take seconds to deliver my weapons, then jump away.”

“That is not possible,” Dumar objected. “It will take at least five to ten seconds for a Corinairan cruise missile to obtain a target lock. The Ta’Akar did not allow them to have more sophisticated weapons for this very reason.”

“All the more reason for us to take them down and get our hands on better weapons,” Jessica commented.

“Those turrets,” Major Prechitt wondered as he examined the images of the airfield’s defenses, “are they

mounted on elevated pedestals?"

"Yes, they are," Mister Dumar said. "There is a considerable amount of heat generated each time they fire. They elevate them to avoid scorching anyone or anything around them."

"And they are anti-aircraft batteries?" the major asked.

"Yes."

"Which means they don't shoot down, toward the ground, I mean," Major Prechitt stated.

"No, they do not," Dumar confirmed. "But they are only elevated by ten meters, twelve at the most."

"The land is pretty flat there," Major Prechitt commented. "Maybe you could approach eight meters above the surface, just under their firing lines."

Tug took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Perhaps, but I do not know that my reflexes are adequate for such a task," he admitted. "I am not the young man I once was."

"What about you," Nathan asked the major, "or one of your pilots?"

"None of us has ever even sat in that cockpit, let alone flown her, sir. It would be no problem in one of our interceptors using the auto-flight tied into the terrain following sensors. But since we can't jump in, we'd be taken down before we got anywhere near them."

"I don't suppose your interceptor has auto-flight and terrain following sensors," Nathan stated.

Tug shook his head. "It is designed for deep space patrol and intercepts, not for skimming along the surface of a planet." Tug's expression changed as an idea hit him. "There is one person who might be able to do it."

Nathan looked at Tug. "I know just who you mean. Start working up a mission plan. I'll break the news to him."

"The flight will require a crew of two," Tug reminded him.

"Then I'll talk to both of them," Nathan corrected himself. "Meanwhile, you guys get busy. We need to make this happen as soon as possible."

* * *

"You want us to what?" Loki asked.

Nathan was a bit surprised by Loki's response. He had expected some reluctance, but not this much. "It sounds a lot more dangerous than it really is," Nathan assured him, leaning forward on his desk.

"You have ridden with Josh before, right?" Loki asked. "That alone is dangerous enough."

"Tug believes Josh can handle it," Nathan stated.

"It's not like we haven't flown that low before, Loki," Josh insisted.

"That was in a harvester, Josh. It's a bit slower than an interceptor."

"No worries," Josh assured him. "I've got that bird dialed in."

"Don't forget; they'll be shooting at us this time," Loki reminded him.

"They were shooting at us last time."

"Those were snipers, Josh, not anti-aircraft plasma cannons. The slightest updraft could cause us to pop up into their line of fire. They'd smoke us with a single shot."

"Not gonna happen, Loki," Josh insisted. "That ship may not have auto-flight like the newer ships, but it can hold a course true as can be with no effort at all. We'll be fine."

"Look," Nathan interrupted, "I'm not going to order you to do this. I can get someone else to ride second seat."

"I'd really rather have Loki sitting behind me, sir," Josh insisted. "Can't you just order him to go?"

"No, I can't, Josh. Not this time. Not for something like this."

"I thought you said it wasn't as dangerous as it sounds," Loki said.

"I may have understated the risk a bit," Nathan admitted.

"Come on, Loki," Josh cajoled. "It'll be fun."

"You've always had a really strange idea of what fun is," Loki commented.

"Jumping in only eight meters off the deck, skimming the weeds at half the speed of sound and then launching a weapon before jumping out again... how is that not fun?"

Nathan smiled, laughing to himself. Josh did tend to have a twisted sense of adventure at times. He often wondered how the little guy had survived to reach adulthood. "I'll get someone else to ride shotgun," Nathan decided.

"Oh, come on, Loki," Josh pleaded.

"I never said I wouldn't do it," Loki reminded them both. "I don't like it, but I will do it."

"Thattaboy, Loki!" Josh exclaimed, slapping him on the back so hard it caused Loki to take a step forward.

"What choice did I have?" Loki said. "Without me there, you'd probably jump into the middle of a tavern or something."

"Thank you, Loki," Nathan stated. "Now I suggest the two of you get some chow and then head for flight ops. You're going to need to fly some practice runs across the surface of Corinair to prepare for your mission."

"How soon is this mission taking place?" Loki wondered.

"I suggest you eat fast," Nathan told him.

"All right then," Josh stated, "let's go get something to eat." The two of them began to exit the ready room. "Hey, do we get to order something special, like our last meal or something?"

Loki did not look amused. "Very funny, Josh. Very funny."

Nathan tapped his comm-panel on his desk. "CAG, Captain."

A moment later Major Prechitt answered. "*This is the CAG. Go ahead, sir.*"

"Get Tug's interceptor ready for launch. And pick out some terrain on Corinair that resembles that around the airfield on Ancot to use as a warm up. Your flight crew will be there in about thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan leaned back in his chair. Every shot he had fired until now had been in defense of his ship or his allies. Even though he had fired first in the previous battle, it had still been in the defense of the Darvano system that had just declared its freedom from the Ta'Akar Empire. Now, he would not be acting defensively. He was going on the offensive. He was going to start a war. What surprised him most was that it seemed too easy a thing for him to do.

* * *

"Commander," Nathan said.

Cameron nodded and pulled out a small drawer in the table to access controls for the command briefing room's tabletop holographic display system. The room darkened slightly as a holographic representation of a binary star system appeared in the air above the table. Commander Taylor began describing the details of the image, pointing to its components as she discussed them. "This is Mellabore, a binary star system that is analogous to the Alpha Centauri system back in the core. Its two stars are Savoy, a G-type primary similar to Sol, and Darvano which, while also a G-type star, is a bit smaller." Cameron manipulated the controls for the display, causing the image to zoom in on the primary star and forcing its secondary, Darvano, to slide out of the image. "Savoy has four rocky inner worlds and one massive gas-giant, Deikon. The fourth world, Ancot, is its only inhabited world."

"As most of you know," Nathan began, "the Karuzari intelligence cell on Savoy has informed us that the garrison and the nearby airfield are understaffed and not well defended."

"Why is that?" Lieutenant Waddell asked.

"The successes achieved by the Karuzari over the last decade have caused a significant strain on the empire's resources," Tug explained with obvious pride. "Savoy has

always been the most willing member of the empire, as the Takarans purchase the majority of their food from Savoy farms. It is one of the few worlds that has flourished under imperial rule.”

“Intelligence also reports that there are large caches of energy weapons, power packs, and other munitions stored at the garrison,” Nathan continued. “In addition, the airfield has approximately fifty interceptors, most configured for space intercepts and half of which are in storage and are not capable of immediate response.”

“Sir,” Lieutenant Waddell interrupted, “while I’m sure that those additional fighters would be most helpful, we have more than enough weapons to arm our own forces.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan agreed, “but doesn’t the empire restrict the effectiveness of your weaponry to some extent in order to ensure their own superiority?”

“That is correct,” Lieutenant Waddell admitted. “However, that is exactly why the Corinari train so hard. We believe that a well trained, well practiced soldier, even when armed with inferior weaponry, can still prevail. A point which I believe we demonstrated during the boarding of the Loranoi.”

The statement, although logical, struck Nathan as somewhat ironic, as his ship and her small crew were the exact opposite of the Corinari. Their ability to survive so far had been largely due to their jump drive. On the other hand, the rest of their weaponry was inferior to that of the Ta’Akar—perhaps even more so than that of the Corinari.

“Just imagine what your men could do with weapons of equal strength,” Jessica pointed out.

“The thought has crossed my mind,” the lieutenant assured her. “I’m just not sure the capture of such weapons is worth the risk at this time.”

“I would be inclined to agree with you, Lieutenant,” Nathan said, “if this were to be solely a surface engagement. However, those fighters, as well as whatever

ordnance that goes along with them, will be of considerable use in either a space battle or in support of a surface engagement. Therefore, I consider it to be worth the risk. And that requires going after both targets.”

“Assuming we are successful, do we even have the pilots?” the lieutenant asked.

“Of our original twenty-four deep space interceptors, sixteen of them are currently operational,” Major Prechitt explained. “Four were lost in battle, and four more are down for repairs. We also have at least thirty interceptors configured for orbital and atmospheric missions coming up from the surface as pilots report in. So far, we only have four pilots without spacecraft to fly, but we are hoping that more pilots will check in over the next few hours as the call to report continues to spread.”

“So we may end up with ships without pilots?” Lieutenant Waddell said.

“Maybe,” Nathan admitted, “but it’s better to have the extra ships, especially ones that are configured for deep space combat missions.”

“Indeed, sir,” Major Prechitt agreed.

“We are doing this, people,” Nathan reminded everyone, although his statement was aimed at Lieutenant Waddell more than any of the others in the briefing room. Had he been one of his original crew, he might have dressed the lieutenant down a bit. However, as he was a member of the Corinari, he would leave that decision to Major Prechitt, who was currently in command of all Corinari forces both on the Aurora and on the surface of Corinair. Nathan gestured to Commander Taylor to continue her presentation.

“The plan is to launch a simultaneous assault on five separate targets,” Cameron explained. “The first target is the comm-drone platform out here, just beyond the orbit of Deikon. Mister Tugwell and Mister Dumar will perform an EVA and sabotage the platform to prevent any outgoing communications to Ta’Akar command.

“Meanwhile, the Aurora will jump into high orbit over Ancot and take out her network of comm-sats. This will not only help prevent outgoing communications, but will also greatly hamper their communications on and above Ancot itself.” Cameron again played with the holographic display controls, causing the display to zoom in on the planet Ancot. The effect was much like falling rapidly from space, stopping only three hundred meters above the surface. In front of them now was an aerial view of the Ancot garrison, the airfield, and the power station situated between them.

“The second target is the primary power station that serves both the airfield and the garrison. Josh and Loki will jump into the atmosphere of Ancot as close to the surface as possible, dropping down to only a few meters above the surface in order to stay under the firing lines of the anti-aircraft plasma cannons that defend the power station and the airfield. They will launch a pair of cruise missiles at the power station, then turn toward the airfield and launch their remaining missiles at the airfield itself, targeting the roll-out tarmac in front of the ready hangars. If we are lucky, this may prevent some, if not all, of their fighters from launching while keeping them intact for our use once the airfield is under our control.”

“The Ta’Akar are not known for allowing equipment to fall into the hands of an attacking force,” Lieutenant Waddell pointed out.

“True,” Tug agreed, “but if we are aggressive enough and swift enough, we may catch them off guard.”

“The third target is the civilian power plant that serves as the backup for both facilities,” Cameron continued. “This will be the responsibility of the Karuzari operatives on Ancot. Word has it that this facility is also poorly guarded, as it is a civilian facility. The fourth and fifth targets are, of course, the airfield and the garrison themselves. Moments after the power has been taken out for both facilities, pairs of jump

shuttles will jump into the atmosphere above, dropping assault teams to charge the targets.”

“You can only cram about twenty or so troops into a shuttle,” Lieutenant Waddell said with a frown. “Forty or fifty guys is a rather small force with which to attack an installation.”

“Once the first wave has been delivered, the shuttles will jump back to a nearby rendezvous point to meet with the Aurora and reload a second wave of troops,” Cameron stated.

“How long will that take?”

“Approximately twenty minutes,” Cameron told the lieutenant. “The shuttles will continue to ferry troops as needed until the mission is complete.”

“That’s a long time to wait for reinforcements when you’re in a firefight,” Lieutenant Waddell commented.

“We could cut that time in half if we ran the op with a closed bay,” Cameron told Nathan.

“Close it up then,” Nathan agreed.

“Captain, we just started getting used to running flight ops with the deck open,” Major Prechitt objected.

“Can’t be helped, Major,” Nathan told him. “As I see it, this operation is primarily a ground operation. We need to configure ourselves to best support the ground assault. If they fail to succeed, the mission itself fails.”

“Yes, sir,” Major Prechitt said.

“Thank you, Captain,” Lieutenant Waddell said.

“We should be able to jump the shuttles down and up,” Nathan suggested. “With a little practice, we might be able to cut that time down even further.”

“My men would appreciate that, sir,” the lieutenant stated.

“Some fighters will undoubtedly get off the ground,” Major Prechitt warned.

“Of course,” Cameron agreed. “This is one of the reasons that the comm-sats were included in the target list.

With their monitoring systems down, we will be able to surprise them with a wave of our own fighters. After delivering their payloads, Josh and Loki will make a run for orbit, drawing the Takaran interceptors away from the surface.”

“Assuming all of this works, how are we going to hold the targets long enough to haul away their resources?” Jessica wondered. “If the people of Ancot have such a lucrative relationship with the empire, they may not like what we’re doing.”

“Give me a few hundred men, and at least four Kalibri gunships, and we’ll hold them for as long as you need, sir,” Lieutenant Waddell stated confidently.

Nathan noticed that it was the first time that the lieutenant had shown any confidence in the mission. “How are we going to get the gunships to the surface?” Lieutenant Waddell asked.

“They are designed to be collapsed to fit inside large cargo shuttles,” Major Prechitt stated. “They fit two to a shuttle.”

“Those shuttles don’t fit in our hangar deck,” Nathan pointed out.

“No, but they do fit on our flight apron,” Cameron told him. “They could be waiting in orbit over Corinair. We could land them on our deck and then jump them to orbit over Ancot in less than an hour.”

“Captain, this entire plan seems to hinge on one thing:” Jessica observed, “the assumption that we can jump into the atmosphere and do so at extremely low altitudes. Can that even be done?”

“We’re working on that right now,” Nathan assured her.

* * *

Loki had checked, double-checked, and triple-checked his jump plot calculations. Every time he ran them, he got the exact same plots. He even had Abby run them just as

many times back on the Aurora. Not only was she getting the same plots, she was also getting tired of running the same plot over and over.

"The numbers are perfect, Loki," Abby's voice promised over the comms.

"You're sure you've compensated for the planet's gravity?" Loki asked yet again.

"Gravity, magnetic field variances, wind speed, direction, and weather conditions at the jump target, even temperature and humidity."

"And there's no traffic in the arrival zone?"

"There's no air traffic in the atmosphere of Corinair within one thousand kilometers of the arrival zone," Abby promised. *"Major Prechitt's fighters are keeping an eye on the area, just to be safe."*

"We're only jumping a few thousand kilometers, Loki," Josh teased. "Can we jump already?"

"We're jumping into the atmosphere of a planet, Josh," Loki defended. "No one has ever done this before. So if you don't mind, I'd like to be sure everything is perfect."

"Everything *is* perfect," Josh insisted. "Except my navigator has the heebie jeebies."

"The what?"

"The heebie jeebies," Josh repeated.

"What the hell are the heebie jeebies?" Loki wondered.

"I'm not sure," Josh admitted. "I heard Lieutenant Commander Nash say it. I think it means you're nervous, or you feel like something bad is about to happen."

"In that case, yes, I have the heebie jeebies," Loki admitted. He took a deep breath, checking his instrumentation once again. Everything seemed to be in order.

"Loki?" Josh pleaded.

"All right, all right," Loki said, adjusting himself in his seat and tightening his harness. "Let's do it."

"Woo-hoo!" Josh cheered.

"Let me guess; Lieutenant Commander Taylor again?"

"Coming to jump course. Reducing speed to plot specifications."

"Falcon one, Talon two-one," the chase pilot's voice reminded him over the comms. *"Remember, you will be jumping into the atmosphere, so you will suddenly go from no drag on your airframe to a lot of drag. You are going to get shaken up pretty bad. If the calculations are off even in the slightest, the forces could crack your airframe and split you in half. If that happens, or you lose control of the aircraft and cannot jump back into space, do not wait to eject. Understood?"*

"You bet," Josh answered over the comms. He switched off his transmitter so that no one but Loki could hear him. "No way I'm ejecting."

"Do what you want," Loki insisted, "but if this ship breaks in two, I'm punching out with or without you."

"Just don't forget to start the turbines as soon as we finish the jump and there's air for them to breath," Josh told him.

"I know my job," Loki protested. "Just don't crash us into a mountain or something."

"At twenty thousand meters?"

"Assuming twenty thousand meters is where we end up," Loki muttered.

"Course and speed are good," Josh announced. "Killing main drive."

"Twenty seconds to jump point," Loki reported as he scanned his instruments. "Jump field emitters ready. Reactors at one hundred percent. Turbines are armed and ready to light. Ten seconds."

"Good luck, gentlemen," Talon two-one's pilot wished them over the comms.

Josh couldn't help but wonder how he had ended up here, on the far side of the Pentaurus cluster, more than twenty light years from the world on which he had been

born and raised. He thought about his parents and his sisters. They, just like most people on his homeworld, would probably never leave the continent on which they were born, let alone get out into space. But flying had always been Loki's dream as long as he could remember.

His parents never could have afforded to pay for his flight training, so he had taken a loan from a man of less than perfect repute. It had seemed logical enough at the time, but just as he finished his training, the Ta'Akar had restricted all interstellar traffic, allowing only Takaran ships to ply the interstellar routes. That had caused an immediate glut of qualified pilots seeking employment. An eager young pilot fresh out of flight school hadn't a chance of landing a job.

And so his loan had gone into default. Despite his promise to take any job he could find in order to pay his debtor back with interest, he was turned over to the judicial system, his servitude sold to a harvesting outfit on Haven in order to satisfy his debt.

Ironically, just after his arrival, the last in a string of fed up copilots had just quit after growing tired of Josh's reckless antics. With a large contract to fill and no qualified pilot's available on short notice, the timing couldn't have been more perfect. Loki found himself riding shotgun with Josh in the harvester, and his life as a pilot had finally begun. Of course, he hadn't expected it to lead to this.

"Ten seconds to jump point," Loki reported as he started the jump sequencer. "Sequencer running." Loki paused for a moment. "Hey, Josh, you ever miss flying the harvester back on Haven?"

"Uh, no."

"Yeah, me neither," Loki agreed. "Five seconds." One last glance across his instruments told Loki that everything was in order for the jump. "Four..."

Josh scanned his own instruments. Their course was perfect, heading on a line that would put them flying

parallel to the surface of Corinair at twenty thousand meters above the ground when they came out of their jump. Their current speed, although agonizingly slow for a space vessel, would be perfect for atmospheric flight. It was just enough to give them sufficient lift to glide long enough to fire their air-breathing jet turbines, but not so fast that it would rip their ship apart... or so they hoped.

“...Three...”

Josh lowered his auto-visor on his flight helmet and carefully placed his left hand on the throttle and his right hand on the flight control stick.

“...Two...”

He placed his right thumb on the button on the side of the flight control stick to switch from space mode to atmospheric mode.

“...One...”

It dawned on him that it would have been a good idea to write a script that would automatically switch flight modes and light the jet turbines for such a jump.

“...Jump.”

Through his darkened auto-visor, blue-white light quickly spread out from the emitters on his interceptor's hull, creating a glowing blue-white sheen that surrounded his tiny ship. Almost immediately, the glow brightened and became so overwhelming that he had to close his eyes tightly despite the automatic darkening of his helmet's auto-visor.

It was not their first jump, but usually, once the jump flash subsided, they would find themselves once again in the blackness of space. In many cases, the stars would not even appear to have changed. That was not the case this time.

The jump flash subsided and the cockpit was instantly filled with the bright sunlight of Corinair. At this high of an altitude, the sun was much more intense than when on the surface, and Josh was thankful that his auto-visor was down and working.

When the jump completed, there was a brief instant where everything was calm. His engines were all off and, for a split second, there seemed to be no sound of wind rushing past the outside of their canopy. A moment later, the sudden mounting of air pressures on the outside of their interceptor as it plowed through the atmosphere gave way to a thunderous boom. It felt like they had just crashed through a stone wall, and the interceptor began to shake more violently than he could ever remember.

"What the hell!" Loki exclaimed. "Did we hit something?"

"Start the turbines!" Josh screamed over the suit comms as he struggled to get control over the aircraft. He knew they were probably not experiencing any more turbulence than normal at the moment. It just seemed excessive compared to the normal smoothness of spaceflight.

"I already tried!" Loki answered. "They're not lighting! The sensors still think we're in space!"

"Recycle them!" Josh screamed. He could feel his nose wanting to dip in the drag of the atmosphere. "Shut them down completely and restart them!"

"I'm trying!"

"Make it fast!" Josh insisted. "I can't keep our nose up!"

"Falcon one, Talon two-five! You're losing airspeed rapidly!" someone advised over the comms. Josh glanced at his radar display, suddenly remembering that there were a few fighters out there keeping the area clear for their test jump. *"You need to add power,"* the voice advised calmly.

"Really?" Josh responded smartly. "Gee, thanks! I never would've thought of that!"

"Our jet turbines didn't light!" Loki reported to the pilot on the comms. "I'm recycling them now!"

His interceptor was a lifting body, but it required a lot of speed in order to experience any significant lift. Josh quickly scanned his options, trying to figure out what to do to avoid falling from the sky like a rock.

"It's no good!" Loki reported. "They still won't light!" Loki scanned his instrument panel, paying particular attention to the readouts coming from the jet-turbines. The ship was still bouncing around violently, forcing him to squint in order to keep his eyes on the readouts. "The oxygen sensors are not showing high enough levels to light!"

"We're at twenty thousand meters!" Josh exclaimed. "There should be plenty of oxygen at this altitude."

"Falcon one, Talon two-five. Pitch down and dive!" the pilot's voice called over the comms. *"You've got too much turbulence around the intakes. You need to dive to increase your airspeed and force air into the turbines so the sensor will read the oxygen levels!"*

Josh didn't need to be told twice and immediately pitched their nose down. It was easy enough, since the nose already wanted to point downward. He watched as his airspeed indicators began to rise. "Try again!" he started to call to Loki.

"I'm on it!" Loki answered. He was already watching the oxygen level indicators on the jet turbines. He had it figured out now. He had to wait until the air pressure rushing into the turbine intakes was high enough for the sensors to work properly.

Josh looked at his altimeter. They were already passing fifteen thousand meters and falling. "Anytime now, Loki."

"Just a few seconds more," he answered. He, too, had glanced at the airspeed indicator as well as their rate of descent. If he didn't get the turbines to light this time, there might not be enough time to recycle them a fourth time before they slammed into the surface of Corinair.

"Passing ten thousand, Loki!" Josh exclaimed.

"Lighting turbines!" Loki answered. He watched as the system cycled. Despite the turbulence, he could feel the turbines spinning up as the intake vents sprung open and allowed the oxygen rich air to rush in.

“Passing eight thousand!” Josh reported. He was trying to pull his nose up to decrease the angle of their dive, but without the jet turbines to compensate for the poor lifting capabilities of the interceptor, the aircraft’s response was sluggish at best.

“They’re lighting!” Loki exclaimed as the turbines began to whine.

“Passing six thousand meters!” Josh reported.

“Turbine power coming up!” Loki reported. “Stand by to throttle up!”

“Passing four, Loki!” Josh’s left hand had been on the throttles the entire time, but he knew that if he tried to apply power before the jet turbines were up to full power, they might stall the engines out. “Oh shit! Passing two!”

“THROTTLE UP!” Loki hollered. “NOW! NOW! NOW!”

Josh eased the throttles forward a bit. He didn’t want to apply full thrust, as they were already in a steep dive and too much power would make it even harder to level off. As he reached ten percent power on the throttles, he could already feel the interceptor becoming a little more responsive. Her nose started to come up slightly. “Ten percent power. Passing one thousand meters!” Josh reported.

“Pull up, Josh! Pull up!”

Josh continued to slide the throttle forward as his nose came up even more. “Twenty percent. Passing five hundred.”

Loki braced himself, sure that they were not going to make it and at any moment Josh would trigger the abort, causing them both to eject. “Anytime now, Josh,” Loki mumbled.

“I’m not ejecting,” Josh mumbled back. “Fifty percent power. Passing three hundred meters,” he added calmly.

“Then get our fucking nose up!” Loki demanded.

“Passing one fifty.”

Loki peeked out the side of the canopy at the ground. Although it appeared to be rushing under them far faster than it was rushing up toward them, they were obviously still falling.

"You're finally going to do it," Loki mumbled. "You're finally going to get us both killed."

"Seriously?" Josh asked, a bit shocked by his friend's lack of confidence. "Eighty percent power. Passing seventy five meters," Josh added calmly.

Loki suddenly noticed that the ground was not coming toward them as quickly as before. He looked at the flight dynamics displays on his own console. They were coming up on full throttles, their airspeed was nearly maxed out, and everything appeared to be completely normal. That's when he noticed something else... Josh was now cruising along at nearly full speed, only five meters above the ground, just as they had been practicing earlier on the training runs. "You son-of-a-bitch!" Loki exclaimed. "You meant to come in that hot the whole time!"

"Not the whole time," Josh admitted, "just the last twenty seconds or so."

"Not funny, Josh. Not funny at all."

"Oh come, on! That was very funny!" Josh laughed. "'You've finally done it, Josh. You're finally going to kill us,'" he mocked.

Loki brushed off the antics of his pilot and friend, instead returning to his instruments to perform his duties. After all, they were skimming the surface of the planet at top speed. "Aurora, Falcon one. Jump complete," Loki reported over the comms.

"*Falcon one, Aurora copies. Congratulations, gentlemen,*" the flight controller on the Aurora answered over the comms. "*Return to Aurora for debrief.*"

"Falcon one copies," Loki answered. "As soon as all this is over, I'm putting in for a vacation," he told Josh.

Josh smiled, pulled the nose up, and headed back into orbit to rendezvous with the Aurora. Abby would undoubtedly want to go over all the data from their jump. They would have to make some tweaks to the software so the air-breathing jet turbines would light more quickly, but he knew that all those things would be corrected in short order. Soon, they would be back out, jumping down into the atmosphere, and arriving progressively lower with each subsequent jump as they perfected the process. Soon after that, the jump shuttles would begin practicing the same maneuver, and that would give them all a huge tactical advantage against the Ta'Akar forces, not only on Ancot, but on Takara as well. Josh was no military strategist, but even he knew the importance of what they had just accomplished. Now they had a real chance.

Chapter Four

Lieutenant Waddell watched as the men disembarked from the most recent shuttle to roll into the main hangar bay. In order to ensure victory on Ancot, he would need a force of no less than five hundred highly trained Corinari troops. At last report, there were several thousand Corinari that had been accounted for. However, it was taking more time to gather them and get them organized than they had expected. Resources on the surface of Corinair continued to be taxed as the people struggled to cope with the most recent bombardment. Despite the fact that the battleship had only been able to make a single orbit around the planet, she had unleashed considerable punishment on the Corinairans, leveling key military installations, communications and transportation infrastructure, power generation, major industrial plants, and most of the central seats of government. Had it not been for the assistance being flown in from the lesser inhabited worlds of the Darvano system, the chaos below would still be much worse.

Lieutenant Waddell watched as his sergeants barked out instructions to the newly arriving Corinair troops, dividing them into four separate groups as they came off the shuttles. In order to speed things up, the shuttles were not even coming into the main hangar bay to unload. Instead, they would unload while still in the transfer airlock, their passengers entering through the smaller personnel hatchway built into the massive transfer airlock door. He could not imagine how much more difficult this would have been had the captain agreed to continue running with an open deck.

"Lieutenant!" a voice called from behind. Waddell spun around to see Lieutenant Commander Toral coming toward him, Toral having just stepped off the shuttle.

"Sir," Lieutenant Waddell responded, snapping a salute in perfect Corinari fashion.

"How many men do we have so far?" the lieutenant commander asked.

"Just under two hundred, sir."

"That's barely a single company," the lieutenant commander commented gruffly.

"Yes, sir."

"This is going to take longer than we thought," the lieutenant commander observed.

"There just aren't enough shuttles available, sir. Most of them are still evacuating the wounded civilians to hospitals outside of the primary impact areas."

"What about the jump shuttles that we will be using during the assault on Ancot?"

"They're practicing low altitude jump-ins, sir. The entire plan depends on it."

"Yes, it does," the lieutenant commander frowned. "A hell of a plan. Never in a million years would I have thought we would be doing this, and on Ancot of all places." Lieutenant Commander Toral looked around the hangar bay. The forward end of the hangar was packed with the

remaining interceptors that had been gathered and flown up from Corinair. In the middle of the hangar, the men were assembling into platoons as they disembarked from shuttles entering the rear of the hangar. "Listen, Waddell," he began as he turned to face him, "you and I are going to be company commanders."

"Sir, shouldn't the company commander be..."

"A major?" Lieutenant Commander Toral interrupted. "You see any of them standing around?"

"But I'm only a lieutenant, sir."

"And I'm only a lieutenant commander. Hell, I was only promoted a few weeks ago at that. Neither one of us is qualified to command a company. But what the hell? We've got a flyboy major as our commander-in-chief."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll break into two companies, alpha and bravo. We'll keep it simple for now. I'll command alpha, and you command bravo. Since we'll be attacking separate targets, we can probably do without a brigade commander, unless another lieutenant shows up before we jump off, in which case I'll put him in charge of alpha, and I'll take battalion command." The lieutenant commander checked the time on the data image being displayed on the inside of the eyeshield hanging off the front of his battle helmet. "How long until we get under way?"

"Captain Scott promised to wait until we had sufficient resources."

"He did? Well, I like him already," Toral joked. "What's your take on the mighty Na-Tan?"

"Hard to say, sir. I've only met him once, at the briefing today. He's young; that's for sure—younger than either of us. I get the feeling he wasn't expecting any of this anymore than the rest of us. Doesn't really seem like a captain, at least not like one you would expect."

"Well, he's taken out three heavily armed, imperial warships and saved our world twice over, so he's doing all

right in my book.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Waddell agreed as he followed the lieutenant commander toward the assembled men.

“I know that garrison,” he told the lieutenant as they walked. “I was stationed there during my time in the imperial forces. If they are unsuccessful in taking out all their power, we will be cut to pieces by their turrets long before we are close enough to set our shield disruptors.

“They plan to take out both the primary and secondary power sources,” Lieutenant Waddell reminded him.

“That’s all well and good assuming they have no backup reactors within the garrison itself.”

“Did they?”

“No, not when I was stationed there. But that was a decade ago.”

“A reactor powerful enough to run their perimeter shield would have shown up on scans,” Lieutenant Waddell pointed out, “even if it were powered down. Anything too small to be detected would barely be able to run a turret gun.”

“Even if they don’t have backup reactors, we still have to get inside their walls, and that’s not going to be easy, even without perimeter shields and turrets.” Lieutenant Commander Toral stopped a moment, turning back to Waddell. “We’re going to have to drop men inside the walls,” he told him.

Lieutenant Waddell saw the concerned look in Lieutenant Commander Toral’s eyes. “They’ll pick us off before we get down the ropes.”

“Maybe, maybe not. We’ll jump the first group in front, draw their attention to one side. They’ll believe we intend to breach the front gates. It is the weakest point in their walls.”

“And therefore the most heavily defended.”

“We give them just enough time to move most of their men toward the front, then we jump in above the back half of the garrison and drop the men in the rear yard. If we

jump in low enough, only the back two turrets will be able to fire on us. The shuttle can take a few hits."

"The men cannot," Lieutenant Waddell said.

"We'll lose some, I admit, but most will make it down in one piece. It would help if we had some air support to keep those turrets occupied."

"It would take air cover at least ten minutes to make it down from orbit," Waddell told him.

"It will be over by then," the lieutenant commander stated, "one way or another."

* * *

Nathan was awakened by the door buzzer. For a moment, he wasn't sure what was going on. He had only leaned back on the couch in his quarters for what seemed like a moment. The buzzer sounded again, and he quickly rose and headed for the door, finding himself somewhat surprised that he had actually been asleep. He had been unable to fall asleep quickly for several weeks now. He opened the door still rubbing his eyes. "Come in, Cam."

Cameron seemed surprised as well when he opened the door. "How did you know it was me?"

"It had to be either you, Jessica, or Vlad," he explained, walking back to his couch. "Jessica would've rung the buzzer twice, and Vlad would have just walked in."

"Then I'm the only one of us with any manners."

"Pretty much," he answered as he plopped back down on the couch. "What time is it?"

"Twenty-one thirty hours, ship time."

"Holy crap. You mean I've been asleep for..."

"About seven hours, sir," she finished for him, "assuming you went to sleep as soon as you sat down."

"I think I might have," he admitted. "Why'd you let me sleep so long? We have a mission..."

"Relax, Nathan. I pushed the mission clock back ten hours at the request of Lieutenant Commander Toral."

“Who?”

“He’s the ranking ground pounder for the Corinari right now. Apparently he was stationed at the Ancot garrison during his forced service to the empire. He has been sharing everything he knows with Jessica and Dumar. Anyway, he wanted the attack on the garrison to happen when the sun is rising behind the garrison. He says it will put the sun in the eyes of the turret gunners when they will be dropping troops inside the walls. He also said that it will be an hour or so before the morning shift change, so the guards will be tired, and staffing will be at a minimum. I also thought the jumper pilots could use the extra practice, as well as a little stand-down time, before we go. Besides, you needed the sleep as well.”

“How could you tell?”

“It’s my job.”

“It’s your job to take care of the ship, Cam, not me.”

“You *are* the ship, Nathan.” She got a blank look from him in return. “You still don’t get it, do you? Why do you think we announce you coming and going as ‘Aurora arriving’ or ‘Aurora departing’? It’s because you *are* the ship. You *are* the Aurora. The ship serves as the captain’s instrument to do his will. If you say attack, we attack. If you say retreat, we retreat. If you say roll over and play dead...”

“I get it.”

“My job is to make sure the ship and her crew are able to do what you ask when you ask it. That includes making sure the captain is able to make coherent decisions.”

“That must be the hard part,” he joked.

“You can say that again,” she responded.

“So where’s Vlad?” he asked. “Shouldn’t he and Jessica be showing up about now?”

“Vladimir is busy trying to fix as many things as possible before we go on the attack,” Cameron explained. “Jessica is going over the battle plans with the platoon commanders along with Tug, Dumar, and Major Prechitt.”

"What do you think of Dumar?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know what to think of him, to be honest. It's pretty obvious that he is loyal to Tug and that Tug trusts him completely."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"He's also been giving us some pretty good intel, as well as some great insight into the ways of the Ta'Akar." Cameron paused a moment and took a breath. "I'm pretty sure Jessica trusts him as well."

"Jessica doesn't trust anyone."

"She trusts Dumar enough to take his advice repeatedly."

"Yeah. You know, something happened the first time we went to Savoy, something between the three of them. She never told me the whole story."

"Well, whoever he is, she's keeping pretty close tabs on him. He's become the right-hand man for both her and Tug."

"I wonder how Jalea will feel about that when she returns."

"Is she returning?" Cameron wondered.

"I would assume so. Probably after the attack on Savoy."

"Tug is out in a jumper now, communicating the attack timing to her. He should be back within the hour."

"Well," Nathan said as he stretched, "since it appears we're not going to have our customary pre-mission party in the captain's quarters this time around, I think I'll wash up and get some chow before we go on the offensive. We wouldn't want to let the Aurora's blood sugar get too low," he added with a smile.

* * *

"Jump complete," the navigator, Mister Riley, reported. "We are now just outside the Savoy system."

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Comms, signal flight ops, green deck."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

As he listened to Naralena convey his orders to the flight operations center above the Aurora's main hangar deck, he contemplated his first officer's words to him an hour earlier. *You are the Aurora*. He knew that to be true, as he had learned this in the academy as well. It had just never really hit him until this moment. He was about to launch an unprovoked attack on an enemy position, thus declaring war on an entire empire. He had fired without first being fired on once before, but that had been in the defense of the Darvano system. In addition, it had been at the request of the leaders of that system, who had transmitted their declaration of independence from the empire only moments before. There had been no doubt in anyone's mind at the time; had he not taken action, the entire surface of Corinair would have been destroyed and her population all but exterminated.

Savoy, however, was a different story. They posed no threat to the Darvano system nor the Alliance itself. They just happened to be nearby and have resources that the Alliance desperately needed. It could be argued that, because of its close proximity, the Savoy system was a strategic threat, but they had no way to know for sure that the empire would even come after the Darvano system once they learned of their secession from the empire. For all he knew, once the Ta'Akar learned of the true nature of the threat posed by the Aurora and her jump drive technology, they could very well choose to accept the Darvano system's departure from their realm.

Nathan thought about his mission. His responsibility, and indeed his last orders from his captain before command was handed to him, were to get the ship and the crew back to Earth. Captain Roberts firmly believed that the Aurora and her jump drive were the key to the Earth's defense against the Jung. After several opportunities to test the jump drive in the course of battle, Nathan too had no doubts.

Everything else aside, his primary responsibility was to get the Aurora home.

Unfortunately, it had all gone too far. Nathan knew that history was likely to judge his decisions harshly. In fact, he would not be surprised if he was stripped of his commission upon his return to Earth. In his desire to get home as quickly as possible, he had inadvertently instigated an interstellar war to which he had committed not only the resources of his ship and crew, but also the resources of his homeworld over a thousand light years away.

"Captain, jumpers one through five have all cleared the flight apron and are moving into position to jump," Jessica reported from the tactical station directly behind Nathan. "Falcon one is also in position."

"Sound general quarters, Lieutenant Commander," Nathan ordered. "We jump in five minutes."

Tug dropped his helmet visor and activated the seal, locking himself within his suit. A quick glance at his visor's data display in the upper, right-hand corner told him that his EVA suit was properly sealed and ready to go. He turned to Dumar who was similarly suited, giving him a thumbs up signal, which Dumar promptly returned. "Comm check," he announced.

"Loud and clear," Dumar responded.

"Are you ready for this, my friend?" Tug asked.

"I've been ready for this for more than thirty years," Dumar answered, smiling uncharacteristically.

"You may depressurize the ship," Tug instructed the shuttle's flight crew. "We are ready to go back here."

"Understood," the shuttle's copilot responded, turning to look back from the cockpit at the front of the shuttle. *"Good luck, gentlemen,"* he added as he closed the cockpit hatch, sealing them off from the cargo compartment where Tug

and Dumar were suited up and ready to begin their EVA. "*Depressurizing cargo bay,*" the copilot reported.

Tug picked up the tool pack and attached it to the front abdominal plate on his suit. He and Dumar would each carry such a pack, which contained all the tools necessary for their part of the mission against the Ta'Akar forces in the Savoy system. As soon as they were satisfied that their tool packs were secure, they made their way to the rear cargo hatch and waited.

"Time to jump: four minutes," the copilot reported.

Josh noticed that Loki was quieter than usual. Loki was not exactly the talkative type under normal circumstances, but when stressed, he usually became quite chatty. Josh knew that it was Loki's way of relieving stress. Josh's way was to simply curse or scream and yell like a madman. "You're kind of quiet back there, Loki. You nervous or something?"

"No, actually, I'm surprisingly calm, considering," Loki admitted.

"Considering we're about to jump into enemy territory only a few meters off the deck at near supersonic speeds?"

"I'm not too worried about that," Loki said. "I've got the jump thing all worked out, thanks to all those practice jumps to Corinair."

"Maybe it's the fact that we're going to fire a couple of missiles along the way?" Josh wondered.

"Actually, now that you mention it, it does seem a little crazy that someone gave *you* the ability to fire missiles at something."

"Yeah, it's pretty slick, huh?"

"Not the word I would have chosen," Loki answered as he scanned his instruments. "Jump drive is ready. Reactors are at full power. Course and speed for the first jump are good. Three minutes to the first jump point."

Lieutenant Commander Toral stood calmly at the front of the cargo compartment of the small jump-enabled shuttle. It was not designed to be a combat troop carrier. It was a civilian general purpose utility shuttle that had been outfitted with a jump drive. Along with four other shuttles, it had been given the first mini-jump drives produced by Corinairan scientists using data provided by the Aurora in order to create an early warning network. At the time that it had been implemented, most of the Corinari command felt it was a waste of time. However, at this particular moment, the Lieutenant Commander was sure it had been quite the opposite.

The shuttle was barely able to accommodate twenty men. In fact, in order to fit them all in, they had been forced to remove both of the bench seats along the sides of the compartment. It had taken two such shuttles to transport his platoon. In addition, the environmental systems of the small shuttles had not been designed to support so many humans. They had calculated that the shuttles were only good for about an hour of flight time before their life support systems would become overwhelmed and the carbon dioxide within the ships would begin to rise to dangerous levels. Fortunately for them, they would not be inside the shuttles for that long.

Lieutenant Commander Toral watched his men with fascination. They were an odd lot, a mixture of young and old, of those that had served the empire and those that had not. They had been scavenged from the survivors found on Corinair, and most of them were from different units. Few of them had ever trained together, and most had never seen actual combat.

Neither had the lieutenant commander. He had trained as hard as any Corinari. It was their way. However, he too lacked any actual combat experience. His service in the

empire had been in the very garrison they were about to attack. However, the people of Ancot had been of no threat to the forces stationed there, and his entire imperial career had been considerably less eventful than most.

He was bound and determined to prove himself on this day. By some twist of fate, he found himself in command of two companies of Corinari. They were about to strike the first blows in the defense of their homeworld, and the fact that some of the men they would be fighting had been born and raised on the same soil as them did not matter. He and his men were fighting for the very freedom of their world, for its very survival. He was determined not to disappoint his men. One thing he was sure of; soon, they would all be combat veterans.

“Time to jump: two minutes,” the copilot reported over the comms.

Lieutenant Waddell stood at the front of his jump enabled shuttle, the same as Lieutenant Commander Toral did two shuttles over. The two shuttles containing the first of the two platoons that formed his company were tasked with capturing the airfield after the jump interceptor destroyed the primary reactor that powered the base’s plasma cannons. He knew the base was not heavily guarded, especially against such an assault, as it expected to be able to repel any incoming aircraft using its gun emplacements. The lack of power, combined with their element of surprise, would undoubtedly give them enough of an advantage to result in a successful capture. However, he could not help but wonder exactly how many of them would die this night. The imperial soldiers guarding the airbase would fight, if not out of loyalty to their empire then for fear of death at the hands of an enemy. He wondered how many of the soldiers they were about to face were from

his homeworld. He was certain that, if given the chance, each of them would gladly lay down his arms.

Unfortunately, there would be no time to offer such surrender. In order to ensure their victory, they had to move swiftly and assuredly, just as they had always trained to do. He only prayed that he would not find his only son, who had been drafted by the empire only a year ago, at the opposing end of his weapon.

"One minute to first jump point," the copilot's voice announced.

* * *

"You are certain the targeting data is correct?" Jalea asked Tomon.

Her fellow Karuzari gave her a stern look. "You saw the plans yourself."

"But you are certain they are up to date?" she clarified. "Many lives depend on our success in the next few minutes."

"The source of the information is a member of the facility maintenance staff. He has access to all such information. He was more than willing to share the information with Rena."

"I'm sure he was," Jalea observed.

"You believe he could be feeding her false information?"

"We will soon see." Jalea looked at her watch. "Tell all teams to stand by to fire."

"How will you know when it is time?" Tomon wondered.

Jalea looked up at the morning sky. The morning sun was just beginning to peek out from behind the horizon, painting the sky a subtle amber and pink. The sky above was still a deep blue with a few of the brightest stars still shining, including that of the nearby Darvano system only a light year away. In minutes, the sun would begin to ascend rapidly into the sky, illuminating the landscape and Ancot city beyond in brilliant daylight.

“We will know,” she assured him as she scanned the sky. A brilliant blue-white flash appeared high above them, moving along an apparent orbital path. The flash disappeared only a moment later. Jalea immediately turned her attention to the opposite horizon from the morning sun. So low to the ground was the next flash that, if she had not known where to look, it would have gone unnoticed. “Now,” she ordered through her comm-unit. “All teams, fire.”

Tomon quickly stood from behind his cover, revealing himself in the morning sun to the workers inside the fence line as they reported for duty. He raised his missile launcher up onto his shoulder, placing the rubber hood around the display screen up against his face. A moment later, the display indicated that the missile had received its targeting instructions and was ready to fire.

Tomon depressed the firing trigger, holding it down firmly until the missile left the launcher balanced on his shoulder and streaked up into the sky on a trail of fire and smoke. Only a few seconds later, he felt a sudden pain, almost a burning sensation, pierce his chest. He found he could no longer breathe and fell backward, the missile launcher tumbling forward away from him as he fell.

Jalea stayed down, hidden from the view of the guards inside the facility as she watched Tomon’s missile reach the apex of its flight. Its nose pitched over and downward, as it and three other missiles fired from three other locations around the facility dove into their targets below. It took only a few seconds for them to reach the main reactor plant cluster at the center of the facility. The resulting explosion knocked Jalea backward, falling down beside Tomon.

Jalea turned to look at her second in command. He was still alive, but his breathing was severely labored, and his still smoldering chest wound was oozing a considerable amount of blood. “Tomon, we must go,” she urged. She could hear the sound of guards scrambling to react. There

were several already running toward them; of that, she was sure.

"Go," Tomon insisted. "I am finished."

Her first instinct was to grab him and drag him to safety, but the man that had pretended to be her husband to maintain their cover on Ancot for the past two months was twice her weight.

"You know what must be done," he gasped between labored breaths.

Jalea reached out, her hand touching his face. Tomon grabbed her wrist. "Were we successful?"

"Yes, Tomon. The power plant has been destroyed."

Tomon swallowed hard. "I am ready."

Jalea pulled out her knife and quickly slit his throat from ear to ear. His eyes widened in pain for a moment, after which his body went limp. She wiped the blood from her knife on his smoldering jacket, replaced it in the sheath on her belt, and ran off into the woods.

* * *

The interceptor shook violently, throwing Josh and Loki forward against their flight harnesses. Thankfully, a Corinari flight tech had overheard their complaints during their debrief and had improvised additional padding into the restraint system. While jumping from space into the atmosphere of a planet still felt like slamming into a brick wall, at least it no longer bruised their shoulders.

"Jump complete," Loki reported.

"No shit," Josh answered as he pitched the nose down. "Altitude: five hundred meters. Pitching down."

"Spinning up jet turbines," Loki reported.

"Passing four hundred," Josh reported. The interceptor bounced and shook as it continued to drop, nose down, through the atmosphere of Ancot.

"Two seconds to turbine ignition," Loki reported calmly. During their practice jumps into the atmosphere of Corinair,

they had managed to jump in as low as five hundred meters and still have enough time to get their jet turbines to light before crashing into the ground. A quick tweak of the code by one of the Corinairan software engineers allowed the turbines to start more quickly. It had been suggested that an on board oxidant be added in order to light the turbines before the jump, but there had not been enough time to design, install, and test such a device. Loki had filed the idea on his 'must do' list for later.

"Passing three hundred," Josh announced.

"Turbines on line," Loki reported.

Josh brought the throttles up gradually, his thrust ports pointing primarily downward to provide the lift he was currently missing. "Twenty-five percent power. Passing two hundred."

"Activating target acquisition system," Loki reported. Despite the fact that Josh did not yet have full control over their aircraft and that they were still falling toward the surface of Ancot, Loki didn't want to waste any time getting their missiles launched. The less time they had to skirt the surface, the better.

"Fifty percent power. Passing one fifty."

"Target acquired." Loki frowned. "I'm reading power surges at the target. I think they're powering up their defensive turrets."

"They don't waste any time, do they? Seventy-five percent power. Passing one hundred."

"Target acquired. Transferring targeting data to missiles," Loki announced. Loki peeked outside through the canopy. The ground below was still coming up toward them, but he could feel the ship beginning to stabilize as sufficient lift began to develop under the jump interceptor's lifting body.

"Full power. Dropping down to the deck," Josh said. He pushed the nose down a bit more and brought the ship just

above the ground. "Altitude: eight meters. Speed: eight hundred KPH."

Loki checked his displays. Both missiles were ready, and on board targeting systems were locked on the reactor plant just outside the airfield that provided energy for both the airfield and the nearby garrison. "Missiles locked and ready. You're cleared to fire."

"Firing missiles," Josh reported. He could feel the ship shudder slightly as the missile bay on the bottom of his interceptor slid open and dropped the first missile. The missile fell quickly away and immediately lit its own engine, speeding forward ahead of the interceptor a mere ten meters above the ground.

"One away," Loki reported. "Missile track is good."

A few seconds later, the second missile dropped from their missile bay, lit its engine, and also streaked forward away from them in pursuit of the first missile.

"Two away." Loki reported as the missile bay closed.

A brilliant streak of reddish-orange light streaked over them no more than a meter away. Josh thought he could feel the heat of the succession of bolts of plasma energy that followed the first one. "They're firing. Going lower."

"Uh, you sure you want to do that, Josh?" Loki asked.

"Better than melting our helmets."

Loki peeked outside at the ground rushing beneath them. He gulped and immediately decided that it was a bad idea to look outside.

"How are those missile tracks doing?" Josh asked.

"Missile one impact in five seconds. Missile two in ten."

"Let's hope those Corinari techs programmed those things correctly," Josh said as the plasma bolts continued to stream over their heads.

The first missile angled downward just before it reached the power transfer lines that ran from the reactor plant to the airfield and its plasma cannon turrets. It plowed into the

ground a second later, driving under the lines before it finally exploded. Dirt, rocks, and pieces of the power transfer lines erupted upward and downrange from the point of impact, showering the area with debris.

“Holy shit!” Josh exclaimed. The bolts of red-orange plasma streaking over their heads suddenly disappeared, and Josh noticed that all the lights on the airfield flickered out.

“Target one destroyed,” Loki reported. A feeling of satisfaction swept over him. However, he wasn’t sure if it was because they had destroyed their first target, or if it was because the deadly plasma energy bolts had stopped streaking closely over their heads. “Missile two impact in four seconds.”

The second missile suddenly began to climb, turning sharply upward until it was almost vertical. Its engines automatically throttled as it arced over, going into a dive. The missile’s engines came back up to full power, and the missile slammed into the hardened bunker that contained the primary reactor plant for both bases. The missile’s special casing allowed it to plow through the layers of the bunker with ease, finally exploding within the bunker.

“Impact,” Loki reported.

“Hell yeah!” Josh exclaimed as he witnessed the second explosion.

“Second target destroyed,” Loki announced.

“Buzzing the airfield,” Josh stated.

“You can pull up a little first.”

“Killjoy.”

Loki looked out the window to his right as they began to climb slightly. He could see the cloud of smoke and fire erupting from Ancot city’s main power facility, followed by

the lights of the city also going dark. "Looks like Jalea's team was successful."

"There are fighters rolling out down there," Josh reported as they streaked over the airbase.

Loki looked down at his radar. "I've got six fighters rolling out. Estimate they'll be in the air in fifteen seconds."

"Let's give them something to chase," Josh suggested as he rolled the interceptor over onto its left side and began to turn hard to port.

"Aurora, Falcon one," Loki reported over the comms. "Phase one complete; targets destroyed. Both facilities are dark. Proceeding to phase two."

Josh looked through the canopy ahead of them as he flew back over the airfield. "Three are already up. They're turning to engage us."

"Climb, Josh," Loki insisted. "We're not fighter jocks, you know."

"No argument there, my friend," Josh agreed as he pulled back on his flight control stick and brought the throttles back up to full power. The nose of the interceptor pulled up sharply as the force of their jet turbines pushed them back into their seats. "Headed for orbit."

"Jump complete," the Aurora's navigator, Mister Riley, reported. "We're in position over Ancot."

"CIC reports phase one complete," Naralena announced. "Both facilities are dark."

"Targets locked," Jessica reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Fire missiles," Nathan ordered.

"Missiles away," Jessica reported as she pressed the firing button.

Nathan watched the forward view screen as four missiles streaked away from them on their way to the targets, the next four comm-sats along their orbit over Ancot.

"Fifteen seconds to first missile impact," Jessica reported.

"Give me the tactical display," Nathan requested.

Without a word, a rectangle containing the tactical display superimposed itself over the exterior view of space currently being displayed on the main view screen that wrapped around and above the forward half of the bridge. Nathan watched as the four missile tracks grew in length on their way to their respective targets. In order to capture the comm-drones, they would have to prevent the Ta'Akar forces below from sending out any messages, such as launch orders or self-destruct commands. Nathan knew that, even with the comm-sats down, the garrison could still send a signal to the comm-drone platform from the surface. However, it would be another ten minutes until the rotation of Ancot would allow them to send a direct signal.

"First target destroyed," Jessica reported. "Second missile impact in five seconds."

Nathan continued to watch the tactical display as the second missile closed in on the next comm-sat in line. He knew that, with each comm-sat they destroyed, they were buying Tug and Dumar a few more minutes with which to attempt to override the comm platform's security systems and take control of all the comm-drones stored there.

"Second target destroyed," Jessica reported. "Still no signs of defensive measures."

"Seems odd, doesn't it?" Nathan wondered. "No defenses for such a crucial piece of infrastructure?"

"I guess Tug wasn't kidding when he said the empire was secure in its dominance of this system."

"I guess not."

"Target three destroyed," Jessica reported.

"Captain, I have multiple contacts coming up from the surface of Ancot," Ensign Yosef reported. "Total of seven tracks. Transferring to tactical."

"First one is Josh and Loki," Jessica reported. "The other six are Takaran fighters."

"The airfield is coming into range on the horizon, Captain," Ensign Yosef reported. "I show six more fighters launching."

"That's twelve," Nathan observed.

"Fourth target destroyed," Jessica reported. "Next available target in four minutes."

"Where are the first six fighters headed?" Nathan asked.

"First six are following Falcon one," Jessica reported. "They're headed right for us."

"And the other six?"

"Too early to tell," Ensign Yosef advised. "They've only just launched and haven't come to a new heading yet."

"They've got to see us up here by now," Jessica stated.

"The fighters that are chasing Josh and Loki might," Nathan agreed, "but their base is in the dark."

"If those shuttles jump in too soon, the second wave of fighters will turn back and tear them apart," Jessica warned.

"Let's hope they don't jump the gun," Nathan said grimly.

"Jump complete," the shuttle's copilot announced. Tug opened his eyes and raised his protective visor. In order to save time, the shuttle had jumped with the rear loading hatch opened and the cargo ramp deployed.

"I see it," Tug announced. They had jumped in close to the Savoy comm-drone platform parked at Ancot's second gravity point. The balance of gravitational forces at this particular spot in space allowed the platform to maintain its position in relation to both Ancot and the Savoy star with minimal resource expenditure.

In order to avoid being fired upon by the comm platform's automated defensive systems, they had to jump

in relatively close. Regardless, they were still at least fifty meters from the platform.

"Exiting the ship," Tug stated as he and Dumar broke into a sloppy jog along the cargo ramp toward the comm-drone platform floating in the distance. Despite the lower artificial gravity being generated by the shuttle's rear cargo ramp, the weight of the EVA suits made running about as clumsy an exercise as Tug could ever remember. It took them only five bounding strides to reach the end of the ramp, from which they both leapt into the inky blackness of space beyond, sending themselves hurling toward the comm-drone platform. "We are aloft."

Travon was floating beside and slightly ahead of Tug as they coasted toward the comm-drone platform when he noticed movement. *"Jumper one, Dumar. Their defensive systems are powering up. One of their gun turrets is rotating to take aim. You must jump immediately."*

"Not until you reach the platform," the copilot insisted over the comms. *"We're still too close to you, and we have no idea what effect a jump in such close proximity will have on you."*

"You have only seconds before the turret fires," Tug warned. "Jump now! That's an order!"

The turret continued rotation outward as Tug and Dumar continued coasting toward the platform. Tug could only assume that the platform's defensive system either did not see them because they were too small or did not interpret them as a direct threat. Then again, as the turret was taking aim directly between himself and Dumar, it could very well be targeting them.

The turret stopped its rotation and adjusted the angle of its twin barrels. A moment later, it opened fire, sending amber bursts of energy spewing forth, the brilliant bolts of energy streaking between them. There was a flash of light from behind them, causing them both to instinctively close

their eyes. The turret fired a total of four times before ceasing its attack and rotating back into its safe position.

"Jumper one, Tug. Do you copy?" Tug could not see behind him, and he had no time to turn around as he and Dumar were rapidly approaching the platform. "Jumper one!"

"*Get ready,*" Dumar warned. He was the first to hit. There rate of approach was more severe than he had realized. He struck the side of the platform hard, nearly knocking the wind out of him. His tool pouch broke free from his torso, bouncing off the side of the platform. He grabbed onto the side of the platform, scrambling to find something to hold onto as his body toppled over, heading over the top of the platform. As he slid along the upper side, he finally managed to seize some conduit, stopping his forward motion. His tool pouch, however, continued onward over the top of the platform and out into space.

Tug was the next to hit, toppling over in similar fashion. He was surprised they had not impacted the platform directly in its side, as upon their exit from the shuttle, it appeared that they were on course for her midsection. He too reached out, attempting to grab onto something, anything, but his body twisted as he toppled, and he found himself facing away from the platform as he passed over the top. Just as he was sure he was going to tumble off into space, his motion stopped with a sudden jerk.

"*Gotcha!*" Dumar grunted. There was a brief pause as Dumar steadied himself, afraid to do anything but hold onto his friend with all his might until his forward momentum had subsided. "*Twist to your right,*" Dumar ordered. "*Reach out and grab my shoulder with your right hand!*"

Tug struggled to twist to his right as instructed, his right arm straining and flailing about as he tried to find his friend's shoulder. After several attempts, he finally grabbed hold and twisted himself around to face Dumar, who pulled him down toward the platform. Tug swung his feet down

under him, placed them firmly onto the platform's sidewall, and activated his mag-boots.

"That was close," Tug sighed. "Thank you."

"I was reaching for your tools," Dumar joked. "Mine are gone."

Tug looked back to where the shuttle had been only a minute ago. He scanned the area visually from side to side and up and down. "No signs of debris. They must have jumped away just in time."

"We must begin immediately," Dumar reminded him. "Time is short."

"Tug looked at the mission clock displayed inside the upper left corner of his visor. "We have less than ten minutes before the rotation of Ancot will bring the garrison into line of sight with this platform," Tug added as he began to make his way along the top of the platform toward its opposite end.

"How did we end up so off target?" Dumar wondered. "When we jumped, I was certain we were headed toward the center of the platform."

"Perhaps the shuttle's close proximity jump caused a change in our trajectory."

"Is that even possible?"

"I do not know," Tug admitted as they continued along the top of the platform. "There is so much about this jump drive that even the people of Earth do not yet understand."

"Tug, Jumper one. We are two light minutes out from you. Standing by just outside the platform's defensive perimeter. Comm-lag is two minutes. Let us know when you are ready for pickup."

"I guess that answers that question," Dumar said.

"Jumper one, Tug. We have made it to the platform and are making our way forward to the interface console. Will advise."

Lieutenant Commander Toral's shuttle jumped in just outside the rear of the Ancot garrison, no more than thirty meters above the surface. As the small shuttle had no weapons, as soon as she came out of her jump, she immediately spun around to face her aft end toward the garrison, dropping her rear cargo ramp down so the troops in the rear of the cargo compartment could fire on the turrets. As the shuttle slid backward toward the garrison, two of the Corinari troops stepped out onto the cargo ramp which, in its current position, served as a platform of sorts. Two more troopers grabbed them from behind to ensure they would not tumble off the ramp as it bounced and swayed on the shuttle's approach to the garrison. The two men raised their launchers and simultaneously unleashed a pair of missiles at the turrets. The missiles closed the distance on the targets in short order, the turrets exploding and sending debris in all directions. The turrets had never made a move, as they had no power being fed to them. Perhaps they never would have moved. Perhaps the garrison commander had never felt the need for additional power sources for the base's primary defensive systems. Either way, the Corinari had no intention of finding out.

Having performed their task, the two shooters tossed their expended launchers over the side and pulled out their energy rifles as the shuttle continued to slide backward toward the garrison. From the far side of the garrison, they could see the narrow beams of energy being exchanged by the defenders and the Corinari attacking from the front of the base. Ta'Akar troops began to spill out into the yard on the backside of the garrison, their weapons raising toward the shuttle as it approached. The two shooters still kneeling on the ramp opened fire, cutting down the imperial troops that were spilling out into the rear courtyard.

The shuttle quickly slid over the rear of the garrison and beyond the rear courtyard, taking fire along its underside from the few imperial troops that had been smart enough to

remain inside until the weapons fire raining down from the shuttle above them had ceased. The impacts were few and passed quickly as the shuttle slid in over the building.

Two more Corinari tossed thick ropes over either side of the ramp, the top ends of the ropes secured to the inside ceiling of the shuttle, the opposite end dragging slightly on the rooftop directly below. The men who had tossed the ropes over the sides were the first to go, sliding quickly down the ropes onto the rooftop below and immediately raising their weapons to open fire on the two doorways at the opposite end of the roof from which imperial troops had begun to emerge. One by one, the other eighteen men followed, including Lieutenant Commander Toral. The crew chief in the back of the shuttle released the ropes as the shuttle accelerated forward and away from the rooftop firefight, its cargo ramp closing up as it departed. Seconds later, the shuttle's cargo ramp slammed shut, and it disappeared in a blinding flash of blue-white light as it jumped away.

"I already have three dead and two wounded, sir," the corporal informed his commander as soon as his boots hit the rooftop. "There's no way we're getting through those two doorways, sir!"

"Fire teams one and two, engage the hostiles at the doorways! Teams three and four, rope it over the sides. We'll cut them off from below! We've got ten minutes to secure this end of the garrison so we can land the next wave inside the perimeter. If we don't put some serious pressure on these fuckers, they'll cut our guys out front to pieces! Now move!"

As the colorful yet deadly energy weapons fire continued to fly back and forth across the rooftop, men tossed ropes over the sides of the building. Without hesitation, men went down the ropes on either side to the ground below,

scurrying into the cover of the building as soon as their boots hit the dirt.

Lieutenant Commander Toral watched his combat information display on the inside of his visor as his men below moved into the building and began working their way up the stairs under the imperial troops with which he and the others on the rooftop were still exchanging fire. He felt a sudden wave of heat against his right leg, followed by the weight of his corporal as he fell against the lieutenant commander, a gaping hole burnt through the left half of the man's head and face. The dead corporal's helmet had done nothing to protect him, having melted instantly away when struck by the enemy's overwhelmingly powerful energy weapons. For a split second, he wondered how tough those simple utility shuttles they were using as jump ships must have been to have withstood even a few hits from such weapons.

The Lieutenant took cover behind a piece of rooftop machinery along with the last two surviving Corinari still fighting on the rooftop. They continued to take turns popping up and firing on the two open doorways from where the enemy fire was originating. If they allowed any of the Ta'Akar troops to get out onto the rooftop, they wouldn't stand a chance.

"We're moving up the stairs now," a Corinari voice announced over the lieutenant commander's comm-set.

"Move it!" Toral ordered. "We're down to three up here!" The sergeant next to him popped up and fired several more shots into each of the doorways, killing at least two imperial troops before he took a hit in the shoulder and was sent tumbling backwards. "Sergeant!" Toral yelled, but the man wasn't moving. Muffled energy weapons shots were heard, and the shots coming from the doorways suddenly stopped. "Now! Forward!" he ordered the wide-eyed trooper squatting next to him.

The two of them jumped out from behind their grossly inadequate cover and charged forward screaming, their weapons firing madly at the doorways. Ta'Akar troops came pouring out of both doorways, being driven out into the open by the Corinari troops charging up from beneath them. They stumbled out directly into the unyielding fire of the lieutenant commander, and the last remaining troopers were cut down without mercy. A few of them managed to get shots off as they exited the doorway onto the open rooftop, but their wild attempts were way off target, all except for one.

Lieutenant Commander Toral felt a sudden burning pain in his lower left abdomen. His left leg suddenly crumpled under him, sending him falling to his left. Ironically, as he fell, another wild shot whizzed past his right ear, passing so close he could feel the heat of the energy blast as it just missed him. The pain in his abdomen exploded into new heights as he struck the rooftop, screaming out in agony. His ears rang and his vision blurred. Then everything went silent. He could see the amber and pink sky of the morning dawn above him. The shooting had stopped, and the trooper's face was hovering over him, frantically asking him something as his eyes closed and his world went dark.

The two jumpers carrying B company's first platoon jumped in on either side of the airfield just inside the perimeter fence. They had jumped in only a few meters off the ground and had descended, dropping their aft ramps to the dirt as they touched down. The men quickly unloaded from the shuttles, running down the ramps and fanning out on either side. Within thirty seconds, both shuttles were unloaded and were lifting off, their cargo ramps closing as they sped away, jumping back up into the safety of orbit above Ancot.

Lieutenant Waddell and his platoon advanced quickly and without resistance toward the cluster of buildings at the airfield for nearly a full minute before enemy troops emerged from between the buildings and opened fire on them. He listened to the firing patterns coming from the imperial defenders. They were erratic, uncoordinated. "Those are not imperial regulars," he said to the corporal next to him. "They're probably flight line or maintenance personnel."

"Bravo one, Bravo two!" the voice called over the comm-set.

"Go for Bravo one," Lieutenant Waddell answered.

"We're taking heavy fire, sir! They've got us pinned down in the open. I've lost two men already!"

"Are they regular troops? Are their firing patterns regular and coordinated?"

"Hell yes!" the voice reported. *"These are imperial regulars, sir. I'd bet my life on it! Request instructions!"*

Lieutenant Waddell looked around. Sporadic fire continued to splash about them from in between the distant buildings. He looked at the morning sky behind him, hoping that his jumper was still in the area, but it was long gone.

"Bravo two, is your jumper still in the area?"

"No, sir, they already jumped out!"

"Then dig in and hold your ground, two. One out." Lieutenant Waddell turned to his corporal. "Pass the word. Odds use grenade launchers. We launch ear-busters on my go."

"Yes, sir."

"Orbital altitude in ten seconds," Josh announced.

"They'll be in firing range in twenty seconds," Loki warned.

"How far to the Aurora?"

"At least a minute," Loki answered.

"Shit! Where are they?"

"I've got them!" Loki announced. "Twenty kilometers ahead, just inside the upper atmosphere."

"Falcon one, Talon one. Ten seconds out, just below you hiding in the ionization layer. Continue on present course, and do not break until we engage the hostiles."

"Copy that, Talon one," Loki responded. "Glad to see you. Continuing on course." Loki switched off the transmit button and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God that's over with. Now let's get back to the ship and let the fighters handle the dirty work, shall we?"

"What's the matter, Loki?" Josh teased. "You don't like flying with me anymore?"

"No, not really."

"Jumpers two and three are landing now," the flight boss reported to Cameron. "Three and four just jumped in and will be landing in a few minutes."

"Let's have them stand off until the first two are cycling out," Cameron stated. "That deck isn't set up to be a troop loading facility. I don't want to tie it up with too much confusion at this point."

"Yes, sir."

"Command, Bravo one! One and two are pinned down in the fields. Two cannot advance. One can move a little using sonics, but we're going to run out of them before we make our objective. Request close-air support."

"Sir, Talon one reports they have engaged the first six enemy fighters pursuing Falcon one. They have already taken out three enemy fighters and are engaged with the other three."

"How far out is the second wave of fighters?" Cameron asked.

"Two minutes, sir."

"Launch Talons seven through twelve to intercept the next wave."

"Yes, sir."

"How long will it take us to get air support down to Bravo company?"

"Ten minutes," the flight boss answered.

"That's too long," Cameron decided. "Get me Falcon one."

"Yes, sir," the comm-operator next to her answered.

"What are you thinking?" the flight boss asked.

"Go ahead, sir," the comm-operator told her.

"Falcon one, XO."

"Go ahead, Commander," Loki answered.

"Do you have guns in that ship?"

"Uh... yes, sir. We've got a rail gun in our nose, but I'm afraid to ask why."

"I'm not!" Josh added over the comms.

"Bravo one and two need air support back at the airfield, and it will take us ten minutes to get a flight down to them."

"Well, we can jump back down there in less than a minute, sir," Loki stated over the comms, *"but you do realize we are not trained for this sort of thing, right?"*

"Now's your chance to show us what you've got, Josh," Cameron said, knowing full well that Josh would never let an opportunity like this get away.

"Command, Talon one," Major Prechitt called over the comms. *"I can send three of my flight down to the surface. We can handle the last three on our own."*

Commander Taylor looked at the flight boss.

"I can do this, Commander!" Josh pleaded.

"It will still take Prechitt's birds at least eight minutes to get down there," the flight boss admitted.

"Negative, Talon one," Commander Taylor ordered. "Stay on task."

"Talon one copies."

Cameron took a deep breath. "Oh my God, I cannot believe I am doing this," she muttered.

"Neither can I," the flight boss agreed.

"Falcon one, XO. Jump back to the airfield. Contact Bravo one on arrival and provide air support as needed."

"Falcon one copies!" Josh answered exuberantly.

"Don't blow up everything, Josh," Cameron reminded him. "We need most of the stuff down there."

"Yes, ma'am," Josh answered. *"Don't blow up the pretty planes."*

Eight sonic grenades detonated along the row of buildings on Bravo one's side of the airfield. Just as they had done the last two times, the disorienting effects of the grenades allowed Lieutenant Waddell and his men to advance a bit more before the men defending the airfield would regain their senses and open fire again. The first time, they had lost another two men when the defenders continued firing. The second time, the lieutenant had anticipated their recovery time and had ordered everyone to hit the deck just before the enemy regained their senses and continued their barrage of energy weapons fire.

He was down to twelve men, however, and the sonic grenade trick would only work one last time as they were nearly out of grenades. If they didn't get air support very soon, they would have to rush the buildings on the next sonic grenade blast and hope for the best. Unfortunately, by the lieutenant's estimates, rushing them had a high probability of failure.

"One, two! They're rolling four more fighters out. If they get in the air, we're screwed!"

"Shit!" Lieutenant Waddell cursed. "Command, Bravo two! We've got birds lifting off over here! We need that air support now!"

"Bravo two, Command. Support inbound, arriving momentarily," command reported over the comms.

A flash of light appeared to their right out beyond the distant fence line, followed by a thunderous triple-clap as the jump interceptor broke the sound barrier upon its arrival.

The interceptor streaked over the airfield at only ten meters above the ground traveling at twice the speed of sound for Ancot. Just after it arrived, it banked slightly to the right, barely missing the two fighters that were hovering only four meters above the ground as they began their launch cycle. The shock wave created by the interceptor as it rushed past the fighters caused one of them to yaw uncontrollably to port, smashing into the one beside it. Both the fighters fell to the ground and exploded. The other two fighters that had been rolling out just behind the first two crashed into the exploding hulks and were also destroyed.

"Holy crap!" Bravo two called over the comms. *"That guy just took out four fighters without firing a single shot!"*

"What?" Lieutenant Waddell asked.

"He just buzzed the birds that were taking off at twice the speed of sound, I think. I lost track of the sonic booms. He knocked all four of them out!"

"Who the hell was it?"

"It's the jump interceptor! Falcon one!"

"Falcon one, Bravo one!" Lieutenant Waddell called over the comms.

"I thought you said you weren't going to blow up any pretty planes?" Loki said as the interceptor pulled up and away from the airfield.

"Uh... I may have come in a little too fast," Josh admitted as he eased the nose up and backed off on the throttles to allow their airspeed to bleed off as they climbed.

"Bravo one, go for Falcon one," Loki answered.

"Falcon one, we need rail gun fire along the backside of the buildings on the south side of the airfield. Come in from the east and fire over our heads, twenty degree down angle."

"Copy that, Bravo one. We'll come in from the east and lay down twenty degree fire in thirty seconds," Loki answered. "You heard that, I'm assuming," he said to Josh.

"Coming about," Josh answered as he banked hard and continued to climb, bringing the ship around.

"Everyone get ready," Lieutenant Waddell yelled out. "As soon as our air support opens up, we charge their position."

"Bravo one, Falcon one. Inbound on target. Coming in slow. Will hover and fire at twenty down until you call us off. Firing position in ten seconds."

Lieutenant Waddell looked behind him. Squinting hard, he could barely make out the interceptor against the morning sun as it closed in on their position. He seriously doubted that the enemy even realized they were about to die.

"Five seconds," Josh reported. "Speed down to one meter per second."

"Targets acquired through thermal imaging," Loki announced. "I count twenty warm targets, and I've locked them all."

"In position and hovering," Josh announced.

"Engaging," Loki announced, depressing the fire button.

Josh looked out the front of the canopy as rail gun fire erupted from their nose turret. Sparks flew from the sides of the buildings in the distance as the thousands of metal slugs spewing out of their rail guns struck the building at various angles, some of them piercing the metal while others ricocheted off. Bodies fell as blood and tissue splattered in

all directions along the building. "Oh fuck!" he gasped. "Jesus! Cease fire, Loki! Cease fire!"

Loki pressed another button to disengage the rail guns, and they fell silent. He looked at his targeting display. All twenty of the thermal images that represented the Ta'Akar defenders were gone. Instead, there were at least three times that many targets, although they were smaller, irregularly shaped, and a little less warm than the original targets. "Original targets are gone," he reported.

"Yeah, I'll say," Josh agreed. "You cut them to pieces."

"Falcon one, Bravo one. Nice shooting. We've got it from here. Go to the opposite side of the airfield and contact Bravo two for instructions."

"Falcon one copies," Loki responded calmly. It had all been just like one of the many video games he and Josh had played together over the years.

Josh moved the flight control stick, twisting it to the right and increasing his forward airspeed. The nose of the ship swung to starboard in response and began to climb slightly. "Do yourself a favor, Loki," Josh warned. "Don't look down right now."

"What?"

"Trust me on this," Josh insisted.

Loki had never heard such a serious tone of voice from Josh. He chose to heed his friend's warning.

"Commander," the flight boss began, "the second wave of fighters are turning back. I believe they have figured out our ploy and are returning to protect their base."

"I guess Falcon one attracted a bit of attention," she mused. "How long until our second flight intercepts them?"

"Now that they are returning to their base, it will take a few minutes more than we originally estimated to reach them. However, they should still overtake them before they make it back to the airfield."

“Nevertheless, as soon as Falcon one finishes up down there, have him jump out, just in case. Shooting at ground targets armed with rifles is one thing. Air-to-air combat is quite another.”

“Yes, sir, it is indeed.”

“Sir, Jumpers two and three have departed. Four and five are touching down now.”

“Good,” Cameron said. “We need to get reinforcements down to that airfield as soon as possible.”

The next time Lieutenant Commander Toral opened his eyes, he was being carried into the back of a jump shuttle by four members of his platoon. His abdomen still hurt, but the pain had somehow become bearable. His head was swimming, and his vision kept slipping out of focus. He was covered with something as well. “What’s going on?” he asked in a raspy, strained voice. He realized that his mouth felt quite dry.

“Don’t move, sir,” he heard a voice say.

The lieutenant commander ignored him, turning his head to his left, toward the sound of the voice. He could make out the image of a field medic, a bag of reddish-brown fluid hanging from his shoulder with long tubing coming out of the bottom of the bag.

“You’ve got a bad belly wound, sir,” the medic told him. “You lost a lot of blood. We’re taking you back to the ship for emergency surgery.”

The lieutenant commander realized why his belly didn’t hurt as much. The tubing with the reddish-brown fluid running through it was attached to him. His vision was blurry, and his head was swimming because of the pain medication the medic had undoubtedly given him. He rolled his head to the right, looking up at the man carrying him on that side. “What’s our status?” The man looked down at him as they continued up the ramp and into the shuttle. He was

a sergeant. Lieutenant Commander Toral recognized him. He was in charge of the second wave.

"The garrison is secured, sir," the sergeant assured him.

They reached their position inside the shuttle and placed him on the deck along with the other wounded. As the men carrying him were about to leave, the lieutenant commander grabbed the sergeant's arm with his free hand. "How many?"

"Twenty-eight dead, thirty-two wounded, sir," the sergeant answered before pulling away to return to his duties.

The sergeant's words hit the lieutenant commander like a hard slap in the face. "Twenty-eight men," he mumbled.

"Go to sleep, sir," the medic instructed as he pushed another dose of medication into the lieutenant commander's IV line. "When you wake up, you'll be in recovery."

As he fought to hold back the tears for his dead and wounded, he could feel the shuttle begin to lift off. Once again, his vision failed him, and everything went black. As his consciousness faded into darkness, he could hear someone ask "Is he going to make it?" The medic replied "Doubtful."

* * *

Two Kalibri gunships flew overhead as they patrolled the area of the airfield, keeping an eye out for any combatants that might have escaped capture and could be hiding in the open fields nearby.

"Give me the numbers," Lieutenant Waddell ordered the sergeant as they walked across the tarmac toward a waiting Kalibri airship.

"Sixty-five dead, twenty-eight from A company, thirty-seven from B. Thirty-two wounded from A, and twelve from B for a total of forty-four wounded. Total strength of A

company is one ninety. B company is down to one hundred forty-one."

"That means we're down by more than a quarter of our overall strength."

"Yes, sir. They did not want to give up that airfield."

"No they did not," Lieutenant Waddell agreed. "How's Toral?"

"Pretty bad, I hear. He's in surgery right now. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Don't say it."

"Sorry, sir, but that makes you our battalion commander."

"I told you not to say it." They continued walking across the tarmac as another cargo shuttle touched down nearby, sending up a lot of dust and small debris. "How long until all our resources are on the ground?" the lieutenant asked.

"The Aurora just jumped back to Darvano again," the sergeant explained. "She'll be back in about thirty minutes with the next batch of shuttles. I believe she's got one more trip after that, and then we're set. We should be able to start hauling stuff out of here at that point."

"Any trouble from the locals yet?"

"None yet, but I'm pretty sure they're still afraid to approach. It has only been an hour since the last shots were fired. I hear they're pretty upset about their power being out, though."

"I'll suggest that the Aurora add some generators to her next jump. That should help." Lieutenant Waddell sat down on the edge of the open passenger compartment of the Kalibri airship. "I'm heading over to the garrison for now. You're in command here until I return." Another gunship buzzed over their heads. "And keep those birds on the lookout. If anyone so much as throws a rock in our direction, take them out."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, following with a salute.

The lieutenant returned the salute as the Kalibri airship leapt up off the tarmac and turned toward the garrison, only a few kilometers away. It had been an ugly morning for them all, but they had achieved their objectives with what most would consider an acceptable number of losses. His men had fought well, exactly as he had expected. The Corinari were obsessive about their training. When forced to protect your world with minimal weapons, training was all you had. Every shot had to count; no single movement could be wasted. Despite the superior weaponry of the Ta'Akar, the Corinari had still managed to rule the day. He only hoped the weapons they recovered would be worth the lives that were lost in their capture.

* * *

"How did we do?" Nathan asked as he entered the command briefing room.

"It looks like we captured thirty-eight fighters," Cameron reported. "Twenty-five of them are configured as deep space interceptors and will be easily adapted for operations from our flight deck. Major Prechitt tells me they are even more advanced than the ones the Corinari are currently flying. He will need some training time to get his pilots accustomed to the features of these fighters. He plans to put his best pilots in the cockpits of the captured fighters."

"That's great," Nathan exclaimed. "So we got another thirteen orbital interceptors as well?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about ordnance for them?"

"The Takaran fighters primarily use plasma cannons. However, we did acquire about fifty ship-busters and a few dozen air-to-surface rocket pods along with several hundred rockets. That should come in handy in support of any ground actions."

"What about weapons?" Nathan asked Jessica.

“Lieutenant Waddell seems pleased enough with what he recovered from the garrison’s armory. The energy weapons the Ta’Akar forces currently use are significantly more powerful than that used by the Corinari. Medical reports several cases where direct blasts penetrated the Corinairan armor like butter. The Corinari that attacked the garrison said it took about a dozen shots to bring down properly armored imperial troops with their weapons. Waddell conducted an impromptu field test of the Takaran body armor using Takaran weapons. As suspected, they worked a lot better.”

“How many weapons are we talking about?”

“Enough to arm about a thousand men. We also recovered enough Takaran body armor to equip at least half that many.”

“I’d say that’s a pretty good start,” Nathan surmised.

“Waddell seems to think so. However, he was also quick to point out that it is probably about a tenth of what would be needed to invade the Takaran homeworld.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Nathan said as he turned to Tug.

“How many comm-drones did you and Mister Dumar recover?”

“Six standard comm-drones,” Tug reported.

“That’s it?” Nathan wondered. “I thought those platforms held about twenty drones.”

“That is true,” Tug agreed. “The rest of them were probably in transit. Ancot is a financially active world which requires regular communication with the banks on Takara.”

“I guess six is better than zero,” Nathan commented.

“I should point out, Captain,” Cameron interrupted, “that there are also a lot of other resources to be gathered. Medical supplies, parts, intelligence... all of these things will be of use to us. Even the bunks they use in their dormitories could be of use to us if we decide to carry a large invasion force on board. These things should not be overlooked.”

"It may be impossible to properly inventory and haul all of that up to the ship, Commander," Tug warned.

"We're already getting reports from the surface about clashes with the people of Ancot, sir," Jessica warned. "Seems they're not happy about what the Corinairans have done. I think they're afraid the Ta'Akar will come and punish them for the actions of the Corinari."

"Have they taken any aggressive actions?" Nathan asked.

"Nothing more than throwing a few rocks and bottles and the like. I'm pretty sure the people of this world are not armed."

"You would be sadly mistaken," Tug warned. "Do not believe for a moment that just because you do not see them carrying guns in the streets that they are not armed. Jalea and her team found it quite easy to purchase any type of weapon they desired on Ancot, including shoulder-launched guided missiles."

"Good to know," Jessica stated.

"Sir, regardless of how many Corinari we put on the surface, we cannot hope to hold back the entire population of a planet should they choose to take action."

"Indeed," Tug agreed. "It appears that, in attacking the Ta'Akar forces on Ancot, we have inadvertently stirred up a lotee's nest."

Nathan stared at Tug. "What the hell is a lotee?"

"A small, flying insect," Tug explained. "Harmless for the most part until angered. They live in large ball-shaped nests that hang from tree branches. Their bite is quite painful."

"I think he's saying we stirred up a hornet's nest, sir," Cameron pointed out to him.

"Yeah, I got that."

"Sir, the sooner we get the Corinari off of Ancot, the better," Jessica reminded him. "If the people of Ancot start to riot, we could lose them all."

"We need time to haul everything up to the ship," Cameron reminded Jessica.

"How much time are we talking about?" Nathan asked.

"At least a day or two," Cameron guessed.

"We're going to need to bring in reinforcements from Corinair," Jessica resigned.

"I've got a better idea," Nathan told them.

* * *

Being closer to Ancot city, the garrison received the brunt of the attention from the angry citizens of Ancot. Several thousand of them now gathered outside the walls of the garrison, occasionally hurling stones, bottles, and even the occasional burning ball of cloth that had been soaked in flammable liquids. The guards on the wall had been instructed to avoid firing at the crowd unless it was necessary to defend the garrison against a breach by the people of Ancot.

The airfield had been a different story. Located on the opposite side of the garrison from Ancot city and lying several kilometers out into the country side, fewer protesters had been willing to travel so far from the safety of their homes. Also, the airfield's fence line was considerably far away from the base itself, making it impossible for anyone to hurl something into the middle of the compound from beyond the perimeter. That, combined with the constant patrols by the Kalibri gunships, made the airfield a much safe environment.

Despite the repeatedly broadcast announcements by the Corinari, and the explanation that their conflict was with the Ta'Akar and not the people of Ancot, the angry shouts and hurling of debris continued. Occasionally, a shot or two rang out from the crowd, but as none of them had even come close to injuring one of the Corinari on the walls, Lieutenant Waddell had managed to keep his men from taking any

aggressive actions against the Ancotans gathered outside the garrison's walls.

Lieutenant Waddell watched the scene outside from the central control room of the garrison. Now that portable reactors had been setup to provide power, the garrison's basic systems were operational once again. He would've liked to have produced enough power to operate his weapons turrets as well as the garrison's defensive shields, but most of the few generators the people of Corinair could spare had been sent to provide limited power for Ancot city, which had been without power for more than twelve hours now.

"How are things at the airfield?" the lieutenant asked the corporal as he entered the room.

"All of the aircraft have been flown up to the Aurora, sir. They shuttled down pilots and mechanics to fire the birds up and fly them out. They're working on getting the ordnance out as well, but it's a much slower process to move rockets than rifles and body armor."

"How about our armory?"

"It's just about empty, sir. A few more shuttle loads should do it. Then we start on the medical supplies in the infirmary."

"Lieutenant!" one of the technicians in the control room called out. "I think you'd better take a look at this."

Lieutenant Waddell rolled his chair over next to the technician to get a better look at his monitor. The view was from the cameras mounted farther down the approach road that led from Ancot city to the garrison. There were a thousand more people marching up the road, and most of them were armed.

"Corporal, call the Aurora," the lieutenant ordered. "Tell them we've got trouble coming our way."

A minute later, the lieutenant was standing on the wall above the main gate to the garrison. Through his visual

scanner, he could see the armed mob coming toward them.

"How long, sir?" the sergeant next to him asked.

"No more than ten minutes, I suspect."

"What are we going to do, sir?"

"We call in all six gunships. Have them hold the incoming mob at the last bend."

"They can't fire into them, can they?"

"If they are fired upon, then yes, they can."

"Sir, those are civilians down there," the sergeant protested.

"I'm aware of that," Lieutenant Waddell stated. "But they are also civilians with guns, Sergeant, and our orders are to hold this garrison until ordered to withdraw. If that means we have to mow down a bunch of angry farmers, then so be it." The lieutenant turned to face the sergeant, staring him straight in the eye. "No one, I mean no one, is to fire without my express orders. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the sergeant responded.

"Good. Now you pass that on to the men. One slip of a trigger finger and this could turn real ugly, real fast."

"*Lieutenant, Comms,*" the voice called over his comm-set.

"Go ahead."

"*Sir, the Aurora just arrived. She's dispatched four cargo shuttles carrying four hundred men.*"

The lieutenant looked at the sergeant. "Where the hell did they find four hundred men so quickly?"

"Beg your pardon, sir," the sergeant began, "but they could send four thousand men, and that still might not be enough. I mean, what if this is just the tip of the iceberg? What if the whole damn planet decides to come at us? We can't kill them all, sir. That would make us no better than the Ta'Akar."

The lieutenant sighed as the gunships flew overhead. The sergeant was right, but he was being left with few

alternatives. One way or another, something momentous was about to happen.

Kalibri gunships swooped low over the approaching mob, but not one of them raised their weapons to fire. They knew that drawing the fire of the circling gunships prior to their arrival at the garrison would only serve to ensure their own deaths. Instead, they continued to march forward. When one of the gunships parked itself in a hover in the middle of the road, its turret tracking ominously from left to right, they simply went around it. The only way the gunships would stop them would be to open fire on them. If the statements being broadcast by the Corinairans holding the garrison were truthful, the gunships would not fire first. So far, their assumptions were proving to be correct.

As the approaching mob reached the garrison, the crowd encircling the base quickly tripled in size. Soon, the unruly mob had grown to nearly ten thousand, and more were spotted making their way up the road from Ancot city. Only now, the number of weapons in the crowd had nearly doubled, and the words being shouted at the Corinari on the garrison walls had become angrier and more impassioned. The crowd had reached an ignition point, and the slightest spark would set it ablaze.

Lieutenant Waddell watched as the crowd continued to swell in ranks. He felt as if the sheer force of the crowd could break through the garrison's walls at any moment. "How long until those shuttles get here?" he asked over his comm-set.

"Ancot garrison, shuttle two-four. Time to touch down: one minute."

"Shuttle two-four, Waddell. What's your compliment?"

"Four hundred men, sir. Captain Scott orders you and your men to stand fast. You are ordered to hold your fire unless you receive direct orders to fire by Captain Scott himself. Please confirm."

“Waddell confirms. Standing fast. Will not fire without direct orders from Captain Scott.” The lieutenant turned to the sergeant, who looked just as confused as he was. “What the hell is going on here?”

The crowd’s attention suddenly began to turn away from the angry protestations directed at the garrison and toward the approaching shuttles in the sky behind them. Within seconds, the entire crowd was looking in the direction of the approaching shuttles.

“There,” the sergeant announced, pointing toward the incoming shuttles.

Lieutenant Waddell looked up and spotted the shuttles. They were approaching in a slow, standard approach pattern, not in the aggressive style one might expect of a ship landing assault troops. “What the hell are they doing?”

The shuttles came in low and slow, crossing over the distant tree line, one following the other. As they approached the garrison, they formed a half circle, each of their aft ends facing the center of the circle. They descended slowly down into the crowd as they reluctantly yielded. Finally, the shuttles touched down, still spread out in a half circle whose open end faced both the majority of the crowd and the garrison, their aft ends each about ten meters apart.

As their engines spun down and the dust kicked up by their landing settled, the crowd began to slowly work their way back in toward the shuttles, forming a circle around them. Those with weapons held them high, expecting armored troops to come storming out of the backs of the shuttles at any moment. Those without guns either hid behind those that carried them or moved to the back of the crowd.

Lieutenant Waddell watched from the garrison wall above as the crowd became more confident and moved closer to the half circle of shuttles. Their engines were now completely silent, and the dust had been carried away by

the gentle evening breeze. Had it not been for the dire threat that lay before them, it might have been considered a beautiful scene with the setting Savoy sun in the distant sky behind them. "What the hell are they waiting for?"

The crowd screamed as a brilliant flash of blue-white light appeared not more than ten meters above them, sending them scattering in all directions. A split second later, the flash had subsided, leaving only a single, black interceptor hovering powerfully in the air above them, her jet turbines screaming to keep her aloft. The people of Ancot looked on in both fear and amazement. Never had they seen a ship appear out of thin air. Had they not seen it with their own eyes, they would not have thought it possible.

The black interceptor began to descend, and once again the crowd fell back. The interceptor made its way down to the ground briskly, bouncing slightly on its landing gear as its turbines spun down.

As the dust subsided, the cockpit of the intercept tilted up and open, revealing two men, both wearing flight helmets. At the same time, the side hatch on one of the shuttles opened, and Naralena stepped cautiously out, followed by four armed Corinari guards in full combat armor and carrying heavy automatic energy weapons. The five of them ascended the shuttles side ladder, climbing up to the top side of the shuttle in order to see out across the crowd. A technician from inside the shuttle tossed a portable loudspeaker up to one of the guards on top of the shuttle, who in turn handed it to Naralena.

Nathan removed his flight helmet and set it on the forward console before he climbed down from the front seat of the interceptor, Tug climbing down from the second seat immediately after him. They, too, made their way to the top of the shuttle to stand next to Naralena and the Corinari guards. Nathan straightened his uniform jacket as he turned to Naralena.

"You ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"People of Ancot," he began, "my name is Nathan Scott." Naralena began translating his words into the native language of Ancot. Most of them spoke Takaran as well, as they were all willing subjects of the empire. However, on the off chance that some of them might not, Nathan had felt it best to have Naralena translate his words into their native language. He could not afford any misunderstandings.

"I am the captain of the United Earth Ship Aurora," he continued. "Many of you may know me by the name given by your Legend of Origins." Nathan paused for dramatic effect, an instinctive skill he had somehow picked up from his father, the senator. "I am Na-Tan."

An audible murmur rose from the crowd. He could not understand what they were saying, but he could tell his statement was having the desired effect. "We have traveled over a thousand light years from the Earth, the birthplace of all humanity, to free the people of the Pentaurus cluster from the oppression of the Ta'Akar. We have joined forces with the Corinari and others in order to defeat the empire and restore freedom to all. We ask you to join us in our fight against those that seek to exploit you and your sons."

A man yelled something from the crowd. Nathan leaned in toward Naralena.

"He asks why you have attacked us."

"Our aggression was aimed only at the Ta'Akar forces that occupy your world. We regret the destruction of your power generation facility, but we promise to restore all power before we depart." Another challenge was cast out from the crowd.

"They ask what you will do if they refuse to join us."

"We will not force you to do anything," Nathan stated. "If you do not wish to join us, we will depart, taking only that which belongs to the Ta'Akar."

"He asks who will buy their crops and their livestock if the empire is defeated."

“The Takarans will not stop eating just because they are no longer an empire,” he told them. “They will still need the products that you sell to survive. But you will be able to charge a fair price instead of accepting whatever price they are willing to pay you.” More disagreeable remarks sounded from the crowd.

“They are worried that the Ta’Akar will return and will assume that they did this to their forces. They fear they will be punished in the same way that the people of Taroa were punished.”

“The Ta’Akar fleet is down to only a few, and they are spread out all over the cluster,” Nathan assured them. “We have already defeated six of their ships, including the mighty Campaglia in the battle of Taroa.”

“They say they are but simple farmers. They cannot hope to fight the forces of the empire.”

“Do they not take your sons from you every year?” Nathan asked. “How many of those that are taken are ever returned to you? How many more of your sons will you stand by and watch disappear into the hands of the empire? We are not asking you to pick up a weapon and march off into battle. We are only asking for your support in our cause, in your cause. We are only asking you to take back what is rightfully yours. We are only asking you to take back your future, your destiny, your self-respect. No man or woman should be forced to bend to the will of another simply because they are afraid of punishment. We are asking you to take back your freedom.”

Another angry shout was heard. “He asks what you will give them in return.” Nathan smiled. “I was wondering when we were going to get to that,” he said to her. “People of Ancot, I give you back your sons!”

The rear cargo ramps of all four shuttles began to lower simultaneously to the ground, kicking up a bit of dust as they struck the dirt. One by one, slowly at first, the young men that had been taken from Ancot just over a month ago

came down the ramps. The crowd had become silent as the young men gathered in the middle of them, searching about for familiar faces. They knew they were home. They had been told on the way down that they were being released back to their families. They had also been told the truth about what was really going on in the Darvano system, back on the Earth, and all throughout the empire. Nathan knew that the only way the people of Ancot would learn and accept the truth was if they heard it from their own sons.

A woman screamed out her sons name as she pushed her way through the crowd. The young man she was calling to looked toward the sound of his mother's voice, spotting her just as she came bursting out of the crowd into the open and rushed forward to grab her boy. His father was right behind her, and he grabbed them both up in his arms. A moment later, there was another scream, followed by several others, both from men and women, fathers and mothers alike. Within minutes the air of distrust and suspicion that had plagued the angry mob had been replaced with a feeling of joyous celebration as the sons of Ancot were reunited with their families. Those whose parents were not amongst the crowd were hugged and welcomed by anyone in the crowd that could reach them.

"Your father would be proud," Tug mumbled. Nathan cast a sidelong glance at Tug, a small smile forming on his face. Suddenly, from deep in the crowd, a woman yelled out "NA-TAN!" Nathan looked out into the crowd, trying to spot the source of the familiar voice. Another voice, this time from a man, repeated the name. "NA-TAN!" The woman repeated the name again, this time breaking into a chant. "NA-TAN! NA-TAN! NA-TAN!" He continued searching as more voices joined in the chanting of his now legendary name. Finally, he found the source of the familiar voice. It was Jalea. Apparently, her mission on Ancot was now complete.

Chapter Five

"Thanks for the ride," Nathan said as he climbed out of the jump interceptor's cockpit.

"It was my pleasure, Captain," Tug answered as he removed his helmet and handed it to one of the Corinari technicians working the Aurora's hangar deck. "I must say, returning the sons of Ancot at that particular moment was a bold move."

"Seemed like the right thing to do," Nathan stated as he climbed down the boarding ladder.

"It seems that your instincts continue to serve you well." Tug turned his attention to the deck technician standing next to him. "Please refuel and rearm as quickly as possible. And we will need the reconnaissance package made ready as well."

"Going somewhere?" Nathan asked, pausing momentarily as he descended the boarding ladder.

"We must recon the other systems within the cluster as soon as possible," Tug explained.

"You just came off a dangerous EVA, Tug. Maybe you should stand down and rest."

"That was hours ago, and it was actually quite relaxing," he argued, a wry smile on his face.

"Nevertheless, perhaps you should take Josh with you. That way one of you can rest while the other one minds the store."

Tug ignored the unfamiliar Earth expression, having become accustomed to his frequent use of them. In most cases, he was able to determine his meaning by the context in which it was used. "If you wish me to rest, Josh would be the wrong choice."

"Then take Loki," Nathan suggested. "We need to get them trained to do recon so they can handle the flights while you attend to more pressing matters."

"Such as..."

"Such as planning and preparing for an attack on Takara," Nathan said. "By now they've received the Loranoi's comm-drone, and they know they have a problem. We need to act fast before they have time to react. As it is, they're already going to be on alert."

Tug nodded his agreement. "As you wish."

"That was a damned risky move, sir," Cameron interrupted as she approached.

Nathan stepped down onto the deck and turned to face his executive officer. "No choice, Commander. Something had to be done before things spun out of control down there."

"Maybe, but playing the 'Na-Tan' card? Do you think that was wise?"

"It had to be done," Nathan said. "We need those people on our side."

"They're not exactly a fighting force," Cameron reminded him. "They have absolutely no military capabilities short of what the Ta'Akar were operating on their world."

“True, but they do have some industrial capacity, medical facilities, and bodies. More importantly, they have food. ‘An army marches on its stomach’, remember?” Nathan reminded her as he headed out across the hangar deck toward the starboard exit, his quote drawing a nod of agreement from his executive officer. “Besides, we’ve got a planet that just had the shit bombed out of it. Even if all we get from the Ancotans is a little humanitarian aid, it will be well worth it.”

“Having the role of Na-Tan thrust upon you is one thing,” Cameron said, “but choosing to play it to support your own interests is quite another.”

“Did I miss something?” Nathan wondered aloud. “Did I do something evil to these people?”

“You’ve involved them in an interstellar war without their consent.”

“How exactly did I do this?”

“You know the Ta’Akar will probably blame the Ancotans for the attack, and if they do, the punishment will be severe.”

“With any luck, it won’t come to that,” Nathan stated as they entered the starboard corridor and headed forward. “Besides, you’re assuming they wouldn’t have agreed to join our cause to begin with.”

“Perhaps, but they were not given the chance to make that choice.”

“Neither were we, Commander. We were drawn into this war on moral grounds.” Nathan paused for a moment. “Where were all these objections a day ago when we were planning that attack? I seem to remember that it was you who insisted we take the fight to the enemy.”

“Nathan, I’m not saying you were wrong. I’m just trying to make sure you’re considering all the angles. Things are happening awfully fast right now.”

“I appreciate that, Cameron,” Nathan told her. “Really, I do.” He turned and continued down the corridor, Cameron

falling in step beside him.

"Still, the captain of the ship shouldn't be out taking such risks. You have a crew, remember?"

"I was the only one who could play the Na-Tan card, and you know it. Besides, I am the Aurora. You said so yourself."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" she mumbled, wishing she had never done so.

"What's our current position?" Nathan asked, changing the subject as they walked.

"We jumped back to the Darvano system while you were in the transfer airlock," Cameron reported. "We'll be docking with the Loranoi in about fifteen minutes."

"The Loranoi?"

"Yes, sir. We received word from Mister Willard; they have found fifty orbit-to-surface cruise missiles, ten of which have nuclear warheads. He believes they can be adapted to launch from our torpedo tubes in much the same fashion as the Corinari missiles."

"We need ship to ship missiles, Commander, not orbit to surface," Nathan reminded her.

"They could be useful against ground targets if they are accurate enough."

"According to Tug, collateral damage is the last thing we want."

"Vlad thinks they can be reprogrammed and made into dumb point-and-shoot torpedoes, just like the ones from the Corinari."

"That would be great. If not, let's see if we can use the nukes to replace the warheads on our conventionally armed torpedoes. There's no way we're using nukes against surface targets. Conventional warheads, maybe, if we have to, but not nukes."

"But you're okay with using KKV's to crack the planet in half," Cameron countered, reminding him of a statement he had made during a previous discussion.

"I never really intended to use a KKV against Takara, Commander. However, the fact that we could might be enough to convince them to surrender."

"Of course, sir."

"How many jumps until we complete our mission on Ancot?" Nathan asked.

"We estimate two more jumps should get everything we can use off of Ancot. After that, we will need to stand down for a while and recharge the jump drive's energy banks."

"Will all our people be off Ancot by then as well?"

"No, sir. Lieutenant Commander Nash has requested that we keep a small force there long enough to finish scouring the facilities for possible intelligence. They're still working on cracking the computer core at the garrison."

"As long as we still have people on the surface of Ancot, I don't want to be sitting in Darvano unable to jump back if they need help."

"We'll still have enough to jump back," Cameron promised. "I told the helm never to make a jump without having at least a one-light year reserve of energy in the banks."

"Good idea."

"We can leave a jump shuttle there as well. That way they can not only send for help if needed, but they can also use it to evacuate if necessary."

"We need to establish diplomatic relations with the leaders of Ancot," Nathan announced as they ascended the ramp to the command deck. "They could prove to be an extremely valuable asset if we can convince them to join us."

"Are you suggesting they join the alliance?"

"Actually, I wasn't, but now that you mention it, that might not be a bad idea."

"I'm not so sure that's going to work, Nathan," Cameron objected. "Tug said they were content with their situation

within the empire. What makes you think they'd be willing to risk all of that?"

"I'm betting that, once they learn the truth about what is really going on out in the cluster and the Darvano system, they'll realize that it's the right thing to do."

"And why would they believe us?"

"They won't," Nathan agreed, "but they might believe their own sons. Every one of them spent the last two months locked up in a holding camp on Corinair along with the rest of the crew of the Yamaro. They know what's really going on. Maybe they'll listen to their own sons."

"You might want to check the crews of both the Yamaro and the Loranoi," Cameron suggested. "Some of them might be from Ancot as well. They would know even more about the true state of the empire."

"That's an excellent idea, Commander."

* * *

"Loki?" Tug inquired from the front seat of the interceptor. They had just come out of their jump, entering the system from just beyond its outermost uninhabited gas-giant.

"Sorry," Loki apologized as he regained his focus. "Jump seven complete." He scanned his instruments for a moment. "Position confirmed; we are now in the Juntor system. Course and speed are good. Shutting down all systems except for recon suite and passive sensors."

"At our current speed, it should take us about twelve hours to finish our run."

"Twelve point six four," Loki corrected.

"I stand corrected," Tug stated.

"Sorry. I guess after making so many close-in jumps for Captain Scott, I've become a bit overly precise in my navigational plots."

"There's no such thing as an overly precise navigator," Tug insisted.

"Not according to Josh."

"Josh has a different way of flying."

"You've noticed."

"Josh flies more by instinct than by instruments," Tug explained. "Your piloting style is much different. You fly more by the numbers and the physics than by instinct."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all."

"Josh always says that flying is something you should feel, not something you should calculate."

"Josh lacks formal training. Many self-trained pilots say such things."

"He is good, though."

"Yes, he is. However, he lacks understanding of the forces that enable his vessels to do the things they do. When you understand how your ship works, you better understand what you can do with it."

"And that makes you a better pilot?"

"In some ways, yes. It also makes you a safer pilot, and safer pilots tend to live longer, therefore becoming more experienced pilots."

"Oh, I'm definitely a safer pilot than Josh."

"I would be inclined to agree with you on that point."

"Then why is it that Josh always ends up as pilot, and I end up as copilot or navigator?"

"You do not like such positions?" Tug asked, somewhat surprised.

"No, it's not that. I like them fine. I'd just like to get my hands on the flight controls once in a while."

"I suspect that Josh is given the pilot's position on most occasions for two reasons:" Tug explained, "first, because they see the two of you as a team in which Josh is the pilot, and second, because you are always willing to take second seat to him."

"So you're saying I should demand more stick time?"

"It would not hurt," Tug told him. "However, in the case of Captain Scott, there is another reason he put you in the navigator's chair. He knows, as I do, that Josh would not be as good as he is without you with him."

"Can you tell Josh that?"

"I suspect that he already knows," Tug insisted.

Loki thought about it for a minute before speaking again. "How do you know that? About the captain, I mean."

"I have come to know Captain Scott quite well. He, too, is an instinctive pilot, much the same as Josh."

"Yeah, I heard that, but he did have training."

"Yes, but his captain put Captain Scott and Commander Taylor together as a team because he knew that each would make the other better at their jobs. He knew that together, they would make an exceptional flight crew. I suspect Captain Scott sees the same potential in you and Josh."

Loki was silent for several minutes as he monitored the recon suite. "You know, up until we left Haven, I had never been anywhere but my homeworld and Haven. Now I've been to half the systems in the empire."

"Before you know it, you will have been to every world in the empire. I suspect that by the time you are my age, you will have been more places than you can imagine."

"If we get out of this alive, you mean," Loki responded.

"You must have faith."

Loki smiled. "How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?"

"You've been fighting the Takarans for what, thirty years?"

"Something like that."

"How do you keep fighting when you know that the odds are astronomically against you?"

"Like I said, you must have faith."

"Faith in what?"

"Faith in yourself, faith in those you trust, faith that your cause is just, that it is worthy of succeeding."

“Yeah, but you guys are fighting the entire Ta’Akar empire. It will take a miracle to defeat them.”

“A miracle... like the jump drive, perhaps?”

“That’s not a miracle, Tug. That’s just science.”

“That depends on your definition of the word. Is not the jump drive a miraculous piece of technology?”

“A miracle is something that has no explanation.”

“I prefer to define it as something that we previously did not believe to be possible, given our current understanding of the world around us.”

“By your definition, once it happens, it is no longer a miracle.”

“Only if you understand how it was possible.”

“So you’re saying you understand how the jump drive works?”

Tug laughed. “I did not say that. It is enough for me that others more qualified than I understand how it works. The physics involved are far beyond my level of understanding.”

“Do you think it’s a miracle that the Aurora arrived in the middle of the battle of Taroa inside the shields of the Campaglia?”

Tug’s smile quickly faded. “I have wrestled with that one for some time now.”

“Yeah,” Loki agreed, “that one’s not easy to figure out.”

“Nor is the coincidental name of her captain.”

“You don’t really believe he’s the guy in the legend, do you?”

“At first, I did not. Lately, however, I have had my doubts. I have seen him accomplish unbelievable feats, and I have seen him inspire thousands, if not millions, of people to rise up against an empire they believed to be unstoppable.” Tug sighed. “It is difficult, when faced with such evidence, to discount the possibility that Captain Scott *is* indeed the Na-Tan of legend.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Loki agreed. He stared out the canopy at the blackness of space for several

minutes. He, too, had contemplated the unbelievable timing of the Aurora's arrival, and her captain's uncanny similarity to the Na-Tan described in the Legend of Origins. As a child, he had read the legends. His family was not a spiritual one, but then again, although the followers weren't spiritual in nature either, even though they behaved that way. As a child, he had found the legends fascinating. As a young man, he had found them inconsequential. They were who they were, and from which rock they had all originally spawned made little difference in their daily lives. "Tug, mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Go ahead."

"How old are you?"

"Older than you might think," Tug answered coyly.

"No, really. How old are you?"

"Old enough to know that it is time for me to take a well deserved nap," he added, dodging the question yet again. "Wake me in four hours."

"Yes, sir." Loki checked the recon suite once again, as well as his passive sensors. The Juntor system was quiet as expected. There was nothing more than a mining facility on one of the barren moons of the gas-giant closest to the system's tiny red dwarf star. Imperial patrols rarely visited the system, as its population was minuscule and its strategic value was just as negligible. However, it still needed to be reconnoitered, as it would be a good place to hide a few Takaran ships.

Satisfied that there was nothing of interest on his displays, he returned his gaze to the stars outside their canopy. Out there somewhere, more than a thousand light years distant, was the Earth he had read about as a child. The legends had described it as a place of incredible beauty and diversity. All his life, he had only known a history of about one thousand years. Now, a few more millennia had been added to that, and he longed to know more about the history of humanity. It was all out there, somewhere. He only

hoped Tug was right, that someday, he would travel to many places. Perhaps even to Earth.

* * *

“Captain?” Cameron said, poking her head into Nathan’s ready room. Nathan had become accustomed to leaving the hatch open. Although there was little for him to do on the bridge, especially when they were moored at the docks inside Karuzara, he felt more comfortable being able to hear the voices of his bridge staff as they went about their work. Although most of his bridge staff was new, they had taken well to their new jobs, undoubtedly due to the incessant training by Commander Taylor, who now hailed him from the hatchway.

“Come in,” he told her, gesturing from his place behind his desk for her to enter.

Cameron entered the room, noticing that Nathan’s gaze had not left his monitor. “Interesting stuff?”

“On his recon flight through Takara, Tug outlined several possible battle strategies on his data pad. I guess he needed something to kill the time that wouldn’t increase his risk of detection.”

“Any good ideas?”

“They’re all good,” Nathan said. “They’re not anything too surprising or outlandish, but they are really detailed. He even includes pros and cons of each strategy, as well as a suggested order of battle, required resources, potential outcomes, even ways that the Ta’Akar would likely counter each strategy.” Nathan leaned back in his chair, finally taking his eyes off the screen. “The man has an amazing mind for this stuff.”

“Not exactly a molo farmer, huh?”

“Yeah. I mean, I know he was a pilot in the Takaran military at some point and that his training was in the Palee system, but this... this goes far beyond the kind of training

you'd expect a stick jockey to have. This is war college stuff. I mean, he's even got expected losses and stuff in there."

Cameron reached for the monitor on Nathan's desk. "Do you mind?"

"Please."

Cameron began scrolling through the data, her expression changing to one of surprise which increased as she continued to scroll. "Wow, you weren't kidding. Attack timings, ordnance lists, routes of ingress and egress, even exit strategies and potential political and cultural ramifications." Cameron turned the screen back toward Nathan. "He did this all himself?"

"Apparently."

"Has Jessica seen it?"

"She's the one who gave it to me."

"Well, I've seen stuff like this before," Cameron told him. "I remember reading similar plans back at the Academy that came out of the war college. But those were prepared by groups of people, and it took them weeks, not by one guy sitting in a cockpit for thirty hours."

"He has been fighting the empire for three decades, Cam. It stands to reason that he might have been developing such plans over time."

"Still," she said, "definitely not the work of a molo farmer."

"No, it's not."

"Does this have you worried?"

"More like curious, really," Nathan said. "I see something like this, and I can't help but wonder what we do not know about Tug."

"Maybe he did attend war college. Aren't most of the Ta'Akar pilots of noble families? They would have the connections to get their son into such specialized training. I mean, you earned your upper level degree in history before you enlisted. Why would this be any different?"

"I guess you're right," Nathan concluded. "I suppose we should be thankful that he does have such expertise. That, combined with his understanding of the socio-political structure of the empire, makes him an extremely valuable asset for us."

"Just as our jump drive makes us an extremely valuable asset for him," she pointed out.

"True." Nathan lost himself in thought for a moment before he remembered that Cameron had come to him. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Major Prechitt reports that things on Corinair are beginning to stabilize somewhat. Civil security forces and emergency services have managed to get back up and running, and communications networks are slowly being reestablished. It seems all the hospitals have their own networks in order to manage resources and balance patient loads amongst them. They've piggy-back their comm-traffic over the medical network until they can get all of their routing points back on line."

"Is there any kind of casualty count yet?"

"It's too soon to tell. There are thousands of injured in the Aitkenna area alone... hundreds of thousands planet-wide. They haven't even started with the death toll yet. They've only just started to haul the bodies to a central processing area. Reports are that they are planning to cremate everyone."

"I thought the Corinairans bury their dead," Nathan wondered. The people of Earth had all but discarded the practice of burials more than a millennia ago, mostly due to space limitations on an overcrowded homeworld. The bio-digital plague had completely ended the practice of burials altogether, as the survivors feared the deceased could infect them even after death.

"It's probably a major logistical problem to bury them all," Cameron said, "not to mention a potential health

problem as well. It's probably more expedient to take a DNA sample and send the body straight to the incinerators."

The idea of hundreds of thousands of bodies being processed and incinerated like common trash was a sobering thought, but one that Nathan realized was in the best interests of the survival of Corinair. "Any word from the government?"

"Local governments are beginning to hook into the medical networks. The national and planetary governments have yet to recover. They were the hardest hit. I suspect they were all on the primary target list."

"You really think the Wallach was executing a prewritten target list?"

"All the evidence points to that."

"The idea that someone took the time to calculate how to most expediently destroy an entire civilization is..."

"Yeah, I know," Cameron agreed.

"What about the Prime Minister?"

"They're still trying to dig down to where they think he is located. They have intermittent signs of survivors, but they have no idea as to their identities."

"What about their industrial capacity?" Nathan asked. It was a cold question in the light of so many deaths, but it was a necessary one.

"Reduced by about eighty percent of normal, I'm afraid."

"What about the ones that were cranking out point-defense rounds for our rail guns?"

"Unfortunately, they were destroyed."

"Can we retool any of the surviving factories?"

"Possibly, but it will take weeks, if not months. More than half of the planet's power generation facilities were also destroyed."

Nathan took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he considered the report. "So I guess we're not going to get much help from the Corinairans going forward."

“I think at this point, the people of Corinair have their hands full. I’m not sure they’re going to be able to recover from this one, Nathan. I mean, they don’t even have reliable methods to move food and water to the people who need it, let alone continue to produce it.”

“We need to put pressure on the Ancotans,” Nathan declared. “They have more than enough food and water to go around. They probably have plenty of shuttles they could loan to the Corinairans as well. If we can get them to cooperate, we might be able to get some serious relief efforts underway.”

“Well, I’ve already gathered up the Ancotans that were part of the crews of the Yamaro and the Loranoi,” Cameron informed him. “They’ll be arriving in a few hours. Hopefully, they will be of some help in convincing the people of Ancot to side with us.”

“Let’s hope.”

* * *

After spending an hour with Tug discussing his various battle plans, Nathan finally had some time off, and he was determined to carry on his tradition of meaningless guy talk over a meal with his friend and chief engineer, Vladimir. Back when they were both new ensigns starting their first tour on the Aurora, they had shared quarters and dined together whenever possible. Once fate had pushed command upon him, Nathan continued the tradition of dining with his friend, as the chance to relax and talk about anything other than the ship’s business was always a welcome distraction. Of course, the conversation always started with ship business, but his friend always seemed to find a way to steer the subject toward less official topics. Unfortunately, he was quite late, and he only hoped that Vladimir had not given up on him and left.

Despite the fact that the Aurora had both a captain’s and an officer’s mess, Nathan and Vladimir had always

dined in the crew mess. However, with all the additional Corinari troops on board, the mess hall was not only crowded, but noisy. The officer's mess had worked for a while, but it was not always an option, as it had also become somewhat crowded. The only solution had been to succumb to the trappings of rank and utilize the captain's mess.

The first thing he noticed was that he missed the long walk from the bridge to the mess hall. The captain's mess was on the command deck, which put him only a minute away from his ready room. The walks had been a chance for him to be alone and think, not to mention to stretch his legs. Now, whatever he wanted would be provided for him at any time in a room that was dedicated to his personal dining. He knew that most captain's used their mess as a place to meet and share a meal with the junior officers, but it seemed like such a waste of space to him. He had even suggested to Cameron that the space be reallocated for something more important, but she had advised against it, at least for the time being. He had insisted, but in the end, she had won based on the argument that it would take too much effort to convert, as it had its own galley and pantry, along with all the plumbing, electrical, and fire suppression systems as well.

What it did not have was a cook. When Nathan arrived, he found Vladimir in the kitchen hovering over a large skillet on the hot stove, a slightly soiled apron tied around his waist. There were remnants of several unknown vegetables lying around, and one of the cutting boards was covered with the blood of something recently butchered. The smell of cooking food filled the room, the aroma reminiscent of garlic, meat, and tomato. There were other smells as well, ones Nathan could not identify, but that was not uncommon since they had started eating nothing but Corinairan food more than a month ago.

"Vlad, what the hell are you doing?"

"I guess you did not know," Vladimir answered.

"Know what?"

"That the captain's mess does not yet have a cook."

"It never crossed my mind, to be honest. I figured we'd just have something sent up from the mess hall."

"When you did not show up, I went looking for something to eat. Did you know you have entire pantry here?"

"I didn't even know I had a separate kitchen in here."

"Well, you do my friend. And it is full of food, let me tell you. So I decided to cook something."

"I didn't know you could cook," Nathan admitted.

"Neither did I. I guess I spent so much time as a child helping babushka Vera in the kitchen, I picked up a few things."

"Babushka Vera?"

"My mother's mother... How do you say? Grandmother?"

"Ah yes."

"Very positive lady she was. Her name, Vera, it means 'hope' you know."

"And she was a good cook?"

"Amazing, yes."

"What are you making?"

"Golupzi."

"What is that?"

"It is cabbage stuffed with meat, onions, carrots, and garlic, except we do not have garlic, or carrots, or cabbage. We also do not have tomato sauce or sour cream, so I guess it is not really golupzi. Maybe we should think of a different name for it. What do you think?"

Nathan peered into the skillet at the bubbling, rose-colored sauce. Floating around in the sauce were strange blobs that looked like large leaves of a plant that resembled cabbage. Vladimir had apparently tried to fill the leaves full of his meat and veggie mixture and roll them up neatly. Unfortunately, most of his attempts had failed, and the

leaves had come unrolled, allowing their contents to spill out into the sauce surrounding them. Although it smelled appetizing, its appearance left something to be desired. "I don't know. How do you say 'mess' in Russian?"

"Very funny. Wait until you taste it; you will see," Vladimir promised as he began serving the few stuffed rolls that had held together.

"Do you think you made enough?" Nathan asked after he noticed the amount still left in the skillet.

"Babushka Vera worked in restaurants. She did not know how to make small portions." Vladimir laughed. "We ate well, believe me."

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Comms, Captain. Go ahead."

"*Sir, Lieutenant Commander Nash needs to see you.*"

"Can it wait? I'm about to eat dinner."

"*She says it's urgent, sir.*"

"Have her come here," Vladimir suggested. "We have plenty."

"Maybe we should taste it first before we start poisoning the crew."

"See if I cook for you again."

"Comms, Captain. Send Lieutenant Commander Nash to the captain's mess."

"*Yes, sir.*"

"I wonder what she wants," Vladimir said as they carried their plates into the dining room.

"She's probably found something in the recon data from the Juntor system."

"Where is that?" Vladimir asked as he took his first bite of the golupzi.

"A little over six light years from here," Nathan said, "about three light years from Takara. There's not supposed to be much there, a mining colony or something."

"Then why recon it?"

“Tug thinks it would be a good place for the Ta’Akar to hide a few reserve ships.” Nathan took a tentative bite of his food. “Hey, this isn’t too bad.”

“I told you,” Vladimir answered, proud of himself. “It was not easy to make, let me tell you. I had to taste a lot of different Corinairan ingredients to find proper substitutes, so do not be surprised if you find a lot of vegetables in your cold locker with bites taken from them.”

Nathan took another bite. “What’s that unusual flavor? It’s really strong.”

“I don’t know what it is called,” Vladimir admitted, “but I used it as a garlic substitute. Did I use too much?”

“I’m not sure. I like it, but maybe it is a bit strong.”

“So, what other systems are we going to recon?” Vladimir asked.

“Pretty much all of them if we have enough time. I’d like to have an idea of where all the empire’s ships are located.”

The hatch opened from the corridor, revealing Jessica, Sergeant Weatherly, and a man Nathan had never seen before. He assumed the stranger was one of the Corinairan technicians. Nathan only hoped this man wasn’t there because Jessica or the good sergeant had caught him doing something untoward.

“Lieutenant Commander, Sergeant,” Nathan greeted. “What can I do for you?”

“I think you should talk to this guy,” Jessica told him.

Nathan looked the man over. He was a few years younger than Nathan, a bit on the scrawny side, and dressed in an unmarked jumpsuit much like many of the technicians working on the Aurora. “And you are?”

“Soloman, Captain. Dexter Soloman. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Mister Soloman was one of the volunteers that helped us retake the ship, sir,” Sergeant Weatherly stated.

“According to the reports, he’s the man who killed Captain de Winter.”

"Is that so?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Dexter admitted. "There's some debate about which of us actually made the shot. It was either me or my friend, Sal."

"Well, either way, we owe you a debt of gratitude," Nathan told him. "Would any of you care to eat? We have plenty." Jessica and Sergeant Weatherly both declined. After a few moments, Nathan looked at Dexter. "Mister Soloman, how about you? Are you hungry?"

Dexter looked surprised at first, his gaze moving back and forth between the captain and Jessica, unsure if he should accept. Finally, Jessica nodded to him. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm actually very hungry."

"I'll dish some up for him," Vladimir said as he rose from the table.

"This is an honor, sir," Dexter said, a smile filling his face as he took a seat at the table. Jessica sat down next to him. As usual, Sergeant Weatherly maintained a watchful position from the hatch.

"Are you from Corinair, Mister Soloman?" Nathan asked.

"Actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you about," Jessica told him. "He's not really from Corinair after all. He only led us to believe he was."

"You lied to us?" Nathan wondered. Vladimir returned with a plate full of golupzi and a glass of water, setting it down in front of Mister Soloman.

"It was more like I lied to the Ta'Akar, sir," Dexter responded. "It just spilled over onto you."

"What the hell is that stuff?" Jessica wondered aloud.

"Glopzi," Nathan responded.

"*Golupzi*," Vladimir corrected.

"I think you were right the first time," Jessica commented.

"So if you're not from Corinair, where *are* you from, Mister Soloman?" Nathan asked.

"I'm from Ancot," he responded as he took his first bite.

“But you do speak Corinairan, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I do. My father was born and raised on Ancot. He spent ten years teaching advanced agricultural techniques at a technical school on Corinair. I was actually born on Corinair. We moved back to Ancot when I was about seven, I think.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Captain, when I was drafted into the service of the empire, my father warned me not to reveal my relationships to the Ta’Akar.”

“Why?”

“My father is a rather influential man on Ancot. He feared that, if the Ta’Akar knew who my father really was, they might use me as leverage against him at some point. When I was in training camp on Takara, my bunkmate was from a rural part of Corinair, and he had trouble learning the Takaran language. Since I still remembered most of my Corinairan, I helped him learn the language of the empire. We spent hours talking each night. He told me of his homeworld, and I told him of mine. I knew so much about him and the village he came from that, when I was assigned to the Yamaro, I simply pretended to be from Corinair.”

“But the officers on board the Yamaro surely had access to your personnel records,” Nathan commented.

“Of course, but I doubt any of them ever paid me a nod. Besides, if any of them ever asked where I was from, I would just answer loudly that we were all Takarans now, and they would smile and walk away.”

“But you fought to retake this ship,” Nathan said.

“To be honest, sir, I was just hoping that it would allow me to get back home to my family on Ancot. Few of us who serve ever make it back home.”

“So I’ve heard.” Nathan noticed that Mister Soloman had finished his meal. “Would you like some more?”

“No, sir. I’m quite full. Thank you. It was quite delicious. I wouldn’t mind having the recipe. I used to cook in a

restaurant on Ancot before I was drafted.”

“You’ll have to speak to Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy. He did the cooking.”

“Oh God,” Jessica said.

“I will be happy to share it with you,” Vladimir promised.

“Thank you, sir.”

“So you were born on Corinair, moved to Ancot, and then pretended to be Corinairan on the Yamaro. Why are you telling us this now?”

“Like I said, I would prefer to get back to Ancot if I could. It is my home, after all. Besides, I understand that you’re looking for someone to convince my people to join the alliance.”

“Yes, we are.”

“If that’s the case, my father is the man you need to be convincing.”

* * *

“Man, I hate recon flights,” Josh complained. “Is there anything more boring than cold-coasting through a star system?”

Loki chose to ignore Josh, his attention still focused on the passive sensors that were currently monitoring the Norwitt system. Unlike the last system he had flown through with Tug, this one did have something of interest; it was the home of the Ta’Akar empire’s primary off-world pilot training facility, and that increased the risk significantly. Loki knew that a ship could come out of FTL nearby and spot them at any moment, at which point he would have only seconds to jump them away to safety.

“I’ll take your silence as agreement,” Josh stated.

“Try to relax. We’ve still got eight hours left before we reach the next jump point.”

“Eight more hours?”

“Then we have to recon Taroa and Korak as well,” Loki added.

“What if I need to drop a load?”

“That’s why we used the head before we left. It’s also why we’re not supposed to eat a heavy meal before a mission.”

“We weren’t?” Josh answered, a guilty tone in his voice.

“You didn’t.” Loki suddenly had visions of Josh defecating in his suit.

“Relax; it’s Corinairan food, remember? It’s all meat and fiber, not a piece of bread or a dumpling in sight. Been that way for weeks now. I’m down to once every other day now.”

“Can we choose a different subject?” Loki asked. Josh went quiet for a moment, much to Loki’s relief. Unfortunately, his silence didn’t last long.

“Hey, Loki. Have you ever thought about taking this ship and just jumping away?”

“You mean not finish the mission?”

“No, I mean just taking the ship and going rogue. You know, go explore the galaxy and stuff.”

“Are you nuts? Where would we go?” Loki wondered. Josh’s question had managed to distract him from his sensor suite.

“Anywhere. We could visit your family and pick up some supplies, then just keep on going. There’s gotta be at least a few more inhabited worlds out there.”

“Out where?”

“Everywhere,” Josh insisted. “Think about it. Our ancestors fled the core worlds of Earth and headed farther out into space. They ended up a thousand light years from home. That means they were in stasis for about a hundred years! That is a long time to be asleep, my friend.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that our ancestors weren’t the only ones to head out into space.”

“Sure, but they could be anywhere,” Loki pointed out. “How would we know which way to go?”

"I'll bet most of the people that fled the core only went a few hundred light years out. If we headed back toward Earth, think of what we might find along the way."

"Uh, the Jung? Did you forget about them? For all we know, they've already spread a few hundred light years out. For all we know, they could be in the very next sector, about to invade the Pentaurus cluster."

"Then we'd go a different direction."

"The galaxy is an awfully big place, Josh. The chances of us finding another inhabited world outside of our own sector are so astronomical..."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right."

"Besides, where would we get food? What about air to breath and water to drink? The recycling systems in this ship will only last so long."

"Leave it to you to shoot down my fantasy with practical logistics," Josh complained.

Loki suddenly felt bad. He knew his friend was only fantasizing. The fact was he had never seen Josh as happy as he was these days, despite the frequent dangers. In fact, Loki himself was happier than he could remember, and that didn't make sense to him. They were caught up in the middle of an interstellar war against an enemy with greater numbers and, for the most part, superior technology. It was dangerous, yes, but it was also exciting, and he was getting a chance to fly some amazing ships in some incredible situations. More importantly, he was doing something that had meaning, something that had purpose. He was part of something big, something really big. Although the enormity of it scared him to death, it also made him quite proud.

"I guess it would be fun," Loki finally admitted.

"Yeah, it would!" Josh agreed, happy that his friend was willing to partake in the fantasy. "I figure for food and stuff, we could fly some missions for people."

"What kind of missions?"

"I don't know, missions that only a ship like ours could fly, like this recon mission."

"I don't think there's going to be much demand for recon missions, Josh."

"Something else then."

"We could convert the weapons bay into a passenger compartment. I'll bet we could easily fit three or four people in there."

"Like an interstellar jump taxi. Now you're thinking, Loki."

"We could also carry urgent cargo in there."

"Yeah, we could be smugglers!"

"I was thinking of something more legal."

"Why not? How the hell are they going to catch us?" Josh insisted.

"What about Kaylah?" Loki wondered.

"There you go, ruining the moment again."

"What?"

"It's not like we're married or something," Josh insisted. "We're just having a bit of fun."

"I was just asking," Loki defended.

"What about Deliza, then?"

"What are *you* talking about?"

"I've seen the way you smile when she's around," Josh teased. "And I've seen how she always finds a way to be near you when she's in the same room."

"She's only a child, Josh."

"A child who has the hots for you."

"It's not going to happen," Loki insisted.

"Why not?"

"She's what, sixteen, seventeen years old?"

"There are girls that age getting married and popping out kids on some worlds, my friend."

"There's also the fact that she's Tug's daughter," Loki reminded him. "Or have you forgotten that part?"

“Yeah, that would make things kind of tricky, wouldn’t it?” Josh admitted. “Screw it; we leave the women behind. It’s just the two of us. Besides, we’ll probably meet tons of girls along the way.”

Loki’s attention returned to his instruments, his interest in the fantasy waning. “I think we’re better off staying where we are,” Loki mumbled.

“Well of course we are,” Josh agreed. “It was just a harmless fantasy.” Josh stared out of the canopy at the stars. “Still, it’s an interesting one.”

“Yes, it is.”

Josh continued staring out at the stars. “Hey Loki,” he said after a few moments, “you got anything to read?”

Loki pulled out a data pad and floated it forward to Josh. “Here.”

Josh caught the data pad as it floated past his right shoulder heading forward. “What’s this?”

“The captain gave me a bunch of stuff about Earth history. He studied it in school or something. I guess he’s supposed to be some kind of an expert. He thought I might find it interesting.”

“Did you read it?”

“I started to, but it’s a bit depressing. It starts right after the plague and covers the history of the recovery of Earth. Pretty gruesome stuff. Makes Haven look like a paradise. He said it gets better at the end, where there’s a bunch of historical stuff found in the Data Ark. I just haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Josh turned on the data pad and began skimming over the table of contents, looking for a section that piqued his interest. “Do you think we’ll make it?” he asked as he scanned the contents list.

“Do I think we’ll make what?”

“Do you think the Alliance will be able to defeat the Takarans?”

“I do not know, Josh.”

“Well, if it all goes to shit, we can always jump away and go rogue,” Josh stated.

“Of course.”

* * *

“As you were,” Nathan ordered as he made his way to his seat at the head of the conference table. “Jalea, nice to see you once again,” he stated as he took his seat. “I hope your mission on Ancot was not too difficult.”

“It had its moments, Captain,” Jalea responded.

“I’m sure it did. However, the information provided saved countless lives, as did the sacrifices made by your operatives during the raid on the Ancot garrison.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Your incitement of the crowd in support of Na-Tan could not have come at a more opportune moment,” Cameron commented rather sharply.

“It seemed the best course of action at the time,” Jalea responded, choosing to ignore the tone of the Commander’s comment.

Nathan decided to change the subject before things got ugly. He knew that Cameron, just like Jessica, did not trust Jalea, and for good reason. Her actions in the past had been reckless and self-serving, at times even bordering on immoral. Unfortunately, her actions also seemed to produce results, which Nathan assumed was the reason Tug seemed to trust her as much as he did. “The purpose of this meeting is to discuss our situation, examine our options, and devise a plan to exercise those options.” Nathan looked around the command briefing room, scanning the faces of his senior staff as well as those of Tug and Jalea. “Our primary concern, of course, is the threat to the Darvano system.”

“Isn’t the Savoy system also under threat?” Jessica wondered.

“I do not believe so,” Tug interrupted. “The Ta’Akar obtain much of their food from Ancot. While they may

choose to punish some of their citizens as a show of force, it is unlikely they will take any actions that might significantly disrupt the flow of food from Ancot.”

“Do the Ancotans realize this?” Nathan wondered. Their reaction to the Alliance’s attack on the Ta’Akar garrison on their world had been unexpected.

“While the people may not, I am sure their leaders are aware.”

“Won’t that make it more difficult for us to convince them to help us?” Cameron asked.

“Possibly,” Jalea admitted. “However, the leaders of Ancot will also recognize the long term potential of an alliance. The defeat of the Ta’Akar would not only gain them their independence, but it would also open up new markets as well as give them the freedom to charge what they like for their exports.”

“The technological gains would also be taken into consideration,” Tug added.

“Indeed,” Jalea agreed. “However, they will have to weigh long-term gains against short term risks, one of which would be the reaction of their citizens.”

“Are their leaders elected by popular vote?” Nathan asked.

“To some extent,” Tug explained. “Each local representative is elected to the council by an election within their own district. However, the leaders of the council are selected by the council itself.”

“The current leader of the planetary council of Ancot has voiced his disagreements with imperial policy in the past,” Jalea explained, “so there may be some possibility of negotiation on his part.”

“Then perhaps we should speak with him,” Nathan observed.

“That may not be possible,” Jalea warned. “Simply granting us an audience would be considered a treasonous act by the empire. I suspect he will not agree to speak with

us unless he has already made up his mind to openly support the Alliance.”

“Perhaps through a back channel?” Tug suggested.

“We are attempting to arrange such communication as we speak,” Nathan told them.

“Really?” Jalea said, somewhat surprised. “I was not aware that you had any assets in place on Ancot.”

Nathan understood her insinuation. “A few hundred of them,” he jested. “Although, I wouldn’t exactly call them assets. More like, enthusiastic supporters,” he added with a smile. He wasn’t about to reveal their conversation with Dexter to Jalea. She had a nasty habit of twisting things around to work in her favor. It wasn’t anything that Nathan could prove, but as long as he’d known her, she had always seemed to be in the right place at the right time. He had no idea what her level of involvement was with the near riot on Ancot. However, he was sure that it was more than she had revealed in her debriefing. “For the time being, we must assume that assistance from Ancot will not be forthcoming. We will maintain communications with them via jump shuttle for now in the hopes that they may be willing to provide humanitarian assistance for the people of Corinair. Meanwhile, we need to figure out what our next step should be.”

“That would depend on our goals,” Major Prechitt pointed out.

“Agreed,” Nathan said. “Obviously, our primary goal is to protect our allies in the Darvano system and possibly in the Ancot system as well. The question is, how do we go about this?”

“We must attack the Takaran homeworld as soon as possible,” Tug insisted. “We must cut off the head of the dragon once and for all.”

“Again, I agree, but I’m not entirely convinced that removing Caius from power will solve the problem. You’ll still have an empire, and surely there is some form of succession

in place to fill his shoes. Who is to say the next guy will be any better?"

"Actually, there is not," Mister Dumar explained. "Caius never declared an order of succession for fear that it would invite assassination. In his mind, he is the empire. Without a leader to replace him, the empire would fracture into at least six separate realms. Each realm would have the resources to defend itself to some degree, but unless two or more of them combined their forces, no one realm would have the strength to conquer the others."

"How does that stop them from trying to assassinate Caius?" Jessica wondered. "It sounds to me like they'd be better off without him."

"The anti-aging serum," Tug said. "Caius is not using it as it was intended. He is trying to live forever. I believe his abuse of the serum is the cause of his irrational behavior, his belief that he can do no wrong. In addition, to further protect himself and his hold on Takaran civilization, he has centralized the production and distribution of the serum and has compartmentalized the process so that no one man knows the entire formula. Only Caius and the scientist that developed the serum and still oversees its production know the entire formula. He and Caius are electronically linked. If Caius dies, the only man who knows the formula dies, taking it with him."

"How do you know all of this?" Jessica wondered.

"We have been fighting the Ta'Akar for over thirty years," Tug reminded her. "During that time, we have successfully infiltrated many levels of Takaran society, including that of the royal palace and its staff."

"Are they still active?" Nathan asked.

"We do not know," Tug admitted. "Most of them were eventually discovered and executed. A few may still remain, but if so, they are in hiding and have not been able to make contact with us."

"Can you make contact with them?" Jessica asked.

"We do not know their identities," Tug explained. "This was done to protect their cover."

"Too bad," Jessica said. "It would open up a whole new world of possibilities if we had an asset on Takara."

"We could send out an encrypted hail during a recon pass," Tug suggested.

"Can that be done without being detected?" Nathan asked.

"Doubtful," Tug admitted.

"By now, they already know that we're here and that we have destroyed several of their warships. There's nothing we can do about that. However, we do not want to alert them to the fact that we're waltzing through their star system whenever we want. That will undoubtedly put them on alert."

"Waltzing?" Mister Willard whispered to Jessica next to him.

"A type of dance," Jessica whispered back.

"The captain wants to dance?"

"It's an expression," she told him, gesturing for him to pay attention.

"Captain, I too have contacts, or should I say, my cover identity has contacts within the palace on Takara. One of them in particular may be of assistance."

"Why would your friend want to help us?"

"Many within the empire are dissatisfied with the direction Caius has taken our civilization."

"Dissatisfied enough to commit treason?" Jessica wondered.

"Technically, I myself am committing treason." His statement drew concern from Nathan and his staff. "I was born and raised on Takara, as were many of the Karuzari."

"As was I," Tug admitted.

Nathan did not react as the others in the room. He had known for some time that many of the Karuzari were once Takaran citizens. Although he had not known for sure, he

had always suspected that Tug was Takaran born and raised as well. He knew far too much about Takaran culture and politics to have been an outside observer. "Even if your contact was willing to help, communication is still a problem."

"Indeed it is," Dumar admitted.

"So it appears we may be forced to mount a full-on assault," Nathan admitted. No one in the room commented, all of them knowing full well that it would not only cost many lives, but it was also a long shot at best. "I've reviewed your mission plans for invading the Takaran homeworld, Tug, and while they are impressive, I don't know that we have the man power to pull them off. We really need help on the ground."

"Captain," Mister Willard interrupted, "it may be possible to communicate with Mister Dumar's contacts without tipping the Ta'Akar to our presence." Mister Willard paused for a moment as he felt all eyes in the briefing turn his way. "The comm-drones." He scanned their eyes again, but none of them seemed to understand where he was headed. "Surely the Savoy system was launching drones according to schedule prior to the attack on their garrison. If we are lucky, we may be able to catch one on its way to Takara."

"And do what with it?" Nathan wondered.

"Imperial command is still expecting the Yamaro to arrive within a few weeks," Mister Willard explained. "She would be flying a course that closely parallels that of the Savoy comm-drones. It would not be unexpected for her to alter her course slightly in order to intercept a drone and add messages to its queue. Nobles often do this just before their ship arrives in Takara in order to alert family of their impending arrival."

"So we just use the Yamaro's transponder again," Nathan surmised, "to get the drone to drop out of FTL so that we can add messages to its queue."

"Correct."

“Can you do that?”

“As a communications technician, I have done this many times. It is a normal procedure.”

“We will need to know the exact launch schedule for the Savoy drones over the last few weeks in order to calculate which drone to intercept and where to intercept it,” Tug added.

“Comm-drones for all imperial worlds follow schedules set by the empire,” Mister Dumar stated. “The schedules would be known by all warships in order to intercept the drones as needed. I am sure the information can be found in both the Yamaro and the Loranoi’s comm-systems.”

“Assuming we can make contact with Mister Dumar’s friend,” Nathan began, “and assuming that he is willing to help us, what would we be asking him to do?”

“If I may?” Tug asked. Nathan gestured for him to continue. Tug handed a data card to Cameron, who inserted it into the table’s holographic display system. “This is Answari, the capital city of Takara,” Tug began, pointing at the holographic display of an overhead view of the city. The display hovered just above the table. “The city itself is protected by a ring of energy cannons designed to automatically detect, target, and destroy any incoming vessels that have not been tagged as authorized by Takaran command.”

“There’s not that many of them,” Nathan commented.

“There are only eight of them, but make no mistake, they are formidable,” Tug warned, “and they are also designed to operate both independently and autonomously, each with their own power plant and target acquisition system.”

“So how do we get around them?” Nathan asked.

“They are designed to detect and destroy incoming weapons and ships,” Tug explained, “not individual combatants.”

"You want to drop paratroops into the city to take them out?" Jessica surmised, a bit surprised. "If those guns are so formidable, how are we going to get close enough to do that? If those guns can reach orbit, we couldn't even get close enough to HALO jump."

Tug looked perplexed.

"High altitude, low open," Nathan explained. "It's the term we use for jumping from a very high altitude and waiting until you reach the lowest safe altitude to open your chute."

"I see," Tug responded. "Then that terminology should serve our purpose."

"It doesn't matter what you call it," Jessica argued. "We can't do it with those guns down there."

"Ah, but we can," Tug disagreed. "Because their guns use their own power plants, they take several minutes to spin up to full operational status."

"Seriously?" Jessica challenged. "That seems conveniently stupid."

"Remember, they were not designed to defend against an enemy equipped with jump drive technology," Tug told her.

"So you want to have the shuttles jump into the upper atmosphere and unload a bunch of HALO jumpers?" Nathan asked.

"No, that would not work either," Tug told him. "First, the shuttles themselves can only hold about twenty men. We would need to utilize every one of them just to make the first drop. There would be insufficient time for them to return to a rendezvous point in space to reload with the first wave of ground troops. Second, that many targets suddenly appearing in the atmosphere would undoubtedly trigger an alert. If that happened, the sky would be filled with imperial fighters in minutes. For this to work, we need to deliver the entire group from a single ship, spending no more than thirty seconds in Takaran orbit."

“Did you say, ‘in Takaran orbit’?” Nathan asked.

“Yes, Captain, I did,” Tug responded confidently. “I recommend we jump the Aurora into a low orbit over Takara, have the strike teams jump from her flight apron, and jump away again. If we are lucky, the Takaran defense command will consider the temporary contact an anomaly and will not call an alert.”

“You want them to jump from orbit?” Nathan asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Tug responded, surprised at Nathan’s reluctance.

Major Prechitt also noticed the captain’s disbelief. “It is possible,” he added. “Our pilots wear special suits designed to withstand reentry through the atmosphere. I had to do this myself when my ship was destroyed shooting down the missiles headed for the Aurora. While it was not a pleasant ride, I did survive.”

“Now that’s a HALO jump!” Jessica declared. “Captain, I have got to be on this mission.”

Nathan gestured for Jessica to control herself. “You want them to jump from our flight apron, in orbit, re-enter the atmosphere, free fall for ten minutes, and then land on a specific target.” Nathan shrugged. “Piece of cake, right?”

“The Corinari airborne assault squads have parachute systems that can put them on a precise spot,” Major Prechitt told them. “If we can replace the final stage chute system in the pilot’s reentry rig with the one used by the airborne assault squads, it might work.”

Nathan shook his head in dismay. “Is there no other way to get the strike teams down to their targets?”

“None,” Tug admitted. “Even if it works, we will still need someone within the palace to do something to mask our final descent into the compound. Perhaps a distraction of some type.”

“Assuming we attack in the early hours just before dawn, it could be as simple as killing the lights for a few minutes,” Dumar pointed out.

“Do you think your contact would be able to pull that off?” Nathan asked.

“I can ask.”

“Why even bother with all of this?” Cameron asked. “Why not just hit the palace with a precision strike weapon? Mister Willard found plenty of them on the Loranoi.”

“The risk of collateral damage is too high. The palace itself is woven into the city,” Tug explained, pointing at the holographic display to indicate the various spines of the palace. “This makes it difficult to strike without killing thousands of innocent people.”

“Considering the number of innocent people the empire has already killed, I’m not sure I see the problem,” Nathan said.

“Captain, you have to understand Takaran society. While many of them may not care for Caius or the actions of the empire, if attacked, they will rally in defense of their world, as will the nobles who command the empire’s warships. And you would also be destroying the anti-aging serum, which would further enrage the nobility as well as the upper and middle classes. The Ta’Akar home system is heavily populated, with twenty billion people on Takara alone. We do not want them demanding revenge. If we hope to end this quickly and avoid retaliation, we must take out Caius himself with as little collateral damage as possible if we expect the citizens of Takara to accept whomever steps up to take the throne.”

“I understand that,” Nathan told Tug, “but you still haven’t told me how we can accomplish that goal.”

“I will lead a team of Karuzari that will drop into the palace grounds, directly within their walls. We’ll probably drop into one of the many arms that stretch out into the city, and preferably into more than one of them to increase our chances of reaching the center compound.”

“Uh, that’s just a bit insane,” Jessica pointed out.

“Many of my people are native Takarans. We know their customs and mannerisms, and we speak the language. If we dress as palace guards and are able to land within the compound unnoticed, we have a very good chance of reaching our objective unchallenged.”

“And if we are unable to take out all the turrets?” Nathan challenged.

“As long as we can disable at least half of the turrets, we’ll have a chance. Our atmospheric fighters can keep them occupied in order to get our jump shuttles safely in and out. Once men are on the ground, we might be able to redouble our efforts to disable the batteries. We might even be able to use the jump interceptor to launch strikes against them.”

“Aren’t they shielded?” Nathan asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, I believe so,” Tug admitted. “Hopefully the failed attacks would have left their shields damaged or in a weakened state.”

“Those are a lot of ‘ifs’,” Jessica commented.

“Okay, say the first teams *are* able to take out the defensive batteries, then what?” Nathan wondered.

“Then the jump shuttles will begin landing invasion forces into the city. They will attack the palace from one side, drawing the palace guards’ attention away from the teams dropping into the palace grounds at other locations.”

“A diversion,” Jessica commented.

“Yes, also a psychological weapon, as no one on Takara would believe they could be invaded. However, this presents additional complications,” Tug admitted. “Once the attack begins and they realize their defensive batteries have been disabled, command will recall all ships in the system to return to Takara to provide support.”

“How are spaceships going to be of help to them?” Nathan wondered.

"Each warship carries a contingent of ground forces," Mister Dumar explained, "most notably the Ghatazhak."

"Takaran spec-ops," Jessica reminded them.

"I remember," Nathan stated, recalling their first interrogation of an imperial prisoner months earlier. "How many troops could one ship put down?"

"At least one hundred," Dumar told him, "a quarter of which would be members of the Ghatazhak."

"And our last recon showed there were fifteen ships in the system," Tug added.

"No way we can hold off fifteen hundred men, sir," Jessica pointed out, "especially if they're spec-ops. I don't care how good the Corinari are."

"So we need to keep the other ships busy," Nathan surmised.

"Starting with the ones closest to Takara," Tug explained, "as they will be the first ones to receive the call. If you are able to disable the ships quickly, one at a time, and jump your way out to engage each one, you might be able to keep them occupied long enough for our ground forces to finish their mission."

"How long are we talking about?" Nathan wondered.

"Less than an hour, I would imagine," Tug stated calmly. He knew it was a lot to ask of one ship, even one with a jump drive.

Nathan did not want to show his many concerns about the mission, not in front of his entire command staff. They needed a leader that was confident, one that believed it could be done. "Very well. I will review the mission proposal. I expect that further refinements will be in order, however. I will give all of you my decision in short order. Dismissed."

Nathan watched calmly as everyone exited the command briefing room, everyone except for Cameron who waited patiently until everyone had left. She signaled the guard at the hatchway to close the hatch before she spoke.

"If he jumps into the palace grounds, he is not getting out alive," Cameron stated dispassionately, "even if they do accomplish their mission. You do realize that."

"The thought had occurred to me," Nathan stated with equal solemnity. "That's why I'm sending Jessica with him."

Cameron looked at him for a moment, not quite believing what she was hearing, yet not wanting to react before she considered his words. "You think he's up to something, don't you?"

"As much as I believe Tug is willing to give his life for his cause, I don't believe that's part of his plan, at least not yet."

"You think he has another play, something he's not telling us about."

"He has to," Nathan insisted. "You don't really believe that some nobleman can step up and take control just like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "Tug has something else up his sleeve."

"Why isn't he telling us?" Cameron wondered.

"Because he's afraid we won't agree, and he can't afford to take the chance that we'll say no."

"Then why go through with it at all?" Cameron asked.

"His plan doesn't put us in a position we can't jump away from. In fact, his plan puts us in less danger than any of them."

"Uh, fifteen ships, remember?"

"He wants to end the reign of Caius; that much I'm sure of. I'm also sure that, once the ZPED technology is under his control, he will share it with us."

"How can you be so sure?" Cameron wondered.

"Because Jessica will be keeping an eye on him." Nathan smiled. "Besides, we'll have a half dozen FTL KKV's aimed at his ass."

* * *

"You should have given him better assurances that the nobles will fall in line once Caius is removed from power," Dumar began.

"I could not," Tug argued as they continued down the corridor, "not without revealing our true purpose."

"No man would deny you that which you seek," Dumar insisted. "It is..."

Tug hushed his friend as several technicians approached, waiting until they had passed before speaking. "If he believes we intend to sacrifice ourselves to accomplish our goal, then he believes he will still be in control of the events that will follow. His only desire is to retrieve the zero-point energy technology so that he can return to his homeworld more quickly. That is where his duty lies, not here defending the oppressed."

"Then you do not believe him to be honorable?" Dumar wondered, somewhat surprised.

"I believe him to be honorable only in as much as it serves his purpose. He is a man like any other, and a young one at that. He has not seen the decades of war and strife as you and I have done."

Dumar shook his head. "I fear you may be judging him too harshly."

"I judge him in the only way I am allowed," Tug insisted. "I have sacrificed too much to risk losing it all now."

"But if you shared the truth with him, perhaps he..."

"I cannot take that chance," Tug insisted sternly. "We will speak of it no further."

"Of course," Dumar stated, bowing his head in acquiescence. "My apologies."

The two of them turned the corner, disappearing from the sight of the others in the main corridor for the moment. Tug stopped, placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, and turned him to look in his eyes. "With this ship and this alliance, we will finally rid this entire sector of Caius and his tyranny. We will finally set right what we allowed to go

wrong all those decades ago. Then Nathan Scott will no longer be of concern."

Dumar looked in his old friend's eyes, seeing the same strength and determination that his friend had always possessed, even decades ago when they were young pilots trying to earn their place among the elite cadre of Takaran nobility. "I hope you are correct, my friend."

* * *

Dexter Soloman entered the foyer of the central bank of Ancot. As he strolled across the marble floors and between the massive ornate columns, he could feel the stares of the guards. He was not dressed in a fashion befitting the most prestigious and powerful financial institution on the surface of Ancot. The Corinairans had given him civilian clothes to wear on his journey home instead of the imperial technician jumpsuit he had worn for the last few months. Not only was the clothing ill-suited for this lavish facility, it was also not of Ancotan style.

Dexter ignored their stares as well as the overly curious glances of the tellers and customers below as he ascended the staircase that swept along one side of the main lobby. As he reached the stairs, he could see that one of the guards below had already started to follow him. It brought a smile to his face.

He made his way down the long hallway and past the numerous thick wooden office doors, each with their golden engraved placards identifying the name and position of each office's occupant. As he approached the distant end of the hallway, he briefly peered back over his shoulder. His quick glance confirmed what the sudden cessation of the guard's footsteps on the stairway had already told him; the guard was now following him down the carpeted hallway.

Dexter came to the double doors at the end of the hallway. The placard on the door identified the office as belonging to the 'Chief Financial Officer and President' of the

bank. He opened the massive door and entered the well appointed office. Its decor was modest, yet it told of the status of its occupant. He approached the receptionist, an attractive, young woman seated perfectly behind the reception desk.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked politely. Dexter could tell she found his attire distasteful.

"I'd like to speak with your boss, if you don't mind."

"Of course," she answered politely. She was quite sure there was no way he would be allowed to bother the president of the bank, and her finger immediately took its position over the button that would summon security to her room within a moment. "And who shall I say is calling?" she asked, keeping to protocol.

"Tell him Dexter, his son, has returned," he announced with a smile.

The receptionist's expression changed from disdain to shock, and her finger pulled away from the button.

Chapter Six

"The final count is forty-four torpedoes," Cameron reported. "Thirty-two of them carry nuclear warheads, eight of which are variable yield. As of this morning, only twenty-eight of the nukes were ready. The other four are being fitted with torpedo tube adapters today. The remaining twelve torpedoes carry conventional warheads."

"Those won't do us much good against a warship," Nathan commented from behind his desk.

"If their shields are down and we throw several at them in rapid succession, it might."

"I'm hoping we won't get that desperate," Nathan said. "What about missiles?"

"Mister Willard and his crews found a total of eighty-seven missiles. There were another forty or so that were still in the loaders when our fighters took out the Loranoi's launchers. According to Mister Willard, most of those are either scrap or otherwise too unreliable to utilize. He recommends they all be disposed of as soon as possible for safety's sake."

"Any ideas?"

"Bundle them up and attach them to a maneuvering platform, then send them on a slow intercept course to the Darvano sun," Cameron suggested.

"Whatever way you think is best, Commander. What about rail gun rounds?"

"We're at about eighty-seven percent right now," Master Chief Montrose said. "We did find another five hundred thousand point-defense rounds in one of the factories down on Corinair. Either we missed them when we were running up the last loads before the Loranoi arrived, or they were still producing them right up until the planet was attacked and they went offline. Either way, that brings our point-defense load up to about twenty percent capacity."

"That's not going to give us more than about ten minutes of protection," Nathan said. "Did any of the production facilities on Corinair survive?"

"Yes, but their power grid is wiped out in that area."

"Can we get some portable generators in there or something?"

"They're working on it, sir," Master Chief Montrose explained, "but they have so many other priorities down there right now. Even if they dropped everything and concentrated on getting those factories back online, it would still take a couple days before they started producing anything."

"Yes, of course, Master Chief," Nathan agreed.

"Tug has his fabricators working around the clock for us," Cameron added. "He cranked out the last of the gear adapters so that all fighters we've captured can launch and recover properly, at least the ones that are configured for deep space combat. We could have him start producing point-defense rounds, but I think it would be better to get all the birds able to launch and recover normally. I don't think we want to hang around in Takaran orbit launching fighters any longer than we have to."

“Good thinking,” Nathan told her as he fought back a yawn. “Anything else from the Loranoi that we can use? Energy weapons? Shields?”

“No, sir. She was a missile frigate. She has some rail guns, but they’re not that much better than ours, at least not enough to take the time to integrate them into our systems. However, Mister Willard’s men are pulling them anyway to see if they can mount them on the jump shuttles to give them a way to defend themselves.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes, but he advised that it could take several weeks to make it work. The guns are automated, and they are controlled from a central targeting system. Senior Chief Taggart thinks he can rig up a simple point-and-shoot sighting system using the systems we employ to remotely control external cameras, but to be honest, that’s probably not going to be worth it either.”

“You’re probably right. Tell Willard to just pull them and box them up for now,” Nathan ordered. “Anything else over there?”

“No, sir, that’s about it as far as weapons are concerned. They do have some interesting medical stuff, though. Doctor Chen and one of the Corinairan doctors are over there checking it out. They’ll bring back anything that looks useful.”

“Good.”

“Mister Willard is also going through the Loranoi’s targeting systems and ECS suite to find a way to improve our own electronic countermeasures systems.”

“That’s good thinking,” Nathan commended. “What about her comm-logs?”

“Jessica’s people are going through them.”

“Good, there might be some useful information in there,” Nathan stated. “How are we doing on ground forces?”

“It’s a good thing that we recovered all those energy weapons from the Ancot garrison,” Cameron admitted. “If

we had to go into a ground battle with our own projectile weapons, we'd be in trouble. Jessica reports we're down to only a few thousand rounds total. As far as personnel, Lieutenant Waddell reports we are up to about a thousand men in total, and between the Corinari armories and the Ancot garrison, we've got more than enough weapons. He doesn't expect many more to report in from the surface. Besides, he's hesitant to pull everyone from the surface. At this point, he figures anyone who hasn't reported in is either dead or so involved in rescue operations that they can't report in. He's coming up short on officers to lead companies and platoons, however."

"Then tell him to start promoting people," Nathan ordered. "While you're at it, maybe we'd better promote him as well. What's the next rank in the Corinari?"

"I believe it's captain."

"Is he the senior man for the Corinari forces right now, after Major Prechitt?"

"I believe so," Cameron told him, "but perhaps we should leave this to Major Prechitt to handle."

"Very well."

"*Captain, comms,*" Naralena interrupted over the comm-set.

"Comms, Captain. Go ahead."

"*Sir, we're receiving a broken transmission from the surface of Corinair. It sounds like they've recovered the Prime Minister and several of his staff from the ruins of the command center. They're saying the Prime Minister wants to speak with you as soon as possible.*"

"What's the delay time from Karuzara to Corinair?" Nathan asked Cameron.

"Eight minutes."

"Can't hold a decent conversation that way."

"You are *not* going to the surface of Corinair, Captain," Cameron insisted. "It is still way to chaotic down there."

“Comms, have Major Prechitt retrieve the Prime Minister and whomever he wishes to bring with him and haul them back here ASAP.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you think he wants?” Cameron wondered.

“I’m sure he just wants to ensure that he is in control of things once more,” Nathan said, “at least in the eyes of his people.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Trust me on this one,” Nathan assured her. “I’ve got a lot of experience with politicians.”

* * *

Mister Willard had been on board the Loranoi for more than four days now. In that time, he and his team had scoured every corner of the ship in search of anything and everything that might be of use to the Aurora and the Alliance in general. It had been a difficult job, but as more and more technicians arrived from Corinair, the work load had begun to ease up a bit and had become less hectic.

His most recent task was to go through the Loranoi’s electronic countermeasures system in search of ways to inhibit or even defeat it during battle. So far, other than learning the exact frequencies that the system was using, he had found little of use. Nevertheless, he documented everything he did find, no matter how trivial it seemed, on his data pad for later review.

“That’s odd,” the man nearest him on the Loranoi’s bridge declared.

Willard looked away from his work and the ECS station. There was no one else near the two of them, so Mister Willard assumed that the man was talking to him. “What’s odd?”

“There’s a strange entry in the comm-log, right after Corinair transmitted their statement of independence but before the Aurora attacked.”

"What kind of entry?" Mister Willard asked.

"They transmitted an encrypted burst transmission to Corinair."

"To where on Corinair?" Mister Willard asked. He had worked as a communications technician on the Yamaro, and he knew that most transmissions from an imperial warship were targeted at a specific location, usually through a laser transmission system.

"To the whole planet," the technician responded. "It wasn't even using the laser-comm. It was radio frequency."

"What? What was in the message? Can you decrypt it?"

"I already did," the technician told him. "The Loranoi's captain gave us the encryption codes. It's an action alert code of some sort. 'Baka, one-one-seven, Rondall-Corpa five-three-nine, Topa Zeta fourteen ten.'" The technician looked at Mister Willard. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Topa Zeta fourteen ten refers to the time. Fourteen ten is probably the message time stamp."

"No, the time stamp on the entry is fourteen zero five."

Willard thought for a moment. "Did you run those codes through the system to see what they mean?"

"I was just doing that," the technician assured him. "Got it. Baka is used to signify a battle message. It's supposed to be followed by a number representing a battle plan or a targeting package."

"What about the second one, Rondall?" Mister Willard asked.

"Rondall means respond, retransmit, or repeat. Corpa means... oh, wait... when Rondall is followed by Corpa it means redirect and retransmit at coordinates. I'm pretty sure five-three-nine are the targeting coordinates for a laser transmission."

"They were sending out a planet wide hail, notifying someone on the surface of an upcoming laser transmission."

"Did anyone reply?" Mister Willard asked. The mystery was becoming more intriguing by the moment.

"No, at least not according to the comm-logs."

"Did they retransmit later?"

"Yes," the technician told him, "at fourteen ten hours they sent another message via laser-comm to coordinates five-three-nine on the surface of Corinair. The second message was a warning to get to assigned safe coordinates."

"They were warning someone that they were about to attack Corinair," Mister Willard surmised.

"But the Loranoi didn't attack the planet," the technician pointed out.

"You said this was before the Aurora attacked?"

"Yes, sir," the technician confirmed. "A few minutes after the second message, they went to battle stations. A few minutes after that, they dispatched a high-speed comm-drone to Takara informing them of the Aurora's attack on them."

"Then this was all before the Wallach arrived," Willard surmised. "The Loranoi intended to begin bombardment of Corinair as a show of force after the Prime Minister announced their independence from the empire. They didn't even know the Aurora was out there yet."

"What did they mean by assigned safe coordinates?" the technician wondered.

"I'm not sure," Mister Willard admitted, "but I have an idea." He moved to one of the many weapons stations on the Loranoi's bridge and began frantically scrolling through screens. "I saw something before, when I was looking at their targeting packages."

"Targeting packages?"

"It appears they have prewritten target lists, probably for every planet. For all we know, there could be different lists for the same planet but for different scenarios." He continued scrolling until he found what he was looking for. "There, package four. It was already selected to be sent to the orbit-to-surface batteries, but once the Aurora engaged

them, it was canceled.” He continued scrolling through the various screens, stopping abruptly again a few moments later. “Here it is, the assigned safe coordinates list.” He looked it over for a moment, then collapsed back in his chair in frustration. “There are over two hundred safe coordinates on this list, arranged by priority.” Willard sighed. “I don’t get it, why would they retransmit the message to specific coordinates? If they just wanted to warn all of their people about the impending attack, the first planet-wide broadcast would’ve accomplished that.”

“Maybe they wanted to make sure one particular person got the word. Perhaps someone important,” the technician speculated.

“Maybe, but how could they expect him to be in that location so quickly?”

“A relay set?”

“Of course,” Willard realized, feeling silly for not thinking of that himself. “The guy must have a relay set to forward laser-comm messages to him. Probably using something as simple as the public planetary comm-net.” Willard’s brain started clicking, and he suddenly started snapping his fingers. “We need to find out who lives at coordinates five-three-nine,” Willard ordered.

“First, we have to figure out where five-three-nine is,” the technician corrected. “The Ta’Akar use a different planetary location reference system than we do. We have to translate it into our own coordinate system.”

“Well get on it,” Willard insisted as he rose from his seat.

“I have no idea how to do that,” the technician admitted.

“Contact flight ops on the Aurora,” Willard instructed. “They’ll know how. Then figure out where it is and who lives there,” he added as he headed for the exit. “Once you do, call me on a secure channel and let me know, and do not tell anyone about this, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the technician promised, “but where are you going?”

“To talk to Lieutenant Commander Nash,” he announced as he came to the exit hatch. He stopped and turned back to the technician. “Get it done, and call me,” he ordered sternly as he turned back and exited.

“Aurora, Dawton, onboard the Loranoi,” the technician called over the comm-set.

“Wilton, Aurora. Go ahead,” Naralena’s voice answered.

“Aurora, please patch me through to flight ops.”

* * *

The shuttle carrying the Prime Minister of Corinair rolled into the Aurora’s main hangar bay. As soon as she came to a stop, her boarding ramp deployed, and the Prime Minister and his translator, Mister Briden, came bounding down the ramp followed by a civilian security guard.

“This doesn’t look good,” Nathan commented, noticing the expression on the Prime Minister’s face. Although he had obviously changed into fresh clothing and had taken care to clean himself up after being rescued from the rubble, his appearance was not of the usual polished and dignified politician. He was obviously shaken, and he appeared impatient as well, which was behavior Nathan had never seen from the Prime Minister in the past.

As the acting commander of all Corinari forces, Major Prechitt greeted the Prime Minister in proper military fashion. The response was not what he had expected.

“What is he saying?” Nathan asked Tug.

Tug listened intently for several moments. “I believe he is challenging the major’s right to take command of the Corinari...”

Nathan wasted no time before intervening. He did not need the two most powerful men on Corinair arguing in the middle of his hangar deck, especially in front of the numerous members of the Corinari working around them. “Gentlemen,” Nathan stated sternly, “this is not the place

for such discussions. We should take this to someplace more private.”

“Perhaps my briefing room,” Major Prechitt offered, ignoring the Prime Minister’s continued protestations.

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Nathan agreed, gesturing to the Prime Minister. “Prime Minister?” The Prime Minister began a new argument, this one aimed at Nathan yet still in his native language. “That was not a request, sir,” Nathan added.

The Prime Minister discontinued his tirade, noticing the look of conviction in Captain Scott’s eyes. Frustrated that he had little choice in the matter, the Prime Minister fell in step and began to follow the guards out of the hangar deck.

Nathan moved closer to Major Prechitt. “You’re sure about this?”

“I have followed regulations to the letter in this matter, Captain, I assure you,” Major Prechitt answered as they followed the Prime Minister and his party into the corridor.

“Good enough for me,” Nathan stated.

It took less than a minute to reach the flight operations briefing room and even less time once they entered for the Prime Minister to resume his argument.

“The Prime Minister insists that Major Prechitt is not qualified to take command of all Corinari forces,” Mister Briden translated on behalf of the Prime Minister.

“I was completely within military regulations in my assumption of command,” Major Prechitt argued in Angla out of respect for Captain Scott. The major was a firm believer that, on board the Aurora, the primary language should be Angla. He had held his own men to this requirement as well as himself.

“You are a pilot,” Mister Briden protested. “Your command experience is almost nonexistent, and your tactical training is limited to matters of aerial combat. You are not fit to lead the entire military...”

“Show me someone who is,” Major Prechitt interrupted, “and I’ll gladly step down. But until then, regulations state that it is my duty to assume command. The very same regulations that the Prime Minister and the joint nations military council put into effect twenty-five years ago, I might add.”

“The Prime Minister will take command of the Corinari,” Mister Briden announced.

“Are you joking?” Major Prechitt asked. “How is the Prime Minister more qualified? What military training does he possess?”

Nathan scowled. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Tug said nothing as he observed the Prime Minister’s lack of contribution to the conversation. He nudged Nathan, pointing with his gaze at the Prime Minister, as Mister Briden and Major Prechitt continued to argue.

* * *

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Commander,” Mister Willard stated as he entered the Aurora’s intel shack.

“Mister Willard,” Jessica responded, somewhat surprised, “I thought you were still on the Loranoi.”

“I was, but I discovered something, something I think you might find of interest.”

“You came all the way back to Karuzara just to show me something? Have you heard of comm-sets?”

“I do not yet know enough about your communications systems and their security features. I thought it best that I present this information in person.”

“Very well, spit it out then,” Jessica told him, growing impatient.

“We discovered entries in the Loranoi’s communications log. They transmitted a planet-wide alert to all of Corinair.”

“When?”

“After the Prime Minister openly declared their independence but before the Aurora attacked the Loranoi.

The message they transmitted was a warning of a message to follow a few minutes later. While the first message was over radio frequencies, the second message was via laser comm directed at specific coordinates announced in the first message. The second message was a warning to a Takaran operative on Corinair that they were about to bombard the planet. They were warning the operative to get to safe coordinates."

"We already knew there were Takaran operatives on Corinair. They had an entire Anti-Insurgency Unit stationed there the whole time."

"Yes, but the coordinates they were transmitting to were not at the location that Mister Dumar indicated as the command center for the Anti-Insurgency Unit."

"Where were they?" Jessica asked.

"At first, I did not know. Then I remembered a list of coordinates that were on a 'safe list' in the Loranoi's targeting system."

"What, like a 'no-strike' list?"

"Yes," Mister Willard confirmed. "The coordinates for the laser comm message were on that list."

"Who did the message go to?"

"I had one of your technicians run the location through flight ops. They still have access to the master database that the Corinairan navigational system used before the network was destroyed..."

Jessica grabbed Mister Willard by the shoulders and shook him. "You're killing me here! Who already?!"

"Mister Briden. The coordinates are Mister Briden's residence. I figure he has a comm relay in place there."

"Of course he does," Jessica agreed, throwing her hands up as everything fell into place. "All spies have a comm..." Her expression soured. "Oh shit!" she exclaimed reaching up to her comm-set. "Stay here!" she ordered as she tapped her comm-set and headed out the door. "Comms, Nash! Location of the Prime Minister and Mister Briden!"

* * *

Nathan's gaze shifted between Mister Briden and the Prime Minister as Major Prechitt continued to argue over the major's assumption of command over the Corinari. He too noticed that the Prime Minister was not saying much.

"Excuse me, Mister Briden," Nathan interrupted. "I can't help but notice that the Prime Minister isn't saying much."

Mister Briden stopped speaking for a moment, caught off guard by the captain's statement. "What?"

"I mean, you are a translator, right?"

"Of course, but I don't see..."

"Well, how can you be translating when the Prime Minister isn't even speaking?"

Mister Briden suddenly seemed more nervous. "I am well aware of the Prime Minister's position on the matter," he defended as his eyes danced from person to person.

Nathan noticed Mister Briden's dancing eyes as well. They seemed to be constantly checking out not only he and Tug, but also the two Corinari guards at the doorway and the one standing next to him that had accompanied them on the flight from Corinair. "Well, maybe his position might change if you would tell him what everyone is saying."

Jessica charged down the main corridor aft toward the hangar bay. "Seal off all corridors leading to that section," she barked over her comm-set as she ran. "I want armed guards at every intersection! No alarms, understood? And no one moves in or takes any overt action until I say!"

Sergeant Weatherly was on his way to chow when he saw Jessica running toward him. "Sir?"

"Fall in behind me, Sergeant," Jessica ordered.

Sergeant Weatherly fell in behind her, matching her step for step as they jogged down the main corridor. "What's going on?"

"We've got a spy on board, and he's with the captain and Tug right now."

Jessica came to a stop at the aft end of the main corridor where it split to wrap around either side of the main hangar bay. She was immediately met by two armed Corinari coming from the port corridor.

"Port side is locked down, sir," the first guard reported. "Main hangar bay is also locked down. The aft end should be locked down any moment now."

"What about vertical access ladders?" Jessica asked.

"Men are moving into position above and below that section now. Give them two minutes to get set."

"Comms, Nash," Jessica called over her comm-set. "Patch me into the comm-sets of the two Corinari guards that are with the captain and isolate. I don't want anyone else on the line."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered. *"One moment."*

"Weatherly you're with me," Jessica ordered. She turned to the Corinari guard. "Tell all your men Briden does not get off this ship alive."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's go," she announced as she pulled her weapon and brought it up to shoulder level. She held it out in front of her with both hands in a firing position and started moving carefully forward into the starboard corridor. The sergeant brought his weapon into the same position and followed.

"I have you patched into the guards only, sir. As soon as you start talking, you'll be speaking to them and myself only."

"This is Lieutenant Commander Nash. Do not respond, do not flinch, do not make any movement that might indicate someone is speaking to you over your comm-set. The man in the room with you, Mister Briden, may be a Takaran spy. We have sealed off all exits and there are armed guards everywhere. Do not take any action until I say. We are moving into position now. We should be set in

one minute.” Jessica continued moving down the corridor, turning and heading aft as the corridor wrapped around the starboard side of the main hangar deck. “Stand by.”

The older Corinari guard standing next to the exit and closest to Captain Scott did not move as Jessica’s voice had instructed, he only continued staring straight ahead. His training and years of experience had taught him how to take note of details within his field of vision without looking directly at them. His younger partner, standing on the other side of Tug, was not as experienced. When Jessica’s announcement squawked on his comm-set, his hand instinctively reached for his comm-set. A moment later, his eyes shifted toward Mister Briden, quickly assessing the threat level. The first thing he noticed was that the civilian security guard that had come with the Prime Minister and Mister Briden was standing on Mister Briden’s right side. The guard was left-handed and wore his weapon on his left hip, the one closest to the suspect. Despite his best efforts, the younger Corinari guard’s eyes widened slightly in concern.

The Corinari guard’s sudden change in expression did not go unnoticed by Mister Briden, just as the hushed chatter over the guard’s comm-set had not. Mister Briden’s complexion paled somewhat, small beads of sweat forming on his brow as his body physiologically prepared itself for action and adrenaline dumped into his arteries.

Nathan, who had not heard Jessica’s comm chatter, noticed Mister Briden’s sudden change. “Is there a problem, Mister Briden?”

That was enough to trigger his instincts. Mister Briden’s right elbow shot up into the nose of the civilian security guard, stunning him just long enough to pull his weapon from the man’s holster on his left hip. In one smooth motion, Briden pressed the activation button on the energy pistol and fingered the safety off just as the tip of the weapon

found its place at the back of the Prime Minister's skull. He held the Prime Minister in front of him as a shield.

Both Corinari guards drew their weapons in an instant, each taking immediate aim at Mister Briden as best they could.

"Drop your weapons!" Briden yelled. "Drop them now, or the Prime Minister dies!"

Neither Corinari guard did as they were told.

"DO IT!" Briden repeated, more adamant than before.

"Shit!" Jessica swore as she heard the yelling from just outside the flight ops briefing room. "Change in plans," she ordered, changing direction toward the access ladder on the opposite wall. "Follow me," she ordered Sergeant Weatherly as she dropped her gun back in its holster and slide down the ladder to the deck below.

"Do as he says," Nathan ordered the men calmly.

The guard to Nathan's left glanced at him for a second, unsure if he should comply.

"That's an order," Nathan added. The guard began to lower his weapon slowly to the floor, his partner doing the same.

"That's right," Briden said. "Do as he says." He watched as the guards set their weapons down on the floor. "Now, kick them toward me."

The guards gently kicked their weapons, sending them sliding across the deck so they stopped at the feet of the Prime Minister. Briden looked down at the civilian security guard who was down on his knees, holding his bleeding nose. "Move over there," he ordered the bleeding man. The civilian guard continued to hold his nose, moving across the room to stand next to Major Prechitt and the Corinari guard next to Nathan.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” Nathan asked.
“Walk out of here?”

After moving to the next corridor over, Jessica and Sergeant Weatherly ascended the next ladder to the main deck again, finding themselves on the opposite side of the flight ops briefing room and just aft of it. She moved forward, drawing her weapon once again as she peered into the open doorway to the flight ops briefing room. She could see Tug clearly, and she could make out the captain’s hands as he talked to Mister Briden. She could also see the Prime Minister’s feet as well as the two weapons lying in front of them. There was also blood on the deck, but she didn’t know who it belonged to. She gestured to Sergeant Weatherly to move into position on the left side of the doorway, then looked directly at Tug.

“I was thinking I might borrow one of your little jump ships, Captain,” Mister Briden answered. “One big enough to take the Prime Minister, Mister Tugwell, and myself back to Takara.”

Tug noticed Jessica outside in the corridor as she signaled for him to move to his right. Tug did not look directly at her for fear of alerting Mister Briden to her presence. Instead, with his hands still held up at shoulder level, he took a step to his right. “What interest am I to you?”

“You think I do not know who you are?” Briden answered. “When I return to Takara with a jump drive and you as my prisoner, Caius will reward me handsomely.”

“I think not today,” Tug stated calmly. He then looked to Jessica. Briden’s eyes widened as he realized that someone was behind him. Instinctively spinning around to his right, the muzzle of his weapon left the back of the Prime

Minister's skull and swung slightly to the right toward Nathan.

The Corinari guard to the captain's left saw the change in Mister Briden's weapon and quickly moved out in front of the captain.

Jessica, who was standing in the corridor, fired a single shot from her pistol, placing her bullet squarely in the middle of Mister Briden's forehead as Tug pulled the Prime Minister away from Mister Briden's grip. Briden's weapon discharged as blood and brain tissue spewed out of the gaping hole blown in of the back of his head by Jessica's single, well placed round, sending a bolt of red energy across the room into the chest of the guard attempting to shield the captain from harm. The guard fell backward against Nathan, taking them both to the deck at the same time as the lifeless body of Mister Briden.

"Clear!" Jessica yelled. Corinari guards rushed in from the far door behind Nathan with two more following Sergeant Weatherly in from Jessica's side. Jessica also entered the briefing room and looked around. Tug was on the floor on one side holding the Prime Minister and shielding him from harm. Mister Briden was lying on his left side, the back of his head oozing copious amounts of blood onto the deck. Nathan was on his back near the other door waiting for the guards to pull the wounded Corinari guard off of him. Jessica picked up the weapon that Mister Briden had dropped and handed it to the civilian security guard still holding his nose. "I think you lost this," she told him with disdain as she tapped her comm-set. "Med teams to flight ops briefing room."

Jessica reached out her hand and helped Tug off the floor. "Good job," she told him.

"How do you say it? Nice shootin', Tex?" he joked.

Jessica smiled. "Yeah, something like that." She moved over to Nathan, squatting down next to him as the wounded

guard was lifted away by the rest of the Corinari quickly filling the room. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Nathan answered, a bit dismayed at what had transpired. "What the hell happened?"

"Briden was a spy," Jessica told him.

"What? How did you..."

"You can thank Mister Willard," she told him as she helped him to his feet.

"What?"

"I'll explain later."

Nathan looked at the wounded Corinari guard. He was still awake, but the expression on his face told Nathan that, although the man would live, the pain he was experiencing was considerable. He turned to the wounded guard. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, sir," the wounded Corinari guard answered, wincing in pain.

Nathan brushed himself off and made his way over to Tug who was speaking with the Prime Minister and Major Prechitt. "Everyone okay?"

"We are all fine, Captain."

"I believe we were discussing the Prime Minister's objections to Major Prechitt assuming command of the Corinari," Nathan stated.

Tug looked briefly at the Prime Minister and Major Prechitt who appeared to be getting along much better than before. "I suspect we will be able to come to an agreement, Captain."

* * *

Nathan strode into the command briefing room, the day's events racing through his mind. "As you were," he ordered before the guard at the door could alert the other attendees to his arrival. It seemed the more tired he was, the less patience he had for military protocol.

"I'll get straight to it," Nathan announced as he took his seat at the head of the briefing room table. "I'm inclined to approve Tug's plan, but there are a few things I'd like to go over before I green-light it. My first concern is the space jump. Assuming that it is possible, is there any chance the Answari air defense batteries will detect the jumpers and fire on them?"

"Doubtful," Tug responded.

"Not exactly the response I was hoping for," Nathan admitted.

"Captain," Major Prechitt interrupted, "I would be inclined to agree with Mister Tugwell. When I bailed out in orbit, my transponder was damaged. I had to hike several kilometers to the nearest city in order to call in and request pick up by Corinari Command. I later learned that, without the transponder signal, our forces had no way to track my descent. There is almost no metal in our suits, so they do not show up on most tracking systems. So unless the Ta'Akar have some tracking system we do not yet know about, I am confident that our strike team will go undetected."

"At least until they get into visual range," Jessica pointed out.

"If we jump at night, wearing black gear, no one would see us until we were practically on top of them," Tug pointed out. "In fact, as Answari is near the coast, she sometimes has a thick layer of fog in the early morning that does not burn off until the sun rises. That might give us additional cover."

"It would also make it more dangerous for the strike teams," Nathan observed, "so let's be careful what we wish for."

"The auto-nav systems used by Corinari paratroopers does not require good visibility to operate," Lieutenant Waddell added. "The fog would not impede their accuracy."

“They’ll be dropping into a city full of buildings,” Jessica pointed out. “Will your auto-nav systems steer them around man-made obstacles such as building spires, streetlights, trees...”

“Unfortunately, no,” Lieutenant Waddell admitted.

“Okay, so weather might be an issue,” Nathan said, “not only at the drop zone, but also at the upper altitudes that they’ll be passing through. All of that will have to be taken into account.”

“We have ample data on the weather patterns of Takara,” Tug explained. “This information is publicly broadcast all around the planet. We can pick up the forecasts during our last recon before the attack and adjust our timetable accordingly.”

“Very well,” Nathan said, accepting their answers. “My next concern is with the palace guards. Historically, such guards are the elite of any military. They are also usually the most loyal and, therefore, the most dangerous.”

“That was indeed the case in the past,” Mister Dumar admitted, “but over the last decade as the Ta’Akar have withdrawn their forces from worlds outside the cluster and concentrated them in and around their home system, the people of Answari—as well as the palace guards—have become more complacent. In addition, it is common for noble families of greater influence to get their sons assigned to positions in palace security. Many believe this has had a negative effect on the combat effectiveness of the palace guard. In fact, many consider the palace guards to be more a ceremonial group than an effective combat unit.”

“The whiskey has been watered down,” Jessica mused.

“Something to that effect,” Dumar said, “if I understand the use of your metaphor correctly.”

“So you believe that the palace guards are not a threat?” Cameron wondered.

“Of course they are a threat, Commander,” Tug insisted. “He is only saying that they are no more a threat than any

other imperial combat unit. It is the Ghatazhak that should be feared, but they are usually assigned to ships of the line, not to the palace guard."

"The other issue is resources. We only have fifteen hundred men at our disposal. Most of your invasion plans call for upwards of ten thousand men, Tug."

"Those battle plans were originally conceived without consideration of jump-drive technology," Tug defended.

"Perhaps," Nathan said, "but still, fifteen hundred men seems a bit light, don't you think? Besides, we only have six jump shuttles, one of which we have to leave behind as a comm relay with Darvano, as they will be unprotected should an imperial warship suddenly arrive while we're gone. With only five shuttles, it will take fifteen jumps to deliver the entire ground force to the streets of Answari."

"Actually, it will take more like thirty jumps," Lieutenant Waddell corrected. "The auto-nav rigs are bulkier than standard rigs, and if we pack them into the shuttles too tightly, we are asking for problems."

"How many can we safely carry per jump then?" Cameron asked.

"I would not put more than ten or twelve into a single shuttle," Lieutenant Waddell told them, "not if you want to ensure a safe jump."

"What if the shuttles land on the surface, or even hover and have them fast-rope down?" Jessica suggested.

"That would increase the number of troops per jump to twenty," Lieutenant Waddell agreed, "but it would also increase their exposure to enemy fire. The last thing any pilot wants to do is hover over a hot landing zone."

"The argument does not matter," Major Prechitt told them. "We only have about three hundred auto-nav jump rigs, and close to a hundred of those will be used by the first group that is space jumping."

"What about standard jump rigs?" Lieutenant Waddell asked. "Surely we have more than enough of those."

“Yes, but Answari is an enormous city, and it is densely populated,” Tug explained. “To land a large force of paratroopers, you need wide-open space. That would mean they would have to land on the outskirts of the city and work their way inward toward the palace. That would be over twenty kilometers, during which they would face considerable resistance from civilian security forces. Even with their greater numbers, it would take too long, and there would be too much loss of life.”

“The first wave of jump shuttles should take them completely by surprise, sir,” Jessica pointed out. “The second wave may also be able to get in and out without taking too much fire, but the third wave? If that LZ isn’t buttoned down by the time the third wave jumps in, they’re going to get pounded.”

“You’re going to have to secure the landing zone as quickly as possible, Lieutenant,” Nathan advised him. “If you don’t, you’re going to have a hard time getting reinforced any time soon.”

“If you want me to secure the area, we will need air support,” Lieutenant Waddell replied. “If we don’t own the skies above our heads, their air support will be all over us.”

“Once those big guns are taken out, we can commit at least thirty to forty atmospheric fighters to the surface campaign,” Major Prechitt added.

“That will not be enough,” Tug warned. “There are at least one hundred fighters stationed at the Answari airbase.”

“We’ll have to draw them off somehow,” Nathan said.

“It wouldn’t hurt to send a few cruise missiles their way,” Jessica suggested. “Maybe have Josh and Loki do their thing again.”

“If successful, that would greatly diminish their strength,” Tug noted, “perhaps even by half.”

“It would only be a temporary solution at best,” Dumar added. “The next closest airbase is at Dahleek, just over two

thousand kilometers west of Answari. They would be able to respond in less than an hour.”

“If everything goes according to plan, this will be over in less than an hour,” Tug commented.

“That, is a really big ‘if’,” Nathan pointed out. He leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Look, this is obviously a really big operation with multiple elements, each working toward separate yet related objectives. Perhaps it would be easier to look at each of them separately. For example, the Aurora’s job is to deliver the jumpers to orbit, keep the rest of the imperial fleet away from Takara, and to make sure that the Avendahl doesn’t surprise us all by powering up and jumping into the fray.” Nathan looked at Tug. “What’s the primary objective of the jumpers?”

“Ten teams will jump from orbit. Eight of them are tasked with destroying or otherwise disabling the air defense batteries around Answari. The other two teams will drop inside the palace grounds wearing the uniforms of the palace guards. The first team will destroy the command center, and the second team will locate and execute Caius.”

“What about the ground assault?” Nathan asked.

“Their job is to convince the palace guards that their objective is to capture the palace through a direct assault,” Tug explained.

“Convince?” Lieutenant Waddell asked.

“Yes. It is extremely important that the palace guards, as well as imperial command, believe that your forces and the fighters that are providing your air support are the only threat they face. This diversion is vital to the success of the teams entering the palace grounds. The empire, although recently decreased in size, is quite powerful. If their command and control structure is left in place, even without Caius, they will rally their forces and go on the offensive. They will squash your forces with ease once they are allowed to coordinate and concentrate their resources. Without this ability, they will be like confused children,

seeking only to protect themselves until someone tells them what to do. If we are successful, this confusion may last months, quite possibly even years. During this time, the empire will cease to exist as we currently know it. Darvano and all the other systems within the Pentaurus cluster and beyond will no longer be restricted from interstellar travel or technological growth. More importantly, all the systems will be given an opportunity to develop defenses of their own. That is why we seek to cut off the head of the dragon.”

The briefing room was quiet for a moment as they all considered Tug’s impassioned words. Nathan took a moment to observe the faces of everyone in the room. He could see the doubt in their eyes, but he could also see their resolve, their acceptance of their duty. All except for Cameron.

“Commander?” Nathan asked. “Something on your mind?”

“I’m just wondering how we’re going to coordinate all of this,” she answered. “Space jumpers, missile launches, jump shuttles ferrying in troops at regular intervals. We’re going to have forces on the ground in a dozen different locations, fighters in the air and in orbit, maybe even further out in the system—not to mention what the Aurora is going to be doing. The communications logistics alone are daunting.”

“What’s your point, Commander?” Nathan asked.

“Normally this would be handled in our CIC,” Cameron told them, “but we’re going to be jumping all over the system, which means the transmission times between parties will be constantly changing. Also, if the ground forces need to contact us, they’re not going to have any idea where we are or how long it will take for us to receive their transmission and respond. That’s a hell of a way to fight a battle, sir.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Nathan admitted, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

"To be honest, I do not believe any of us had," Tug agreed.

"Any ideas, Commander?" Nathan asked.

"We need a stationary command and control point," she stated. "Preferably one close enough to the action to be effective in coordinating our forces."

"Well, we can't very well yank out our CIC and leave it in orbit over Takara," Nathan stated.

"Of course not," Cameron agreed, "but maybe we could set one up inside a shuttle and park it at one of Takara's gravity points."

"That would only be a few seconds delay for comm signals," Jessica stated.

"It would be at risk," Dumar pointed out. "With all the signals it would be sending out, it would be too easy to detect and destroy."

"We could park it just outside the system and use a jump shuttle to relay comm signals between the CIC and the units on the surface."

"We need those shuttles to ferry troops to the ground," Lieutenant Waddell reminded them.

"The jump shuttles could carry comm signals with each jump," Cameron suggested. "Once all troops are on the ground, they could then concentrate on just carrying comm signals back and forth."

"What about comms with the Aurora?" Nathan asked.

"We'll just have to jump back every so often for an update," Cameron decided. "Once the jump shuttles are done ferrying troops to the surface, one or two of them could also be used to run comm messages between the Aurora and the CIC."

"Not bad," Nathan admitted.

"How the hell are we going to build a CIC in a shuttle on such short notice?" Jessica wondered.

"We could use one of our mobile command posts," Lieutenant Waddell said.

“Will they fit inside a shuttle?” Cameron asked.

“Not inside a jump shuttle,” he admitted, “but I’m pretty sure it would fit inside one of the bigger cargo shuttles. You might even have enough room to fully extend its bays.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to wire its power and comm gear into the cargo shuttle’s systems, sir,” Master Chief Montrose assured Nathan.

“But it won’t be able to jump,” Jessica pointed out.

“It doesn’t need to,” Cameron reminded her. “The whole point is to have a command post in a fixed position that everyone can jump back to and exchange comm signals. It could also be the point where we would rendezvous with the jump shuttles to refill them with troops.”

“Why not just park a few cargo shuttles out there alongside the CIC shuttle and fill them full of troops?” Master Chief Montrose suggested. “We could fit docking collars on them so the jump shuttles could transfer troops over each time.”

“Might as well join them all together and make a floating logistics station out of it,” Jessica said, half joking.

“That’s not a bad idea either,” Nathan admitted.

“Uh, Captain?” Cameron interrupted. “Who’s going to run this CIC?”

Nathan looked at her. “It was your idea.” He turned back to the others. “I think we have the workings of a decent plan brewing here,” he announced. “However, it will depend on many factors, of which resources are only a small part. If we don’t think we have what we need, we don’t do it. Furthermore, I believe our chances of success increase considerably if we can get some inside assistance from Mister Dumar’s contact. I might even go as far as to say that our plan hinges on inside help. Therefore, I’m going to green-light this plan under four conditions. First, show me an overall plan, complete with timings, order of battle, contingency plans and logistics. Second, prove to me that we have the resources to pull it off. Third, show me we have

a weather window over the target that works for us. And finally, make sure we have our inside man lined up.” Nathan looked them over, expecting rebuttal but finding none. “Very well, dismissed.”

As the others began to make their way out of the command briefing room, Cameron just sat there looking dumbfounded.

“Problem?” Nathan asked.

Cameron watched out of the corner of her eye as the last person left the room. “I’m not sure I’m the right person to run the CIC,” she confided.

“Nonsense,” Nathan responded confidently. “Show me someone better.”

“Sir, it’s just...”

“Cam, I know,” Nathan interrupted. “What you went through would’ve shaken up any of us. Hell, we’re all pretty fucked up right now. We’ve just been too busy to deal with it.” Nathan laughed slightly. “Once we get back to Earth, I suspect fleet is going to ground us all and order us to therapy for a few years.”

Cameron’s eyes stared at the table in front of her as she spoke. “How did you know?”

“Anyone who knows you can tell that you haven’t been yourself since you came back on board, Cam—if for no other reason than that you haven’t been chewing anyone’s ass lately.” Nathan got up and moved over toward her, taking the seat next to hers. “You are the only one on board that I can trust with this responsibility; you know that.”

Cameron nodded her head. “Yes, sir.”

“Take whomever you need to fill that floating CIC,” Nathan told her. “Just be sure to leave me a bridge crew,” he added as he rose.

“Sir,” Cameron asked, her eyes coming up from the table to meet his, “are we ever going to get home?”

“One way or another, with or without this Alliance, this ship is getting home,” he promised as he headed for the

exit.

“Nathan,” Cameron called after him. Nathan turned to face her from the hatchway. “Thanks,” she told him, a slight smile creeping into her worried expression. Nathan smiled back, waving to her as he stepped through the hatchway.

Chapter Seven

“Thirty seconds to drone intercept,” Mister Willard announced from the back seat of the jump interceptor.

“We’re currently two light days from Takara,” Josh announced from the front seat of the cramped cockpit.

Mister Willard reached up to one of several electronics boxes that had been temporarily secured to the top of the dashboard cowling in front of him and pressed a button. “Transmitting dropout signal.”

“Any idea what’s in the message?” Josh asked.

“I did not ask.”

“How could you not ask?”

“I did not need to know,” Mister Willard stated. “Fifteen seconds to drone intercept.”

“But you’re the one sending the message. Seems like you of all people should know what’s in it.”

“If I had needed to know, they would have told me,” Mister Willard insisted. “Besides, I am not the one sending the message; I am only the one transmitting it to the drone.”

"It still doesn't seem right."

The sensor suite beeped at Mister Willard. "New contact," he stated. "It is the comm-drone. Transmitting message transfer challenge."

"I would want to know," Josh stated.

"I've heard that about you," Mister Willard responded. "Message challenge accepted. Transmitting sender ID."

"Heard what about me?" Josh wondered.

"That you are very curious."

"Nothing wrong with that," Josh defended. "That's how I learn things."

"You can learn by observation as well," Mister Willard told him. "Sender ID accepted. The drone believes we are the Yamaro. Transmitting messages."

"Watching is boring," Josh told him. "I like to do things or talk about things."

"I've been told that as well."

"By who? Tug?" Josh asked. "That old man does *not* want to talk much, except to tell me what I'm doing wrong."

"Mister Tugwell is a very wise man. I am sure he only wishes to enlighten you and help you improve yourself."

"I don't know about wise. I mean, how wise is it to fight for over thirty years, and against the empire no less? It's like banging your head against the side of a mountain, it is. You're more likely to knock yourself silly before the mountain crumbles."

"Yet we are all about to bang our heads against that very same mountain," Mister Willard commented as he monitored the transmission of the message queue to the Savoy comm-drone.

"Yeah, good point."

"Messages have been sent."

"Messages?" Josh wondered. "I thought we were only sending one message."

"I added the messages that were in the queue from the Yamaro's comm-system prior to her surrender to make it

look more legitimate. I even faked a few dozen comm-log entries to make it look more authentic. If we had transmitted a single message, it would have raised suspicion."

"Good thinking, but won't, 'Hey, I know it has been awhile, but would you be willing to help us overthrow the empire and depose Caius?' make them even more suspicious?"

"Challenge is closed," Mister Willard announced. "I'm sure the message is more subtle than that."

"Subtle? How does one ask something like that subtly?"

"I am sure the message appears routine on the surface, but some words or phrases within the message will alert the sender to look deeper. Is that not how such things usually work?"

"In the vid-flicks, maybe. I wouldn't know how they do it in the real world."

"I am sure that Mister Dumar knows what he is doing," Mister Willard assured Josh.

"I hope so. The guy makes me nervous. He's always looking at everyone, watching them and stuff."

"I believe it is the nature of people in his occupation." Mister Willard looked at his sensor screen. "The comm-drone is going back into FTL."

"Maybe, but I still don't trust him," Josh said as he changed course. "Coming about."

"You trust Mister Tugwell, do you not?"

"Of course, but he's laid his ass on the line for us more than once."

"Well he seems to trust Mister Dumar, as does Lieutenant Commander Nash and Captain Scott."

"Lieutenant Commander Nash doesn't trust anyone," Josh snickered, "and as far as the captain goes, he doesn't trust everyone as much as everybody thinks he does. He's smarter than that."

“He trusted me,” Mister Willard defended, “and I was not only a member of an enemy crew, but also the leader of a mutiny.”

“The captain likes to give people a little trust, you know, just to see if they’re worth it. That’s what he did with me and Loki.”

“I have read the combat logs,” Mister Willard told him. “In your case, he had little choice.”

“Maybe the first time, but he did trust us enough to let us play in his simulator beforehand.”

“The comm-drone has departed the area. It should arrive in Takara within a few hours. Our mission is complete.”

“Great,” Josh declared. “As soon as we get back, I’m getting cleaned up and locating some food. Me and Loki got two more systems to recon.” Josh yanked the flight control stick to the left, twisting it slightly as he did so. “Coming about.”

Mister Willard shut down the Yamaro’s transponder as well as their communications gear as the jump interceptor completed her turn.

“On course for Darvano,” Josh announced. “Running jump plot now.” Josh punched the new destination into the jump drive’s plotting system. “What are you going to do when you get back?”

“I must begin reprogramming the captured comm-drones,” Mister Willard said. “They must be converted into FTL kinetic kill vehicles.”

“That last one sure did a number on the Wallach,” Josh stated. He had seen the footage from the jump interceptor’s cameras. “Hey, can one of those things really crack a planet in half?”

“I do not believe so. However, when traveling faster than light, they carry staggering amounts of kinetic energy. At the very least, I expect that such an impact would end all life on the target world.”

“Even so, it sure would be something to see,” Josh mumbled. “Five seconds to jump.”

“I hope we never get such an opportunity,” Mister Willard responded as he flipped his auto-darkening visor down to protect his eyes from the jump flash.

“Yeah, let’s hope.” Josh lowered his auto-visor as the two jump fields surrounding the interceptor, one expanding and one contracting, received immense amounts of energy. The two fields intersected just as the additional energy was delivered to them, resulting in the blue-white flash that accompanied every jump. A moment later, the flash cleared. “Jump complete,” Josh announced as he raised his visor. “You know, they really need to come up with an auto-darkening visor that works better. I’m always afraid I’m going to forget to drop this thing in time, and it never gets light enough for me to see my flight displays.”

“Have you spoken to anyone about this problem?” Mister Willard asked.

“Position confirmed,” Josh announced routinely. “We’re back in the Darvano system, coming up fast on Karuzara. Beginning deceleration.” Josh reversed his thrust feed so that all four of his rotating thrust ports had flipped over and were pointing forward, then brought his throttles up to full power in order to avoid slamming into the Karuzara asteroid base. As usual, he was flying with his typical ‘full blast or full stop’ style, as Loki had nicknamed it long ago. “Like who?” Josh asked. “Normally I would ask Marcus, but he’s so busy being chief of the deck, he’s got no time for me.”

“I will speak to one of the Corinairan technicians about this on your behalf, if you’d like,” Mister Willard offered as he tried to hide his nervousness over the speed of their approach.

“Sure, thanks,” Josh answered, calm as could be. “You want to contact Karuzara so they don’t shoot us down first?”

“Of course,” Mister Willard responded as he keyed his comm-set. “Karuzara command, Falcon one. Request

clearance to approach and enter Karuzara air space.”

“Falcon one, Karuzara Command,” the voice answered in Angla, which was fast becoming the common language of the Alliance, despite the many different tongues spoken by its various members. “You are cleared for Karuzara air space. Contact Aurora flight ops on seven one zero on approach. Welcome back.”

“Hey, Josh, I’ve been meaning to ask you; how did you come up with the name Falcon?”

“It was Captain Scott’s idea,” Josh explained as he flipped the interceptor over. He moved his throttles back to zero and swung his thrust nozzles aft once more, then began maneuvering the interceptor in order to line it up with the trench in the surface of the asteroid that led to the entry tunnel. “It’s some kind of bird back on Earth, supposed to be really fast. A bird of prey, I think. Swoops down out of the sky like lightning to strike its target. Kind of cool, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so.”

* * *

“All comm-drones are currently being reprogrammed with the same code that Mister Willard and I created to destroy the Wallach,” Vladimir announced. “Deliza and I have added some additional subroutines that will allow us to transmit targeting coordinates and conditions when the jump interceptor transmits a launch order.”

“Good,” Nathan remarked from his seat at the head of the briefing table. “That will give us some last second flexibility, which I suspect we will need.” Nathan looked over his last ship’s condition report. “How about our guns?” he asked Vladimir.

“We still have four rail guns down,” he admitted, “but to give us better overall coverage, we pulled parts from some and moved them to another. So instead of having four guns

down all on the port side, there is nowhere along the ship's perimeter where there are two guns out side by side."

"So instead of one side being weak, all sides are weak?" Nathan wondered. "I'm not so sure that's a good thing, Vlad."

"We can alter the firing scripts to make the guns coverage zones wider," Jessica suggested. "We can also run them at their maximum rate of fire when necessary. That should make up for the missing guns."

"What about our four quad guns?" Nathan asked. "Did we ever get any ammunition for them?"

"We got a few thousand rounds at best," Cameron reported. "The Yamaro asteroid started producing slugs a few hours ago. If we're lucky, we might end up with about ten thousand rounds."

"That's about a fifteen second blast if we're shooting all four quads," Jessica pointed out.

"While the quads work, they will only work from their topside position," Vladimir warned. "We had to pull the door motors from their bottom sides and use them to replace the burnt out motors on the doors for the secondary heat exchangers."

"No sweat," Nathan assured him. "For a fifteen second blast, I'm sure we can just roll over and bring them to bear. What about the hole in our port side?"

"There is nothing that can be done about that right now," Vladimir told him. "It will take weeks to repair the damage."

"Well, at least the port launch bay is still accessible," Nathan stated.

"Are we still planning on running the flight deck all open?" Major Prechitt asked.

"Once we get all the staging stuff positioned, yes," Nathan told him. "Expect to go to an open deck about an hour before mission zero."

“We now have thirty-six deep space fighters and fifty atmospheric fighters, all manned and ready,” Major Prechitt added. “We’re topped off with aviation fuel, and we’ve got enough ordnance onboard for at least four full sorties.”

“What type of ordnance are we talking about?” Nathan wondered.

“Ship to ship, ship to surface, cruise missiles, rail gun rounds... you name it, we’ve got it, thanks to the Ancot raid. We wouldn’t have half that stuff without it.”

“Good to know,” Nathan answered. “How is the floating command center going?” he asked Cameron.

“We’ve put it into one of the cargo shuttles from the Aitkenna spaceport. It’s tight, but we were able to extend the bays completely. They’re hooking it up to the shuttle’s internal power and jacking its comm-array into the shuttle’s array. It’s not going to have much of a workable range, maybe a few hundred thousand kilometers, but that should be plenty for our needs. The whole thing should be up and running in about six hours.”

“Great. How many people do you need to staff it?”

“Besides the flight crew of two, I’ll need six people to man the data processing and comm stations, someone to backstop me, and people to man the staging platform as well.”

“Staging platform?” Nathan asked.

“We took five cargo containers from Aitkenna spaceport,” Master Chief Montrose explained. “They’ve each got their own power plant and environmental and gravity systems. We are docking them together to make enough space to hold the ground assault force. The whole cluster can sit on the flight apron and be jumped out to the staging point outside the Takaran system.”

“How are we going to move it off our deck?” Nathan asked.

“O-M-U,” Master Chief Montrose told him, “Orbital Maneuvering Unit. We use them to transfer cargo pods

between interplanetary cargo haulers and the orbital transfer facility, where they wait to be shuttled down to Corinair.”

“Kind of like a space tug, then,” Nathan observed. “Will they be safe in those things?”

“They are heavily shielded to protect against the radiation from the Darvano sun for several days, and they will be considerably farther away from the Takaran sun. They should be fine, especially for the short amount of time that they will be in there.”

“We’d also like to include a few more cargo shuttles at the staging point, loaded with some Kalibri gunships as well as a couple of troop haulers,” Jessica added. “The extra air power could come in handy, especially if the ground battle drags out for long.”

“Can we carry all that stuff out there in a single jump?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir,” Cameron admitted. “In fact, it’s going to take us at least three jumps, maybe four.”

“Commander,” Nathan began, his tone souring, “Takara is four point six light years away. That means we’ll have to wait nearly ten hours between each round trip.”

“Plus a few more jumps around the Takaran system to place the FTL-KKV platforms, and then another eight hours at the staging point to make sure we start the battle with a fully charged jump drive.”

“How long is that going to delay the attack?” Nathan wondered.

“Just under fifty hours, sir,” Cameron admitted.

“That’s four days, Commander,” Nathan complained. “It has already been five days since that drone was sent, and two days since Ta’Akar command got the comm-drone from the Loranoi. If we have to wait four more days, they’ll not only have time to better prepare a defense against our jump drive, but they might even be able to get the Avendahl up and running. That is simply not acceptable.”

"If we start hauling out pieces now, instead of waiting until they're all ready, we might be able to save a day or so in the delay," Cameron suggested.

"That's not enough," Nathan argued.

"Captain, it's going to have to be," Jessica insisted. "We can't go down there with anything less. The odds are bad enough as it is."

"What if we just keep the ground assault units on board?" Nathan wondered. "That would save us at least another ten hours."

"No good," Cameron objected. "It would take twice as long to cycle the shuttles in and out of the Aurora's flight deck to load troops. Plus, you would have to keep jumping back to the staging area every so often. Every minute the Aurora is not engaging imperial warships is another minute the distress call from Takara has to reach her ships in the system. You need to hit those ships before they can head back to Takara. Besides, if something happened to the Aurora and she wasn't able to jump back, or worse yet the ship was lost with all hands, the ground assault would automatically fail. It's just too risky, sir. We need the entire staging package."

"Could we leave the FTL-KKVs behind?" Major Prechitt wondered.

"Negative," Nathan stated coldly. "That's our ace in the hole. If the Aurora was lost, Commander Taylor could still task the KKV's as needed. All she needs is one ship with a mini-jump drive to jump out and transmit a launch directive."

"Captain," Tug began, "the use of KKV's within the Takaran system is extremely risky. If one of them was to strike an inhabited planet or moon..."

"I am well aware of the risks involved, Mister Tugwell," Nathan reminded him. "The KKV's will remain in our arsenal for this engagement."

"Of course," Tug conceded.

"Let's get on it, everyone," Nathan ordered. "Commander, I want our first jump to happen as soon as possible. Let's start with the cargo shuttles. We'll save the staging platform for last so those men don't have to sit around in deep space any longer than necessary."

"Yes, sir," Cameron promised.

"Dismissed," Nathan announced. "Commander, a moment?"

Cameron waited as the others left the room. "Yes, sir?"

"How are you doing?" Nathan asked as the last of them filed out. "Are you up for this?"

"Are any of us?"

"You know what I mean," Nathan reminded her.

"I'll be fine, sir."

"You know, there isn't really anyone to backstop you on this. I'd ask Lieutenant Waddell to give you one of his officers, but I don't think he has enough of them as it is."

"It's Captain Waddell now," Cameron answered. "Major Prechitt agreed with you and promoted him an hour ago. And you're right, he doesn't have any officers to spare." Cameron got up to leave. "It would help if I could take Ensign Yosef with me."

"Kaylah?" Nathan wondered. "She's not a combat officer. She's a sensor operator."

"Actually, she's a science officer, remember?" Cameron reminded him. "She can help keep me straight on the time delays and such. Besides, she's got as much combat experience as any of us at the moment... just not the actual training. And you've got two more sensor operators."

"Three."

"Two, I'm taking another one," Cameron told him, cracking a smile.

"I see." Nathan smiled back. "Try to slip in some rack time soon," he reminded her.

"You, too, sir."

Nathan watched her leave the command briefing room. Her original confident and purposeful stride that had been so off-putting to him when they had first met had long left her. He wasn't sure if it was fatigue or if her recent brush with death and subsequent recovery had stripped it from her. They had all been through a lot, but the rest of them had been too busy to think about it. Cameron had been given a couple months to dwell on it while she had been in the hospital on Corinair with nanites crawling through her the entire time.

She still had a few thousand of the little microscopic robots finishing up their repairs, and she still had to report to medical so that the Corinairan nanite tech could scan her progress and issue new commands to the nanites. He knew she had another week or so of nanite therapy left, and he wondered if those last few thousand nanites would present a problem during their attack on Takara.

She was right; he also needed some rack time. He had been surviving on cat naps of a few hours here and there for the last few days, ever since the raid on Ancot. *This is no way to fight a war, he thought, being forced to act in haste instead of being given the time to plan and prepare.*

Nathan placed his face in his hands and leaned forward onto his elbows for a moment, rubbing his eyes and his face, before pulling back. Surprisingly, when he opened his eyes again, Jalea was standing at the hatchway.

"You look as though you carry the weight of the galaxy on your shoulders," she told him.

"That obvious, huh?"

Jalea moved into the room, coming around the briefing table. "To those who have seen all sides of you, yes." She moved to the chair to his left and took a seat, facing him across the shared corner of the table. "Command is difficult for you; I know."

"Also obvious, huh?"

"Being a legend makes it even more difficult, does it not?"

"You could say that, yes."

Jalea looked down at her hands. "I am sorry that the role was thrust upon you. It was never my intent to burden you so."

Nathan's eyes squinted slightly as he tried to figure out Jalea's angle. She was not one to offer words of compassion or understanding. Both her words and her actions always had purpose. This time, however, her purpose eluded him. "Funny you should say that, since you always seem to be the one throwing around the Na-Tan thing."

"True enough," she admitted. "But how can you deny the truth? Anyone can see that you are Na-Tan."

"I'm pretty sure *Na-Tan* was nowhere on my birth certificate," he mused. "I think my parents would've mentioned it."

"Most of us are not aware of our destiny until it is right in front of us," she told him. "What makes you *Na-Tan* is more than the resemblance in your name or the fact that you command great power and are from Earth. It is your actions that make you a legend. Hanging the moniker of Na-Tan on you is nothing more than a play on the hopes and dreams of the oppressed. If your Captain Roberts were still alive, he would be playing the role of Na-Tan instead of you."

"I wish," Nathan laughed. "So you don't believe I'm Na-Tan after all?"

"I believe you are as much Na-Tan as any man can be," she told him.

"Then you lied to all the people of Corinair and Ancot?"

"I told them what they needed to hear," Jalea admitted. "It is easier for the oppressed to rise up and fight for their freedom when a legend leads them." Jalea reached out and placed her hand on Nathan's. "They need Na-Tan to lead them."

Nathan recoiled from her touch, pulling his hands away and picking up his data pad as he rose. "I think my XO is right; I need to get some rack time," Nathan told her. "But thanks for the pep talk," he added as he headed out the door. As he made his way across the room and into the corridor, he remembered how captivated he had been by Jalea's eyes and her mysterious features when she had first come aboard back in the Taroa system. Back then, he would've believed just about anything she told him. Although he had never admitted it to anyone but Vladimir, his judgment had been clouded by her seductive beauty, just as Cameron had suspected. That, however, was a long time ago, and a lot had happened since then. Things were different now. His ship had changed, his crew had changed, and he had changed. He smiled.

* * *

Nathan entered the main hangar bay and strode out across what little open deck there still was. He had never seen the bay so cramped. Even though the cargo deck directly below had been mostly emptied and turned into another hangar deck, there was still almost no room left through which to receive an incoming ship. Yet somehow, Senior Chief Taggart and his Corinari deck crews kept finding room for them, which was a feat unto itself.

As he walked down the only empty section of the main hangar deck—the center aisle—he surveyed the ships that were on board. Most of them were fighters configured for orbital and atmospheric missions. These were lined up in neat, compact rows on either side of the center aisle. They were as far forward as they could go without blocking the forward transfer airlocks that led into the side fighter allies which contained elevators that traveled from the cargo deck below up through the top of the hull to become a launch/landing pad. Under normal circumstances, these pads were not used for flight operations. They were

originally designed to act as an alternate means of moving smaller ships in and out of the Aurora should something happen to disable her flight apron aft of the main hangar deck. Currently, while the hangar deck was too full to allow normal traffic in and out through the rear transfer airlocks, smaller craft were being launched and recovered via the elevator pads. Using this alternate path to and from the hangar deck, they were able to keep up with the smaller shuttles that were constantly coming and going to and from the Aurora despite the crowded nature of her main hangar deck. It was especially important that they were not in orbit over Corinair.

Behind the rows of atmospheric fighters were the two comm-drone platforms, each carrying eight of the fifteen-meter-long drones tightly packed against the platform framework in two rows of four. Technicians worked frantically on the last two drones on each platform as they made the final programming changes that would convert the drones from communication relay tools into deadly, faster-than-light kinetic-kill-vehicles that could destroy an imperial battleship in a single blow. Although they had not been designed for such a purpose, they had an ominous look to them, as if their designers had known all along what they were capable of doing if used with ill intent. Just looking at the things gave Nathan an eerie feeling, as if he knew he would someday be forced to use them for just that purpose.

Aft of the comm-drone platforms were a few of the OMUs or 'space tugs' as Nathan liked to call them. After tractors lifted the drone platforms and carried them out onto the flight apron, the OMUs would lift them off the deck and maneuver them into position where they would await a launch directive at some later time. Nathan knew that, if the devices ever received such orders, it would mean that the battle was not going well at all.

As he moved farther aft, he saw a man in a very odd-looking flight suit. He was being escorted to a small shuttle that was powered up and waiting near the number one transfer airlock located at the port side of the main hanger deck's aft end.

"Senior Chief?" Nathan called to Marcus who was giving instructions to some men nearby.

"Yes, Captain?"

"What is that guy wearing?" Nathan asked, pointing to the oddly dressed fellow now being helped into the small shuttle.

"He's testing the new space jump rig," Marcus explained, "the one with the auto-nav chute system."

"Really?" Nathan exclaimed. "It's not what I pictured it to be."

"They had to add more protective layers to the drogue chute pack," Marcus added. "The auto-nav rig made it stick out too much and it got damaged during reentry. Killed the first guy that tried it."

"He died?"

"Yes, sir... drogue failed, and all the other chutes got torn up because of his speed. He slammed into the ground something terrible, he did."

"Why wasn't I informed?"

"Don't know, sir," Marcus admitted. "Figure the XO must've thought you had enough on your mind. But don't worry, sir, they've got the bugs figured out this time, I'm sure. How do you Earth boys say it? Third time's the charm?"

"Third time?" Nathan was almost afraid to ask.

"Uh, yeah," the senior chief stumbled. "The second one didn't work out so good either. The heat fucked up the auto-nav system and it bounced him off a building before he could override it."

"Did he..."

“Oh, no, sir,” Marcus interrupted. “He’s fine. A few broken bones and such, but he’ll live. Probably even walk again, what with them nanites and all.”

“Thanks, Senior Chief,” Nathan said. “Carry on.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nathan returned the senior chief’s slightly unorthodox salute and continued on to the opposite aft corner of the bay where the Corinari mobile command post was being integrated into one of the medium-sized Corinairan cargo shuttles. The model was the largest one used by the Corinairans that could fit through the larger, number two transfer airlock at the center of the aft end of the main hanger deck. The first thing that Nathan noticed as he ascended the shuttles aft cargo loading ramp was that, despite the shuttle’s respectable size, there was barely enough room for the mobile command post to open its two side bays to their fully extended position. In fact, anyone wishing to traverse from the shuttle’s cockpit to her aft end would be forced to duck and walk under the protruding command post bays on either side in order to get past them.

The mobile command post itself was rather menacing looking in its own right. Built upon what appeared to be an over-sized, multi-axle flat bed truck, the command post itself looked as if it could have been simply placed onto the back of the truck’s cargo bed. The command post was somewhat wider than the truck it rode on, even if its two side bays were not extended. The nose of the vehicle was pointing toward the aft end of the shuttle as if it expected to be driven out the rear and down the loading ramp in a hurry. As Nathan entered the shuttle and moved forward, he noticed that the height of the command post itself was too low for it to be sitting on top of the truck’s cargo bed, but rather the entire unit was built from the ground up.

Laying on the command post’s roof were several Corinari technicians, working in what little space there was between

the top of the command post and the shuttle's ceiling. There was a ladder leaning against the front of the command post's cab, which was connected to the cab by a couple pieces of short rope. It seemed an odd thing to do, until Nathan realized that directly overhead of the cab was the shuttle's overhead escape hatch. Nathan quickly realized that the ladder was not just for the technicians working on top of the command post; it also led to the overhead hatch that, in turn, led to the transfer airlock that another crew was busy installing on the shuttle's topside.

Nathan crouched low, bending over and squatting down slightly to pass under the side bays. Like most Corinairan vehicles and flying craft, this vehicle also had its main door located at the rear of the vehicle. Nathan made his way up the short personnel ramp and into the back of the vehicle, working his way forward toward the command center's front end. After passing through a short, narrow corridor, he stepped into the main area. Although a fraction of its size, it appeared similar in design to the Combat Information Center on the Aurora. Just like their CIC, it had a center plotting table complete with holographic display systems. There was a row of six workstations on either side of the main room, each located along the outermost wall of the expandable side bays. On the forward end, there was another short passageway that led to the driver's cab.

Cameron was at the center table discussing something with one of the lead technicians working on hooking the command center into the shuttle's systems. There were several more technicians busy at several of the side workstations, some writing code and others testing communications gear.

"Captain," Cameron stated, somewhat surprised to see him. "Welcome to the mobile command and control post. What brings you?"

"Curiosity mostly," he admitted. "Not bad," he added as he looked around.

"A little cramped, maybe, but it will do the job. We're still jacking her into the shuttle's comm-array, and we're adding a secondary array on her topside as well using the one they would normally put on an external tower, just in case something happens to the shuttle's comm-system."

"Good thinking."

"We're also writing some routines to enable us to accept burst transmissions from the Aurora's CIC whenever you jump back to the staging area. If we put the same software in the comm-systems of all the jump enabled ships, they'll be able to keep us and the Aurora's CIC pretty well synchronized whenever they exchange messages."

"Also good thinking," Nathan praised. He could sense that his executive officer was proud of her new facility. "So, what are we going to call it? We can't really call it CIC, that would be too confusing."

"C2?" Cameron suggested. "Short for 'command and control'."

"Works for me," Nathan agreed. "I was wondering; why is this thing parked facing aft?"

"Captain Waddell asked us to make it so that, once the main battle is over, the C2 could be dropped onto the surface of Takara and deployed, if necessary. I think he is worried about a prolonged ground conflict."

"If that happens, I don't think having a C2 on the ground is going to help much," Nathan commented.

"Agreed, but accommodating his request was not difficult."

"What's your plan if something should happen to the shuttle?"

"Sir?"

"What if she is damaged somehow? What if she loses power or life support? What is your backup survival plan?"

"Well, the C2 can be buttoned up and pressurized. It does have its own power plant and life support system. But

it isn't really designed to be space-worthy, if that's what you mean."

"You might want to wear pressure suits when you're deployed," Nathan suggested.

"That's going to make it a bit difficult to work in here."

"You're not using a full crew," Nathan said. "Rip out a few seats on either side to give them a bit more elbow room."

"Do you really think that's necessary, sir?"

"Does the shuttle's flight crew wear pressure suits?" Nathan asked.

"Understood."

Nathan took Cameron's arm and gestured for her to move forward into the short corridor that led to the cab, wanting to move out of earshot of the other technicians in the room. "Cam, why didn't you tell me about the test jumps?"

"You didn't need to know," she defended.

"I didn't need to know that one man died and another was badly injured?"

"Would it have made a difference?" she challenged. "Would you have ordered them to stop testing?"

"They could've done more computer modeling..."

"They did, Nathan," Cameron interrupted. "But you know as well as I that all the computer modeling in the world is meaningless without some test jumps."

"I just don't want anyone to die unnecessarily," Nathan defended.

"He didn't, sir. Those men tested the rig because they knew that nearly a hundred more of them were going to be jumping into the heart of the empire in a few days wearing those very same rigs. They knew that, for the mission to succeed, the majority of those men needed to reach the ground alive and on target. No one ordered them to go; they volunteered."

Nathan sighed. He knew she was right. He also knew she was doing her job, managing all of the infinite details that went into not only running the Aurora, but also preparing for what was no less than an outright invasion. She might not have had the same swagger, the same confident stride that she had originally come aboard with, but she was still capable of doing her job. "You're right, Commander," he admitted, sighing yet again. It was yet one more thing about command that he did not enjoy. "Carry on."

* * *

"Jump complete," Dumar announced. "Searching for contacts using passive sensors only."

Josh looked about nervously. Jumping into an enemy system—instead of coasting through it at near relativistic speeds in a cold and dark interceptor—did not set easy with him. Jump flashes might be brief, but they were bright. They were easy to miss if you weren't looking directly at them, but he had little doubt that most of Takaran space was closely monitored. "Did they see us?" he asked. "Are there any ships nearby?"

"Relax, Josh," Mister Dumar told him. "If any come for us, we'll see them in plenty of time to jump away."

"Unless they fire an energy weapon at us from our passive sensor range," Josh pointed out. "Then we'd only have seconds, if we even saw it coming."

"They will not fire blindly within Takara space," Dumar insisted. "Doing so would risk hitting a friendly ship. Besides, they would not expect us to be so bold as to jump into their system."

"But by now they know all about us from the Loranoi's comm-drone, right?"

"The Loranoi's message contained very little useful data about the Aurora."

"You know what the message said?" Josh asked.

"Yes, I do. It informed command of the Corinairan's secession from the empire, and it said they were under attack by a mysterious ship that was able to disappear and reappear at will, possibly even able to relocate instantly over several thousand kilometers at a time."

"That's it?" Josh asked, his nerves beginning to relax somewhat.

"Nothing more," Dumar promised. "However, combined with previous reports collected by the empire about the Aurora's exploits in and around the Pentaurus cluster, it is safe to assume that the Ta'Akar are already aware of the Aurora and her jump drive."

"Great," Josh replied, suddenly feeling nervous again. "You know, you could've left out that last part. I would've been okay without it."

"I have multiple contacts, multiple bearings," Dumar announced.

"Where?" Josh asked, his head swiveling about.

"All around us. This is a rather busy system, you know."

"Are they coming toward us?"

"Not directly, no," Dumar assured him, "but several of them will pass within a few hundred kilometers."

"Are they warships?"

"The ones that will pass close to us, no, but there are warships in the system."

"Obviously," Josh answered, a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

"Our current course is slightly wide of Takara," Dumar explained. "We should be able to transmit our hail, exchange messages with my contact, and jump away again, all long before we reach the Takaran homeworld."

"How is it we can transmit a message without being detected?"

"Using the personal comm-unit we retrieved from the dead officer from the Campaglia," Dumar explained, "the one we found in our bow. If we transmit from our current

position, the message will appear to be coming from a ship in transit between Takara and one of her many sister worlds within the system."

"So, you're just going to place a call. 'Hey buddy, how ya been? Got any plans tomorrow?'"

"It will be a text-based communication."

"Then how can you be sure you're speaking to the right person?" Josh wondered.

"Because he would be the only one who could understand the original message."

"Someone could still intercept the message or pretend to be your friend..."

"The message will be encrypted," Dumar assured him.

"All encryption can be broken," Josh reminded him. "Even I know that."

"True, but it would take several weeks, by which time it will not matter. In addition, I will test the recipient with a series of inquiries designed to authenticate his identity."

"What if the Ta'Akar captured him and scanned his brain or something? Or what if he's a double agent..."

"Josh, I have been in this business long enough to be able to assess the risks and rewards of such situations."

"I'm just saying..."

"Perhaps it would be best if you concentrated on flying."

"What flying? We're coasting, remember?"

"We are approaching the contact point," Dumar announced as he began typing on the touch screen's keyboard on the lower portion of the portable communications device. "I am preparing the initial message."

Josh looked at his own navigation display. "Yeah, entering contact envelope in thirty seconds."

Dumar continued typing, preparing to send the message once he was finished. He watched his navigation display as they approached the virtual corridor of space that lay between the Takaran home planet and one of the many

other inhabited worlds within the Takar system. As the ship entered the virtual corridor on his display screen, he pressed the send button on the personal communications device in his hands, sending the digital text message off into space. "Message sent."

"We're in the comm corridor," Josh announced. "One hour until we reach the other side of the corridor."

"It will take approximately five minutes for the first message to reach Takara, so if all goes well, we should receive a response within ten to fifteen minutes."

"Great. What do we do in the meantime?" Josh asked.

"I will continue to monitor the passive sensors for any signs that might indicate we have been detected. Meanwhile, I suggest that you continually update our escape jump plot, just in case. Remember, we are in the middle of the Ta'Akar home system, and we just transmitted a signal. We are not yet without risk."

"Good plan," Josh agreed as he began to plot an escape jump. After a few moments, he had finished entering the destination parameters, and the system was calculating the jump. Deliza had developed a subroutine that would continuously recalculate an updated jump plot based on the ship's current course and the last entered destination. This allowed the Falcon to be ready to jump away at all times. Depending on the distance of the jump being recalculated, the jump computer could recalculate as often as once per minute if desired. As it was unlikely that any ship could sneak up on them so quickly, Josh had selected five minutes as the recalculation interval.

"I have good news," Mister Dumar announced.

"Your contact couldn't have answered already," Josh stated.

"No, of course not. The Ta'Akar have dispatched a battle group, probably to the Darvano system."

"How is that good news?"

“That means there will be fewer ships for the Aurora to deal with during the attack.”

“How many ships left?” Josh wondered.

“By my count, five ships have departed. There are only eleven remaining, counting the Avendahl.”

“Eleven imperial warships,” Josh said. “I hardly call that good news.”

“It is better than sixteen,” Dumar insisted.

“So five ships are headed for Corinair?” Josh repeated. He couldn’t help but wonder if the strange Corinairan had forgotten about that fact.

“We will have to locate the battle group to be certain,” Dumar admitted, “but the empire rarely dispatches that many ships at once. Since they have recently received the Loranoi’s message, it is a logical assumption.”

“And you’re not concerned about that? I mean, I know you’re not originally from Corinair, but you do have family there, don’t you?”

“Yes, I have a wife and two children.”

“Aren’t you worried about them?” Josh was beginning to get frustrated. Trying to get answers out of Dumar was much like trying to get Tug to talk about himself.

“I am concerned for their safety,” Dumar insisted, “but I do not believe the battle group will continue on to Darvano once they realize that the empire has been defeated.”

“How can you be so sure?” Josh wondered. He and Loki had discussed this at length during their recon flights, as there had been little else to do for long stretches of time. “What if the commander of the battle group decides to fight on in the name of the empire? Wouldn’t their first course of action be to take revenge on the Darvano system?”

“A ship of war is not an invincible platform,” Dumar stated. “It requires a loyal captain commanding a loyal crew and a reliable infrastructure to supply and maintain her. The very structure of the empire—with its noble and common classes, and its conscripted legions—is also its biggest

weakness. Without the support of the empire, and without the promise of reward from Caius, the nobles will no longer be willing to risk their lives in battle. They are more likely to turn tail and retreat, choosing instead to return to their lands posthaste in the hopes of protecting what they already own.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Josh argued. “How would they protect their lands? With their warships, right?”

“With what crew? It is true that some might choose to stay on board and serve in exchange for some amount of compensation and the promise of eventual return to their homes, but that would require considerable amounts of assets. So much so, in fact, that any captain who would consider such a fool’s errand would probably end up spending all that he was trying to protect in the attempt. It is no accident that it is this way. Caius, as unbalanced as he is, is not a fool. The entire system is designed to fail if he is removed from the equation. This is how he has protected himself against assassination all these decades.”

Josh considered Dumar’s claims. While there was a twisted logic to it all, he couldn’t help but question the accuracy of the man’s assertions. Unfortunately, he knew neither the amount of wealth the average Ta’Akar ship captain possessed nor the amount of compensation that might be required to pay each member of his crew in order to ensure loyalty in such a scenario. Without that minimum amount of information, he could only speculate at best, which meant that he and everyone else had to trust that Mister Dumar was indeed correct.

That was the difficult part, as Josh and everyone else knew little about the man. They knew he had been living on Corinair, and they knew he had once served as a Ta’Akar intelligence analyst. There were even rumors that he knew Tug from his days in imperial service. Tug had never alluded to having once been in the imperial service, at least not to Josh or Loki. However, he had to have gotten his combat

flight training from somewhere, and the empire was all there was in and around the Pentaurus cluster. The only way he could have received military training outside of the empire would have been by serving in the days before the empire had come into existence. Josh knew very little about those days, as Caius had ordered much of the pre-empire history to be deleted from all the databases within the empire. Still, Tug was not old enough to have served during those times. As difficult as Josh found it to accept the post-empire predictions of Dumar and even Tug, he knew that Captain Scott had at least enough faith in them to commit to the attack plan. That was enough for Josh, as he trusted the captain without question.

"How long have you known Tug?" Josh asked, as if harmlessly changing the subject. Perhaps if he knew more about their relationship, he would know about Tug's past. That in itself might be enough to satisfy his curiosity and assuage his concerns.

"You are an inquisitive one," Dumar chuckled.

"Sorry," Josh replied, "I didn't realize it was a secret."

"No, that's quite all right. I have known Mister Tugwell for many years," Dumar explained. "In fact, I have known him since before you were born, although we have been out of touch for nearly that long."

Josh suddenly got excited. "You're Karuzari, aren't you?!"

"In a manner of speaking," Dumar confessed.

"What, were you some kind of a spy or something?"

"Let us say that I was a purveyor of information and leave it at that."

"Gotcha," Josh answered. He sat quietly for a moment, happy to have finally discovered something, especially something that Loki didn't know. He couldn't wait to get back to the Aurora and share the tidbit with his friend. "So, did you guys serve together?" he asked, hoping that he had broken the ice and might gain additional insight into both Dumar and Tug.

"We went through flight training together," Dumar admitted.

"I thought you were an intelligence officer."

"Later, yes. I was originally an interceptor pilot. In fact, I was Mister Tugwell's wingman at one point. My transfer to intelligence occurred much later, long after my flying days, and long after Mister Tugwell and I parted company."

"Then you used to fly one of these," Josh surmised.

"Indeed I did," Dumar confirmed.

"So how did you end up working for the Karuzari?"

Dumar's personal communication unit beeped. "We have received a response," he announced.

"What does it say?"

"One moment," Dumar urged. "I am checking his authentication answers."

Several anxious moments passed, during which Josh could barely contain himself. Without further explanation, Dumar suddenly began tapping a response into the device.

"What did he say?" Josh repeated.

"He merely proved his identity and assured me that he was ready to receive the encrypted message."

"How the hell did you guys say all that without raising suspicion?" Josh asked. "You know they've got super computers that monitor all comm signals looking for this kind of stuff, right?"

"Spy talk," Dumar said with a smile as he continued tapping.

"What?"

"The art of saying much while seemingly speaking of nothing."

"What, like code words and stuff?"

"You've been watching too many cheap spy vids," Dumar told him.

"Yeah, you could be right about that," Josh admitted. "So we have to wait another ten minutes to find out if this guy will help us?"

"I'm afraid so. However, the fact that he is willing to communicate with me in this covert fashion is a very good sign."

"How so?"

"He knows that I would not be making contact with him in such fashion unless I wanted his help with something, something dangerous. If he did not intend to help, he would've simply ignored the message completely."

"Unless he's working for the bad guys and he's trying to learn your plans so he can inform his superiors."

"I would not have contacted him if I thought that likely," Dumar assured him. "Again, I think you..."

"I know, too many spy vids."

"Return message has been sent."

"So now what?" Josh asked.

"We wait for a reply. This conversation is long from over. Meanwhile, we start calculating a series of jumps to locate the battle group on our way back to Darvano," Dumar told him.

"Of course," Josh replied, "how silly of me." If there was anything that he liked less than recon flights, it was plotting jumps. That was Loki's job.

* * *

Nathan looked up from his desk as the hatch to his ready room opened and Commander Taylor stepped inside. Although he tried not to appear anxious, he seriously doubted Cameron would not notice his anticipation.

"Nothing yet," she reported as she took a seat on the opposite side of the desk from him.

"They've been gone a while," Nathan commented. "Shouldn't they have gotten back by now?"

"Technically, they should have been back an hour ago."

"Do you think something went wrong?" Nathan asked, trying to hide his concern.

"There could be any number of reasons for the delay," Cameron assured him. "They may have been forced to coast longer before jumping out in order to avoid alerting the Takarans of their presence. Or maybe it was taking longer to receive word from Dumar's contact. Maybe they decided to linger in the comm corridor longer. That is why we installed the cold jets in the interceptor's secondary maneuvering systems."

"Yeah, you may be right," Nathan said. "How long do you think we should wait?"

"Until what?" Cameron asked.

"Until we declare them as missing or lost?"

"Assume that they may have been forced to change their flight plan and instead chose to do a full recon coast through in order to avoid jumping in and out of the middle of the system. That would take them upwards of twenty hours, even if they were coasting a little slower than usual. We should give them at least that much time."

"And if they don't show up then?" Nathan wondered. It wasn't so much a question as it was a confession that he really didn't see any way of proceeding with their current battle plan without the confirmation of assistance from Mister Dumar's contact on Takara.

"How long until another imperial ship shows up here?" Cameron wondered.

"That could take months," Nathan warned. "We can't stay here that long. At some point, we have to cut our losses and head home."

"What about Corinair? What about the Alliance?"

"You know, Cam, the Alliance was my idea, remember? But at what point does our duty to Earth outweigh our promise to these people? Three months? Six months? A year? For all we know, we might already be too late. For all we know, those ships that jumped us outside our own system might have been the advance recon for a larger invasion force that was already on its way to Earth."

“You remember Captain Roberts announcement just before our first test jump, don’t you? When we were still in orbit around Jupiter? Fleet intelligence estimated an attack would occur within a year or two, not a few months.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Nathan told her. “But you know how wrong fleet intel can be. Most of what we know of the Jung, we learned through signals intelligence, and most of those signals were decades old at best. They’re just guessing based on old, outdated notions of warfare logistics taught to them at the War College at the Academy. The fact is none of them have ever fought such a war. Hell, right now you and I have more space combat experience than any of them, if you can imagine that.”

“Think it through, Nathan,” Cameron reminded him. “Think of the resources necessary to invade an entire world. I’m not talking about glassing it from orbit like the Ta’Akar. I’m talking about capturing it with its resources, infrastructure, and population largely intact. The reports from Alpha Centauri were not through signals intel. They were from operatives on the ground. The Centauri put up a good fight, and it cost the Jung dearly. Either they underestimated the amount of resistance to be expected, or they had committed as many ships as they could spare to the invasion. Either way, they wouldn’t be making that same mistake with Earth.”

“So you agree with fleet intel’s timeline?”

“Yes, I do.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair, letting out a slow breath. “Nevertheless, we do need to get back at some point. They need the jump drive technology, and we’ve got the only one.”

“Actually, I’m not so sure that’s true,” Cameron told him.

“Why?”

“Think about it, Nathan. They had to know the importance of the technology. Why would they risk losing

the only prototype they had in a test run? It makes no sense.”

“I don’t know,” Nathan disagreed. “You don’t know how politicians are. They live in different realities.”

“Maybe, but I still think they would be stupid not to at least have a backup copy of the development data stored somewhere.”

“If that were the case, why tell us we had the only one? I mean, even Abby believes that. Captain Roberts died believing that.”

“In case we were captured?”

“If we were captured, the Jung would already *have* the jump drive technology, Cam.”

“I don’t know, Nathan,” Cameron defended in frustration. “I just know that it all seems rather implausible; that’s all.”

“Everything that has happened to us so far seems implausible, Cam!”

Cameron had nothing to say for several seconds. “You’re right,” she giggled. “Nobody’s going to believe us when we get back.”

“Nobody’s going to believe what?” Vladimir asked from the hatchway.

“That I was dumb enough to make you chief engineer,” Nathan joked. “You finish fixing my ship yet?”

“I am an amazing engineer; this is true,” Vladimir boasted as he sat down on the end of the couch, “but I am not a miracle worker.” Vladimir stretched out his legs and arms, finally settling into the couch and getting comfortable. “However, your ship is as good as I can make it, given the circumstances. So you may commence getting it shot up again.”

“Thank you,” Nathan told him. “Then I guess you can keep your rank, Lieutenant Commander.”

Vladimir waved him off. “Blah, you can keep the rank. No, wait. On second thought, I need the extra money. There

is this little dacha outside of Moscow that I have always wanted to own. It has this wonderful little pond behind it, perfect for swimming on summer days.” Vladimir closed his eyes, partly to rest them and partly to daydream of the dacha. “Hey,” he exclaimed, his eyes suddenly popping open. “We will get combat pay, yes?”

“Combat pay?” Jessica called from the hatchway, closing it behind her as she entered the room. “Are we getting combat pay?”

“Uh,” Nathan stuttered, realizing their conversation might have carried all the way out onto the bridge.

“Yeah,” Jessica confirmed as she moved toward the couch. “You might want to keep the hatch closed, sir.” She took a seat at the opposite end of the couch, swinging her feet up and placing them on Vladimir’s legs as she settled in as well.

“Comfortable?” Vladimir asked her.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jessica answered. “Now what’s this about combat pay?”

“I’m sure we’ll get combat pay as long as we’re not all brought up on charges, that is,” he said in jest.

The conversation was interrupted by the hailing beep of the comm-set built into Nathan’s desk. “*Captain, comms,*” Naralena called.

“Go ahead,” Nathan answered, his anxiousness returning.

“Sir, the interceptor just jumped back into the system. I have Mister Dumar on a secure channel.”

“Patch him through.”

A moment later, Dumar’s voice came crackling across the speaker. “*Captain, this is Dumar.*”

“Go ahead Mister Dumar.”

“I have received confirmation from my contact on Takara. He is willing to help us, and I believe he has an adequate plan on how to do so.”

"That's good news, Mister Dumar. Could you tell if any ships were dispatched from Takara?"

"Yes, sir. There are now only eleven ships within the Takar system. Once we finished our communications task, we searched for the missing ships. We found a battle group on its way to Darvano. Based on their distance from Takara, I believe they were dispatched approximately one day ago. However, there were only four ships in the group that we found."

"So one ship is unaccounted for, then."

"That is correct."

"Good work, Mister Dumar." Nathan clicked off the comm-set speaker. "Okay, you heard the man. Let's get the ball rolling. As soon as the interceptor lands, I want to start jumping pieces out to the combat area. Remember, there's a battle group headed this way, so let's use two jumps and steer wide of their last reported position. The last thing we need is for them to spot us and turn back."

"Man, I was just getting comfortable," Jessica complained.

Vladimir picked up her feet and tossed them back onto the floor, rising to his feet. "Come on, little girl," he teased, holding out his hand to help her up off the couch. "Back to work."

Cameron also stood as Jessica and Vladimir exited the room. She looked at Nathan for a moment.

Nathan noticed her stare, his left eyebrow raising in confused curiosity. "What is it?"

"I was wrong about you, Nathan," she stated in all seriousness.

"What do you mean?"

"When I first met you, actually, before I even met you, I figured you were just another arrogant, self-centered, little rich boy who used his daddy's name and money to buy his way through life."

Nathan pretended to be taken aback, despite the fact that he had always figured that Cameron had held a pretty low opinion of him from day one. "And now?"

"I was wrong. You're not the man I thought you were."

Nathan flashed his usual smile, the same one that always got him out of trouble with his mother. "You weren't wrong, Cam," he admitted. "I was all that, and probably worse. I've just changed. I didn't really have a choice, did I?"

"Good," she said, smiling confidently. "I hate being wrong," she announced as she turned to exit.

Nathan continued to smile. It was the most his XO had behaved like her old self in a long time.

Chapter Eight

Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported from the navigation station on the Aurora’s bridge. “We are in position at the staging point, two light days outside the Takaran system.”

“Mister Navashee,” Nathan called to the new sensor operator that was replacing Ensign Yosef, “Any contacts?”

“Sensors are clear, sir.”

“Helm, reduce speed to flight ops normal and maintain course,” Nathan ordered. “Trim the ship to Takara’s ecliptic and lock the reference.”

“Reducing speed to flight ops normal and maintaining course,” the helmsman, Mister Chiles, reported. “Trimming the ship to match the Takaran system ecliptic plane and saving reference.”

“Comms, inform flight ops they have a green deck.”

“Yes, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Tactical, give me a two window overlay, aft flight apron camera and full tactical map.”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Randeem answered.

A moment later, Nathan could see the tactical map of the area as well as the view from the aft facing camera located just above the number two transfer airlock. The camera gave him a clear view of the entire flight apron as well as the aft topside section of the Aurora. There were four heavy cargo shuttles parked so closely together that a good quarter of their aft ends protruded beyond the aft edge of the flight apron. Even then, the four massive shuttles, each of which were too large to fit into the Aurora's largest transfer airlock, filled the entire apron. "I guess the extra emitters did the trick, Doc," Nathan said to Abby, who was again sitting at her console at the aft station on the starboard side of the bridge. "Looks like all the shuttles are in one piece."

"Jump mass and geometry are unchanged," Abby reported, "although we did use a bit more power for the jump than expected."

"How much more?"

"Point zero four two percent."

"That much, huh?"

"It may not seem significant, Captain, and in our current application it may not be, but if we were attempting the same technique in order to tandem jump a significantly larger additional mass, it would need to be considered."

"I'll try to remember that, Doctor. Good work."

"Thank you, Captain. Engineering reports all reactors at one hundred percent," Abby reported. "All available power is being diverted to recharge the jump drive's energy banks."

"Very good," Nathan answered as he watched the camera window on the forward wrap-around view screen. The first of the massive cargo shuttles, the one furthest to port, began to slowly lift off the flight deck. She rose more slowly than one would imagine as she began to slide sideways to port at the same time to avoid drifting to starboard and contacting the shuttle parked so closely beside her. The maneuver was performed perfectly, and

within two minutes the bulky shuttle, loaded down with two Kalibri airships and various supplies to support the ground assault, was thrusting away from the Aurora at a more normal rate. The maneuver was performed two more times by the next two shuttles in line, each thrusting slightly to port as soon as their wheels left the Aurora's deck. Finally, the last cargo shuttle lifted straight off the deck and followed the first three to their staging point a few hundred meters off the Aurora's port side. On the main view screen, poking out from behind the two overlays, Nathan could also see the escort fighters being launched forward through the ship's starboard launch tubes. The six deep space fighters would be of little defense if even the smallest of imperial warships had shown up during the Aurora's impending ten hour absence. However, they might have been able to hold an enemy at bay long enough for the jump shuttle that was also being left behind with the cargo shuttles to jump back to Darvano with a distress message.

"Flight ops reports all cargo shuttles are away, Captain," Naralena reported. "Escorts have all launched, and Jumper one is lifting off the port elevator now. Recon flight is prepping for launch and will take off in one minute."

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Mister Riley, plot a jump to the first KKV platform's staging coordinates."

"Aye, sir, plotting jump."

Nathan watched the view screen as Josh and Loki lifted off the flight apron in the jump interceptor that Nathan had nicknamed the Falcon. As usual, Josh's launch style was somewhat aggressive. As soon as the Falcon turned and headed away from the ship, she disappeared in a flash of blue-white light as she jumped to her entry point to begin another long recon coast through the Takaran system. Josh had complained about having to perform yet another long and boring flight, but Nathan figured since it was going to take them nearly a day to get all the pieces in place and get the Aurora's jump drive fully charged and ready, they might

as well get one last recon of the enemy's resources and ship deployments.

"Jump plot for first KKV platform's staging point is plotted and locked in, sir," the navigator answered.

"Very well, make course for the jump point and jump when ready," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, replace the aft camera window with a 3D flight plot."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered, immediately switching screens for the captain.

* * *

"What does your contact propose?" Tug asked Dumar as they walked the dimly lit corridors of the Karuzari asteroid base.

"He will temporarily interrupt the power, perhaps for as long as five minutes, at a time of our choosing."

"He can do this?" Tug questioned, finding it difficult to believe.

"He is a senior programmer for the palace facilities management department. He can make it look like a minor software problem, easily corrected."

"But it will be happening shortly after the Ta'Akar receive our ultimatum. Surely they will go to some sort of increased security level."

"Yes, and he will make it look like that is the cause of the problem. He says that it has been some time since there has been such an alert within the palace, and there have been several software upgrades applied since then. It would not be beyond belief."

"It still sounds risky."

"He assures me it will work," Dumar insisted.

"And if they do become suspicious, he realizes that he may be putting himself at grave risk?"

"He does," Dumar assured Tug. "He is not the type of man to accept such risk lightly. If he feels it is possible, I

assure you he also believes he can accomplish this task and still escape with his life."

"So after thirty years of fighting Caius and the empire, I must now place the safety of my people, and quite possibly that of all the Alliance as well, in the hands of someone I do not know." Tug shook his head. "I am not sure I can do so."

"Then put your trust in me, not in him," Dumar pleaded.

Tug stopped in his tracks, looking at his old friend. The years, and the battles that had come with them, had been kind to neither of them. Tug could see the pain in Dumar's eyes. The pain of failure and the pain of remorse. However, he could also see the fire of hope in his friend's eyes. It was not burning as brightly as he once remembered those many years ago, but it was still there nonetheless. It was the hope that he might finally set things right. "Of course, my old friend," Tug promised, his hands on Dumar's shoulders, "Of course."

"Thank you, sir..."

"Get cleaned up and get some rest," Tug interrupted. "You shall accompany us into the dragon's lair."

Dumar smiled more broadly than Tug had seen since they had been reunited only weeks ago. As Dumar left him to prepare, Tug tried to imagine the pain and guilt that Dumar must have felt for what he must have perceived as his own personal failure all those years ago. It had been Dumar's job to protect Tug on that fateful day more than three decades ago, and over all those years, Dumar had believed Tug dead and gone. Try as he might to understand the torture that must have beset his old friend's soul, he could not. All he could do was to give him the opportunity to redeem himself in his own mind and heart.

Tug turned and continued walking toward the Karuzari command center. There was still much planning to be done before the mission. He had to continue studying the plans of the palace, the layout of the grounds, the command

structure, the defensive emplacements, and the guard posts. They had to all be committed to memory once again.

"Sir," Jalea called out to him from his left as he passed through an intersection. "May I have a word with you in private?" she asked, running to catch up with him.

"Of course," Tug agreed, looking about and gesturing toward an open door. They entered a small break area just off one of the machine shops where several Karuzari workers were discussing a project over a cup of tea. "Please, gentlemen, give us the room for a minute," Tug begged them politely.

"Of course, sir," one of the men agreed as he eagerly led the others out of the room, the last man closing the hatch behind him.

"You still have one spot left on the mission roster," Jalea began. "I wish to be on that mission."

"It is much too dangerous," Tug told her.

"Have I not proven my abilities time and again?"

"Of course, but I have..."

"Have I not sacrificed more than others? Have I not given all that I am to our cause?"

"Yes, Jalea, you have," Tug assured her, "but I have already promised the spot to Dumar."

"Dumar?" Jalea was shocked. "The old friend that suddenly appeared from nowhere? How can you be sure he has the skills to perform such a mission?"

"I am well aware of his training," Tug assured her. "I was there."

"Thirty or so years past, perhaps. But how can you be sure he still has those skills?"

"Some training never leaves you."

"You know of my training as well," Jalea reminded him, "for you were the one who trained me. You were also the one who called on me to perform dangerous assignments again and again. Did I ever once disappoint? Did I not always deliver that which you sought?"

“What if this does not work?” Tug asked her. “What if we are all lost? Who will carry on as the leader of the Karuzari?”

“By that logic, you should not be going yourself,” she argued.

“This is something that I must do,” Tug insisted.

“Which is how I feel as well. You cannot deny me this moment of victory. I have suffered and bled for too long.”

“No, I cannot...”

“We both know that this mission is an all-or-nothing proposition,” Jalea told him. “If this fails, the rebellion is over. I would rather die on the final battlefield than be left behind to serve as the leader of a lost cause.”

Tug understood her desire as she had lost much at the hands of the Ta’Akar: her mother, her father, and finally her husband. Few carried more hatred for the empire than Jalea, but Tug feared at times that very hatred clouded her judgment, making it impossible for her to see the bigger picture. “It has already been decided,” he stated firmly, turning to head for the exit.

“I can tell him, you know,” Jalea called after him.

Tug stopped dead in his tracks. “Tell who?” Tug asked, his back still to her.

“Your mighty Captain Scott,” she stated indignantly. “I can tell him how you ordered me to orchestrate the rise of Na-Tan on Corinair. I can tell him how you had me send word to the Ta’Akar of his presence in Darvano. How do you think he will feel about you after he knows that you caused the deaths of thousands, perhaps millions of innocent people on Corinair?”

“I never gave such orders,” Tug stated as he turned to face her.

“Can you afford to allow such doubt to enter his mind at such a crucial juncture?” Jalea asked coyly. “Maybe he will not believe you capable of such treachery, such disregard for life. Maybe he will even continue with the mission. Or maybe, he just might dump his crew of Corinari and start

jumping his way back to Earth, feeling he was played by a terrorist.”

Tug stared at her, his eyes burning with anger. He had made the mistake many years ago of letting Jalea get under his skin. Her grief at the loss of her husband had sucked him into her sights, and her passion had kept him there for several years. During that time, he had come to realize that she was a cold, calculating beauty that would use any and all means to attain her goals. He had put up with her for the last twenty years because she had been so good at her job. However, in doing so, he had been forced to conveniently overlook her many transgressions, convincing himself each time that the ends justified the means. Now it was coming back to haunt him one last time.

“Very well, Jalea,” Tug agreed. He took a step closer, grabbing her face forcefully with his right hand as he stared deeply into her mysterious green eyes. “But be warned; should you so much as disobey or ignore a single utterance from my lips, I shall kill you myself without hesitation.” Tug let go of her face, his hand continuing to hover in front of her.

Jalea’s face only hinted at the slightest sign of satisfaction as she stepped to one side and walked past him into the corridor.

Tug closed his eyes and balled his still hovering right hand into a tight fist for several seconds before relaxing it once again. One way or another, this would be the last time Jalea would be able to manipulate him.

* * *

Nathan watched the view from the aft facing camera on the main view screen. The view showed the cluster of five cargo containers, each of them lined up side by side and connected together by a Corinari breaching box. In order to reduce the stress on the breaching boxes, Senior Chief Taggart had assigned a few teams to weld four steel I-

beams across the top and bottom of the cargo pods, thus making them permanently into one unit. Another brilliant idea of the Senior Chief's had been to have the Corinari attach a maneuvering rig to the hastily assembled staging platform. The system, which was normally used to control and maneuver damaged spacecraft during recovery operations, consisted of four maneuvering pods connected to each corner of the staging platform. Using it, a space tug could sit atop the entire platform and maneuver the ungainly-looking assembly as if it were part of his own tug. That simple idea had made the staging platform into a spaceship—a slow spaceship to be sure, but one capable of flight nonetheless.

"That is the oddest thing I have ever seen on our flight deck," Commander Taylor stated as she stepped up next to Nathan's command chair at the center of the Aurora's bridge.

"No doubt," Nathan agreed. "It's pretty slick, though. A few cargo pods, some I-beams, and some breach boxes and you have a staging platform. They've even got power, gravity, and environmental. I hear the senior chief even installed a few portable toilets."

"It's still going to be pretty cramped in there," Cameron commented. "They weren't really made to hold fifteen hundred men."

"Fortunately, they won't be in there for very long," Nathan said.

"We won't load the men until the last minute," Cameron explained. "Senior Chief Taggart's team made sure the platform can mate up nicely with the docking collars on our boarding hatches."

"Sir," Naralena began, "I've set up the automatic comm links between the C2 and the Aurora. I've also set up relay systems to be used by all the other jump ships. Whenever one of the jump-enabled ships arrives at a destination, it will

automatically synch up with other comm-units in the area and exchange messages.”

“How did you get it to do that?” Cameron asked.

“/ didn’t,” she admitted. “Deliza did. She said something about slaving it to the jump drive’s plotting software. Once they lock in a jump destination, the comm relay unit checks your C2’s relay unit for any messages going to the same location. She even programmed in a message tracking system so that the senders know what time their message was delivered to its intended recipient.”

“Nice work,” Cameron told her.

“Thank you, Sir,” Naralena answered. “I’ll pass that on to Deliza.”

“That is one clever sixteen year-old girl,” Nathan mumbled. “Did she ever agree to stay behind where it’s safe?”

“Tug finally had to put his foot down and order her to return to Corinair to care for her sister at Master Chief Montrose’s home.”

“I was sure we were going to have to carry her off the ship in shackles,” Nathan said.

“Flight ops reports the platform is down and secure,” Naralena reported. “The last shuttle has departed for Corinair, and the deck is now red, Captain.”

“Very well,” Nathan answered before turning to face the flight team sitting in front of him. Of the three flight crews that had been trained to operate the Aurora, Colin Riley and Devon Chiles were the most qualified. They had originally been assigned as the second shift, behind Josh and Loki, but only because they had less time working together and had not learned to anticipate one another the way Josh and Loki had. Now that his first team had taken on the duties of flying the jump interceptor—affectionately named the Falcon—Riley and Chiles had become his primary pilots. They didn’t have the personality that Josh and Loki had, but they

were all business and had performed well during the Savoy mission to capture the garrison and airbase on Ancot.

"Mister Riley, plot our jump back to the staging point outside Takara," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir, plotting jump back to the staging point," the navigator answered.

"And don't forget to give the Takaran battle group a wide berth," he reminded him. "We don't need to draw their attention."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan tapped his comm-set to activate. "Doctor Sorenson, Captain."

"Yes, sir," Abby answered over the comms.

"Last chance to stay behind, Doctor," Nathan stated in jest.

"Thank you for the offer, Captain, but I suspect you may need someone to keep the jump drive operational so you can continue to jump about at will."

Nathan chuckled to himself, remembering all the times she had warned him in the beginning of their journey's in the Pentaurus cluster that the jump drive was only a prototype and should not be used so frequently. Despite her objections, he had continued to use the jump drive at will. As far as he was concerned, it was as reliable as anything else on his ship, perhaps even more so. The physicist had once told him that they had built the prototype rather robustly due to the fact that they didn't really understand exactly how it worked. It was a good thing that they had. "Did your people get all the extra jump field emitters in place to cover the staging platform?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, Captain. We should not have any problems."

"Thank you, Doctor," he said as he closed the connection by tapping his ear piece once again.

"Course plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Very well. Mister Chiles, take us out of orbit."

"Aye, Captain, breaking orbit," the helmsman answered.

Nathan raised his hand slightly. "Tactical, kill the aft view." A moment later, the aft camera disappeared, leaving only the image of the planet Corinair as it began to fall away. "I hope that's not the last time we see her," Nathan mumbled as he watched the planet fall away. He noticed both his helmsman and navigator as they looked at each other, then back at Nathan. "Just a figure of speech, gentlemen." As the flight team returned their gazes to their consoles, Nathan glanced to his right toward Cameron just in time to receive a scolding look from her. Nathan shrugged.

"Jumping to first waypoint in five seconds," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was about to embark on the biggest campaign that anyone from Earth had fought in for over a thousand years. He found his thoughts wandering back to Earth, wondering what his parents, his sisters, even his older brother Eli, were all doing at that moment. Did they wonder what had become of him? Did they even know he was missing? He was sure his father did as he was very well connected. It suddenly dawned on Nathan that his father's bid for the North American presidency was about to go to the polls. If they made it through the next battle and eventually made it back to Earth, his father could be sitting in the capital building in Minneapolis when the Aurora made orbit overhead.

His thoughts were interrupted when the bridge filled with the flash of the first jump.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "Plotting second jump."

"What were you thinking?" Cameron asked, having realized that Nathan's mind had been somewhere else.

"Nothing, just thinking of home," he answered. A small laugh escaped his lips. "Funny how all I wanted was to get away from there for a while. Now all I can think about is getting back."

"Second jump plotted," Mister Riley reported. "Jumping in five seconds."

"What will you do when you get back?" Cameron asked.

"Before or after the court martial?" Nathan mused.

The bridge again filled with the flash of the jump.

"You know what I mean," Cameron said.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Threats?" Nathan asked.

"Threat board is clear," the tactical officer, Mister Randeem, reported. "The only contacts in the area are the cargo shuttles and their escorts."

"Very well. Take us to the staging point," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir."

"Comms," Nathan said, "let flight ops know they have a green deck."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see that the cargo shuttle crews are relieved as well," Cameron stated. "I'm sure they could use a shower and a meal after sitting in the middle of deep space for ten hours."

"Good idea," Nathan agreed. "How long until Josh and Loki return from their recon?"

"Four hours," Cameron answered. "It will take us just over five hours to recharge the jump drive's energy banks to full power. After that, we'll be as ready as we can be."

"Very well. As soon as we get on station, deploy the staging platform," Nathan ordered as he rose from his seat. "Have the tug dock it to our starboard boarding hatch. We never got a chance to check the outer hull on our forward port side after those fighters plowed into us. Let's not take any unnecessary chances."

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered as Nathan moved past her.

"And make sure everyone gets some rest over the next few hours," he added as he moved toward the exit.

“Where will you be?” Cameron asked, surprised he was leaving the bridge.

“I feel the need to walk the ship,” he told her. “You have the conn, Commander.”

* * *

After visiting engineering, jump control, the flight deck, and flight operations, Nathan found himself standing in the Aurora’s eerily empty medical facility. The main treatment room was empty with only the central overhead lighting turned on. All the lights and monitors at the heads of each of the twelve treatment beds were turned off, leaving unusual shadows cast across the beds.

Nathan stood there for a moment, remembering the various scenes of carnage and despair that had painted this room in the past. Many lives had been both lost and saved here, and most of them had one thing in common; they had happened under his command.

He continued moving deeper into the room, looking to his left and right. There were a few new devices on the walls, undoubtedly brought on board by the Corinairan doctors who, according to Doctor Chen, were considerably more advanced than the physicians of Earth. In fact, the entire medical facility had nearly doubled in size. Nearby compartments had been re-tasked and joined with the main facility to increase both its treatment and recovery capabilities. Most of the crew quarters used by medical personnel had been similarly sacrificed in order to provide long-term recovery beds closer to the main medical facility. This had required that much of the medical staff, most of whom were officers, shared their quarters.

Nathan had always wondered why the designers of the Aurora and her sister ship, the Celestia, had not thought it necessary to give his ship a larger medical section. After all, unlike the Defender class ships that never left the Sol system, the newer, Explorer class ships were FTL capable

and were expected to be away for many months at a time. Had the people of Earth really not expected their new ships to suffer such heavy losses? It seemed hard to believe, but then again, at the time, the movement for peace had been strong. The opposition to the construction of the Aurora and the Celestia had been significant.

As Nathan approached the other end of the treatment room, he half expected Doctor Chen to come walking out of the utility room in the back, her medical scrubs smeared with blood. That room, however, was dark. The room to his left was not. Nathan hesitated for a moment. The last time he had looked in that room, it had been stacked with the bodies of the dead just after they had destroyed the Campaglia. That had been the day that Captain Roberts had died and placed the burden of command on Nathan's shoulders.

Someone was in the room; he could hear them shift in their chair. He turned and walked toward the room, peeking in slowly so as not to disturb. As he entered the room, he could see Doctor Chen, the petite young woman that she was, her face buried in a data pad as she studied its display screen. Her jet black hair was straight and neatly combed, tied back in a tail that hung down across one side of her neck. Her uniform was neat and tidy, and for once, she was not covered with the blood of others. At that moment, she did not appear the stoic, young physician that had kept the remaining crew of the Aurora alive for all those weeks. Instead, she appeared to be just another young, female fleet officer sitting at her desk, reading reports.

"Doctor," Nathan said, announcing his presence as gently as he could. The attempt was unnecessary, as by now, with all that she had been through in the last few months, she was no longer easily startled.

Her eyes rose first, checking the identity of her guest, her head following suit when she realized who it was.

"Captain Scott, I was not expecting you. Is everything all right?"

"Fine, thanks," he answered, moving further into the room. "What are you reading?"

"Corinairan triage protocols," she explained. "They're somewhat different than ours."

"Don't junior staff usually handle triage?"

"With the level of knowledge the Corinairan physicians carry, I pretty much am the junior staff around here," she admitted.

"I didn't realize."

"Oh, I don't mind," she assured him, turning off her data pad and setting it down on the desk. "I am learning a lot, and they are never condescending about their superior medical skills. Besides, with all of them available to handle the majority of the patient care, I have found more time to manage the department."

"Speaking of doctors, where are they?" Nathan asked. "The place seems empty."

"Most of them are taking advantage of the downtime before the attack to get some rest. It may be awhile before they get another opportunity."

Nathan nodded his agreement. He, too, was considering trying to get in a nap, but doubted he would be able to do anything but lay on his bed and stare at the overhead.

"So what *does* bring you to medical?" Doctor Chen asked.

"I was just out walking the ship," he told her.

"Walking the ship?"

"Yeah. For some reason, I just felt like I needed to reconnect with her."

"You don't feel *connected* to your ship?" she wondered, a look of confusion on her face.

"I spend most of my time on the command deck: the bridge, my ready room, briefing rooms. I get down to the flight deck on occasion. I even stopped eating in the mess

hall. Vladimir got me eating in the captain's mess. I didn't even know I had a mess."

"I see," she answered, despite the fact that she did not.

"I mean, we're about to go into battle, not because we have to, but because we chose to, or more precisely, because I chose to."

"You didn't choose any of this, Captain," Doctor Chen disagreed. "You may think you chose to attack the Takaran capital, but that's not really the case, at least not directly. Events left you, left us, with few alternatives."

"We could've packed up and started jumping home," he reminded her.

"Yes, we could have, and I'll be the first to admit that, at times, I wish we had done just that. But we all know that was never really a choice." She looked at him for a moment before continuing. "A wise, old Chinese man once said, 'We cannot be accurately judged by those that come after us, but only by those living in the moment in which the decision was made.'"

Nathan's face crinkled about as he tried to recall the phrase. "I don't think I've heard that one," he admitted. "What wise, old Chinese man said that?"

"My father," she answered.

"Not one to get directly to the point, is he?"

"No, he isn't," Doctor Chen admitted with a slight chuckle at the end.

Nathan rose from his chair and headed slowly to the exit. "Thanks, Doc."

"For what?"

"For doing your job so well," Nathan told her as he paused at the door. "It makes it a lot easier to put people in harm's way when you know someone like you will be waiting to care for them when that harm comes."

"You're quite welcome, Captain."

Nathan stopped and turned around to face her. "One other thing, Doc. I've had to make some, shall we say,

regulation-testing decisions as of late, and it was brought to my attention not too long ago that the legality of those decisions may hinge on the proper assignment of command. Were you present when Captain Roberts handed command to me? I mean, could you hear him?"

Doctor Chen smile. "I heard every word, sir."

Nathan nodded slightly, feeling a load suddenly lifting from his shoulders. "Thanks," he said, turning back toward the exit.

"You know, Captain Roberts refused all pain medications," Doctor Chen told him. "He specifically said, 'Not until I hand over command.'"

Nathan smiled again, more broadly this time, then turned and left the room.

* * *

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Jessica demanded as she stormed into Nathan's quarters.

"What the hell is wrong with you, *sir*?" Nathan suggested as he closed the door behind her while she strode past him. "And what are you talking about?"

"Walking the ship. That's what I'm talking about."

"All I was doing was giving the ship the once over, trying to reconnect with her and the..."

"Bullshit!" Jessica interrupted. "You don't think we're going to pull this off, do you? That's why you're walking around like some sad-eyed little boy who lost his mommy. You think we're all going to die!"

"I do think we're going to pull this off, but I have no delusions about the number of casualties we're going to suffer. Many of us are going to die, Jess."

"So you thought you'd go around and say goodbye to everyone; is that it?"

"No, I just..."

"You're scared!"

"Of course I'm scared!" Nathan defended. "Aren't you?"

“Let’s see; I’m about to jump off the side of a spaceship in orbit, fall through the atmosphere at who knows how many times the speed of sound, then parachute into the middle of an enemy stronghold, wearing enemy uniforms... and oh yes, I almost forgot, in the dark no less. Fuck yeah I’m scared! I just don’t show it! Especially not to those under my command.”

“That wasn’t my intent.”

“It doesn’t matter what your intent was,” Jessica told him as she sat down on his couch. “What matters is how your crew interprets your actions, and what they see is that their captain doesn’t believe in the mission. How the hell do you think that makes them feel?”

“That hadn’t occurred to me,” Nathan admitted, somewhat embarrassed.

“No shit. I never would’ve guessed.”

“So what do you suggest I do?” Nathan asked as he took a seat in the chair across from her.

“How about acting like a leader, like you were before?”

“Just like that? Flip a switch and everything is fine.”

“You come from a political family. Surely you’ve seen your father wave to the crowd and flash a confident smile. He gets elected because people see the confidence in his face, and they believe if they follow him, they will all succeed in his wake. That’s what your crew needs now... They need to know that you believe we can kick the empire’s ass.”

Nathan stared at her for a moment. “How do you do it?” he asked. “How do you believe? I mean, you and the other Karuzari are the least likely to come out of this alive. Yet you walk around as if there’s nothing to worry about... like it’s only a training exercise. Do you really believe you’ll survive this mission?”

“Yes, I do,” Jessica answered plainly. “I believe it’s going to be dangerous, and I believe there’s a high probability that many if not all of us are going to die. But I still believe we

can pull it off. If I didn't, I'd be trying to come up with a better plan."

"That's what I keep thinking," Nathan insisted. "There's got to be a better way to do this."

"But there isn't," Jessica insisted. "That's the deal. This is what we've got. This is what we have to do. Am I going to die? Probably, but I'm going to die fighting... fighting for something I believe is worth dying for. I'm going to fight for the Corinairans and for everyone else in the Pentaurus cluster, so that we can get our asses back home and fight for the Earth as well."

"It would be so much easier to just pummel that planet with KKV's," Nathan mumbled.

"Sure, if you don't mind killing billions of innocent people."

"That's what the Ta'Akar have done," Nathan reminded her.

"That's what their leaders have done," Jessica corrected, "not their people. That's what makes us the good guys." She leaned back on the couch, satisfied with her answer. "Look, Nathan, I don't expect you not to have doubts; that's only natural. I'm just asking that you don't allow your crew to see those doubts."

"It's not as easy as you think."

"Yes, it is. At least, it should be for you. It's in your blood, remember? Politics?"

Nathan did remember. He remembered hearing his father talk about political problems and debates, and how badly things seemed to be going at times. Then the very next day, he would be talking to the press or some organization or rally as if nothing were wrong, as if everything were going splendidly. Nathan had always hated that side of politics, and it had been one of the main reasons he had refused to follow in his father's footsteps despite the objections of both his father and his grandfather. Yet here he

was, playing the same role only in a different set of clothing and in a different part of the galaxy.

"So what's it going to be?" Jessica asked him. "Are you gonna man up, or do I have to slap you around some more?"

"I could clap you in irons," he joked.

"Don't tease me," she answered, swinging her feet up on the couch and settling in to get comfortable. "Now call Vlad and Cameron in here, and let's get this party started. We're all going to die in a few hours, remember?"

Nathan smiled and reached for his comm-set.

"And tell Vlad to bring some snacks," Jessica added. "I don't want to die on an empty stomach."

* * *

Nathan entered the general briefing room on the main deck, the memory of his first orientation as he came aboard as a boot ensign flooding his mind as he entered the room. Before him were the faces of the Corinari officers that would command the ground forces, the senior pilots, and the leaders of the squads that would be jumping from the Aurora once the ship jumped into orbit over Takara. These men were all there for one reason: to defend their world, their people, their way of life against those that would oppress and even destroy them without remorse. Their world had already been attacked. In fact, it had nearly been destroyed. Hundreds of thousands were dead or dying back on Corinair, many of whom were either known by or were related to these very men. Perhaps it was for this reason they all seemed so convinced they were doing the right thing by going to war. Nathan wondered how far the people of Earth would need to be pushed before they, too, would summon the resolve and the single-minded purpose of the men before him.

"Captain on deck!" the Corinari guard announced, causing the fifty men and women in attendance to rise to their feet.

“As you were,” Nathan ordered as he took the podium. Before speaking, he waited for the audience to take their seats once again. As he waited, he remembered Jessica’s words and tried to summon all the confidence he had in him. “The purpose of this briefing is to review the plan and ensure that everyone understands their individual roles in the overall mission. We are now two hours from mission zero. The latest recon data arriving a few hours ago shows no significant changes in the Takaran system. She still boasts eleven warships including the Avendahl, which still shows no signs of preparation to get under way. Either imperial command does not believe there is a direct threat to the Takaran home system, they do not believe the threat is significant enough to power up the Avendahl, or the Avendahl is not ready for operations. Let’s hope it’s the latter of the three. To our knowledge, the battle group of four ships dispatched from Takara is still bound for the Darvano system with an ETA of five months. We still do not know the whereabouts of the fifth ship that left Takara at the same time as the battle group.” Nathan paused a moment before continuing, taking a moment to look out at their faces. Jessica and Vladimir were sitting in the front row, with Tug, Jalea, and Dumar sitting directly behind them. “As you all know, our intention is to take the fight directly to the Takaran homeworld—more specifically, to the capital city of Answari itself. Our goal is to destroy the imperial command and control facility within the palace grounds, to capture their leader, Caius, and to force him to surrender his forces.” Nathan looked sternly at the people in the audience. “If necessary to obtain our objectives, we will terminate Caius.” His sentence ended with his eyes on Jessica. If the insertion teams had to kill the emperor, their fate would be sealed. Jessica’s fate would be sealed.

“To achieve our objectives, we have devised the following plan. From this staging point approximately two light days outside the Takaran system, the Aurora will jump

into low Takaran orbit and broadcast an announcement to the people of Takara. Withdraw from all worlds outside of the Takaran system and disband the empire or suffer the consequences. They will be given forty-eight hours to respond with their intentions. During this broadcast, ten strike teams will space jump from the Aurora's flight deck. They will make their descent through the atmosphere, eventually using auto-nav chute systems to land on or near their respective targets. The Corinari teams, teams one through eight, will disable the ground based air and space defense batteries located around the perimeter of the city. Upon completion of their primary assignments, these teams will move to their respective zones to provide cover for the incoming jump shuttles. Teams nine and ten will be made up of Karuzari and will be wearing imperial uniforms. They will land within the palace grounds, hopefully with the assistance of a blackout orchestrated by a sympathetic contact within the palace. Once inside, their jobs will be to destroy the command and control facility and to capture or terminate Caius. Now, during this, the Aurora will be engaging targets of opportunity, beginning with the warships closest to Takara in the hopes of engaging any ships that could provide combat support to Takara before they can receive the distress call and respond accordingly."

Captain Waddell raised his hand, waiting to be acknowledged by Captain Scott before asking his question. "Have we decided what level of air support will be available?"

"The airbase just outside of Answari will be targeted by the jump interceptor, code-named Falcon one, at the same time that teams one through eight attack the defense batteries," Major Prechitt explained from beside Nathan. "Once the air defense batteries have been disabled, the Aurora will return to orbit temporarily in order to launch atmospheric fighters. At that point, you will have top cover. Be forewarned, however, that the amount of cover may be

limited as they will have to return to orbit before their fuel runs out. There, they will wait for the Aurora to return and recover them."

"What about gunships for close support?" Waddell asked.

"Once a landing zone is secured, the Aurora will jump in the cargo shuttles. Each of them carries two Kalibri gunships that can be up and running within thirty minutes of touchdown."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but thirty minutes is a long time," Waddell pointed out.

"That's why you'll have fighter cover, Captain," Major Prechitt reminded him.

"Once the air defenses are down, the jump shuttles will begin ferrying troops from the staging area to the combat zone via fast-ropes," Nathan stated, retaking the discussion. "In between engagements, the Aurora will continue to return to Takaran orbit to provide support as needed."

"How are you going to even know we need help?" another officer asked from the audience. "The Aurora is going to be on the other side of the system."

"We will be operating a command and control center from the staging area. We will receive comm relays via the jump shuttles and the Falcon in order to maintain communications with both major theaters as well as to make tactical changes to the battle plan as needed," Commander Taylor added.

"Commander Taylor will be running the C2," Nathan explained. "I'll be on the Aurora. Major Prechitt will be in charge of air support over Takara, and Captain Waddell will be running the ground campaign against the city of Answari, especially the palace itself." Nathan looked at Captain Waddell. "Captain, it is vital that your men keep the palace guards engaged. Those men have to believe that our forces are attempting to storm the palace in order to keep their attention away from our insertion teams."

“And if the insertion teams are successful,” Captain Waddell asked, “the imperial forces will simply drop their weapons and surrender?” His tone was dubious, and Nathan did not blame him. He also questioned the outcome of even the most successful version of the attack.

“Intel suggests that the nobles will cease to put their lives on the line without the emperor to guarantee their lands and wealth. Any ships still in service should break off any engagements and retreat,” Nathan explained. He did his best to sell it, but doubted anyone believed him.

“That is well and good for the Aurora,” Captain Waddell answered, “but what about my men on the ground? The Karuzari may be willing to sacrifice themselves, but I suspect my men would like to have a way out.”

“Once the emperor is no longer in command, imperial forces should fall into a chaotic state,” Tug admitted. “There will continue to be resistance, especially by the palace guards. However, if the Corinari then conduct an orderly retreat, limiting their return fire to defensive only, they should be able to fall back to one of several safe recovery positions both within Answari and outside her borders. If we can get the airships down to provide cover, or even enough of the fighters, we should be able to successfully retrieve the ground forces.”

Nathan looked at their faces once more. Captain Waddell did not appear convinced, but neither did he appear convinced. “I admit that the task we face is overwhelming,” he began, his tone becoming more somber, “and we lack many of the resources needed to pull this off. But we are left with little choice. All of us. If we do not strike now, before the Avendahl’s ZPED upgrades are completed, we may not get another chance.” Nathan stepped out from behind the podium and moved closer to the front row of the audience of over fifty officers and men. “We know that many of us will not survive the day, but destiny has left us little choice. If we do not defeat the empire now, in their own homeland, in

several months, they will come in force and destroy Corinair and possibly all of the Darvano system. We must draw a line in the sand, here and now. We are a force to be reckoned with," Nathan told them, the conviction in his voice building. "We are a force to be feared and respected. You are no longer Corinari," Nathan told Captain Waddell, "and you are no longer Karuzari," he said, looking at Tug and Jalea, "just as we are no longer Terrans. Today, we are *a//* Alliance. We fight as one, we die as one."

Nathan looked across the room, hearing the murmurs of approval from the officers, squad leaders, pilots, and Karuzari agents in the room. They were beginning to believe. It was only a spark, but there was still a few hours left for that spark to build into a fire.

* * *

"Six months ago, had anyone told me I'd be leading the invasion of Answari, I would have thought them mad," Captain Waddell announced as they walked the main corridor of the Aurora.

"And with only fifteen hundred men, no less," Nathan answered.

"Indeed."

"Six months ago, I was praying for a quiet assignment patrolling the outer edges of our system," Nathan confided. "Now here I am, jumping about the stars and getting shot at by an evil empire. It's like something out of an old sci-fi movie."

"Movie?" Captain Waddell asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"I think you call them 'vids'," Cameron chimed in as they turned the corner into the lateral corridor that ran the breadth of the forward section.

Captain Waddell nodded his understanding as they approached the starboard boarding foyer. A few hundred troops were standing in line down the starboard corridor,

waiting for their turn to step through the airlock and into the staging platform where they would then wait their turn to be shuttled down to the combat area on the surface of Takara.

"You know, the one thing I will never become accustomed to is how there are so few young men in the ranks of the Corinari." Nathan took note of the puzzled look on Captain Waddell's face. "On Earth, our military, especially the enlisted ranks, are mostly in their early twenties."

"Ah, yes," Captain Waddell responded. "That is the result of having so many of our young men forced into imperial service. Most of those who join the Corinari do so after their service to the empire."

"Of course," Nathan agreed. "It's still difficult to get used to."

"Well, sir, this is where we wish each other luck and part company," Captain Waddell announced as they came to a stop near the boarding foyer. "Try to keep those ships from complicating matters for us."

Nathan took Captain Waddell's offered hand, shaking it firmly. "I'll do my best, Captain. Remember, it's just a diversion. Don't do anything crazy, like try to take the palace yourself. You just have to make it look convincing until the insertion team finishes their job."

"We'll hold their attention well enough, sir," Captain Waddell assured him. "Commander," he added, shaking Cameron's hand as well.

"Good luck, Captain," Cameron wished him.

Captain Waddell joined his men, disappearing into the airlock with the rest of the column. Soon, he and the rest of his platoon would be boarding the first wave of jump shuttles, which were currently docked to the breach boxes connected to the end of each of the five cargo pods that made up the staging platform.

Nathan and Cameron turned aft and continued making their way to the main hangar deck.

"Six months ago, you were praying you would pass your finals at the academy, just like the rest of us," Cameron reminded him quietly.

"He didn't need to know that," Nathan told her.

"I suppose not. Still, he will be quite surprised when he learns the truth."

"Assuming he survives," Nathan stated. Cameron did not answer. They both knew that the first wave was the most likely to suffer heavy losses, especially if the initial strike teams were not successful in disabling all of the air defense batteries encircling the capital city of Answari.

"I prefer to believe that they all will survive," Cameron stated.

Nathan looked at her. "Since when did you become so optimistic?"

"One of us has to be," she told him, "especially after the way you were walking the ship like a specter of doom."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yes, that bad. What was up with that, anyway?"

"Don't worry; Jessica already chewed me out for that."

"I know, I'm the one who told her to do it."

"Really?" Nathan said, surprised.

"She's better at that kind of thing. Plus, she enjoys it, especially when it's your butt she gets to chew."

"I see."

They passed through the entrance to the starboard fighter alley and made their way across the deck. There were so many fighters packed into the tiny space that Nathan could hardly see how they would ever get them out and into space. Technicians were scurrying about everywhere, all in orderly fashion, as they finished arming and preparing the various fighters for their upcoming flights.

It took them less than a minute to cross the fighter alley and enter the large middeck transfer airlock, one of three that connected the fighter alley with the main hangar deck. With the elevator pad that made up the bulk of the deck

within the airlock down at its lowest position at the cargo deck below, they had to walk along the narrow gangway near the extreme edge of the airlock in order to reach the other side. Looking toward the floor, Nathan found it an interesting sight to see down to the next deck, one that he had never witnessed. From what little he could see below, it appeared to be just as busy as it was on the main deck.

They passed out of the transfer airlock on into the main hangar deck, where the fifty fighters that were configured and loaded for atmospheric flight were being prepared. Once the flight apron was clear of the strike teams, these fighters would be positioned on the apron in order to do a quick launch when the Aurora jumped back to orbit above Takara briefly in order to release them.

Nathan also spotted the Falcon, Tug's interceptor that had since been equipped with a mini jump drive and painted black for her role as a reconnaissance ship. It was parked on the elevator pad in the starboard transfer airlock at the aft end of the main hangar deck, next to the large cargo shuttle that contained the C2 that Commander Taylor would be running. Loki was already in his seat at the back of the interceptor's cockpit, while Josh was saying his goodbyes to Ensign Yosef.

"Still seems an unlikely couple," Nathan said to Cameron.

"I don't know. She seems to like him well enough," Cameron commented.

"Is it serious?"

"As serious as you can get, considering the circumstances."

"Good luck, gentlemen," Nathan called in passing.

"Thank you, Captain," Loki called from the cockpit.

Ensign Yosef pulled away from Josh and became more formal. She was dressed in the same pressure suit as Cameron, ready for her assignment in the C2. She fell in behind her commanding officers as they passed by on their

way aft, and she turned to cast a farewell glance at Josh as they departed.

They stopped at the bottom of the cargo shuttle's boarding ramp. Cameron turned to Ensign Yosef. "Go ahead, Ensign. I'll join you shortly."

"Yes, sir," Ensign Yosef answered. "Captain."

Nathan nodded to Ensign Yosef as she started up the ramp.

"Don't forget," Cameron said to Nathan, "Naralena has to either transmit the jump destination to the Falcon before you jump, or she has to drop a comm-buoy so that he knows where you jumped to during his absence. Never jump without leaving him your destination so he can find you. Otherwise, we'll lose contact."

"I know," Nathan assured her, "and more importantly, so does Naralena. Don't worry, Cam; you've trained them all very well."

"It's not them I'm worried about," Cameron admitted.

"I thought I was supposed to be worrying about you," Nathan told her.

Cameron said nothing for a moment, simply staring at Nathan, unsure of what to say. After an uncomfortable silence, she snapped to attention and saluted. "Good hunting, Captain."

"Thank you, Commander," Nathan responded, returning her salute. He watched as she turned around in perfect military fashion and ascended the cargo shuttle's boarding ramp. Nathan stood there for a moment watching her disappear into the back of the shuttle. She was probably the safest of all of them, tucked away in the back of that shuttle inside the C2, floating in the blackness of space some two light days away from the action. As much as she tried to hide it, Nathan knew she was afraid that she would not see any of them again. In fact, the biggest threat to the safety of those in both the staging platform and the C2 was that none of the jump enabled ships would survive, which would

leave them all stranded out there in deep space, waiting to die.

As the heavy cargo shuttle's aft boarding ramp began to raise, Cameron moved along the port side of the shuttle, squatting down to walk under the side bay that extended from the aft facing mobile command post's starboard side. It was an uncomfortable way to walk, especially while wearing a pressure suit designed to protect the wearer from a sudden decompression of the shuttle itself. She couldn't imagine trying the maneuver while wearing a full EVA suit. She continued her squatting walk under the six meter length of the side bay, sliding her helmet along the deck in front of her as she went until she finally came out the other end and was able stand up straight again.

The inside of the C2 was buzzing with activity as the Corinari technicians made final checks of all their communications and sensory gear. The C2 was configured to be primarily a central communications hub, and to that end, three of her six technicians were dedicated to comm-traffic only. The other three were tasked with taking the incoming data and using it to alter the tactical holographic map that was displayed at the plotting table in the center of the dimly lit room. The six technicians combined could not only present Commander Taylor with as close to a live status display of the battle as possible, but they could also share that tactical view with the Aurora's CIC via the smaller jump ships that would act as comm and data relays.

Despite Captain Scott's objections, Ensign Kaylah Yosef, the Aurora's science officer turned sensor operator, was to serve as Commander Taylor's backstop. Cameron had asked for her because she was a science officer and, therefore, would keep Cameron from forgetting about the various time lags and relay logistics involved in maintaining communications amongst the various elements of the

battle. Not only would the C2 be separated from the battle by two light days, but the two primary battle zones were separated from one another by anywhere from a few light minutes to as much as a few light hours. And the Aurora's position within the system would be constantly changing in an extremely unpredictable fashion. It would take a scientist's mind, like Ensign Yosef's, to keep track of such factors. That would leave Cameron free to think in a more tactical fashion, focusing on the battle itself rather than the logistical complexities.

Ensign Yosef, having come aboard a minute ahead of Commander Taylor, had already tucked her helmet and gloves away in the overhead compartment above the plotting table. As Commander Taylor entered the room, Ensign Yosef was making the final adjustments to the holographic display hovering above the plotting table by perfectly adjusting the brightness and contrast so as to make it easy to view the symbols and abbreviated data that were to be displayed. The holographic display currently showed the immediate area of space around them, referred to as the 'staging area'.

Cameron also placed her helmet with her gloves stuffed inside into the overhead above the plotting table. "How are we looking, Chief?" Cameron called into her comm-set.

"Rear hatch is secure," the shuttle's crew chief reported over the comm-set. *"We're starting our roll-out now."*

"Very well."

"The shuttle's flight data can be displayed down in the corner of the plotting table," Ensign Yosef explained, "but only in 2 dimensions."

"That will be fine," Cameron assured her. "It will save me having to ask."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, people," Cameron began, addressing the entire staff of the C2, "listen up. Our primary role is to act as a central communications hub, as well as a command and

control center. Our ability to control the actual battle will be limited due to our distance from the combat zones. However, we will be the only ones who can truly see the big picture, and thus we are the only ones that can make the decisions. It is extremely important that all messages are tracked, and that we know the exact time the message was received. All combatants will be using a mission clock as a time reference instead of local or shipboard clocks. All messages will be time stamped using the mission time. This should all be fairly automated, but keep your eyes on it nonetheless, as we have not had any real-world testing of any of this. This is the first use of a C2 in a superluminal battle scenario, so we may have to make up a few things as we go. If you have any questions, feel free to ask Ensign Yosef or myself."

Cameron felt the artificial gravity holding her to the deck shift slightly as the shuttle lifted off the Aurora's flight deck and readjusted its own gravity to compensate for the loss of the Aurora's artificial gravity. "I guess we're away," Cameron said to Kaylah as she grabbed the plotting table to steady herself while the artificial gravity smoothed out. She looked at the holographic display. In its center was the icon that represented the C2. The icons for the Aurora and the staging platform connected to it were sliding away from them, circling around to the aft end of their own icon as the shuttle moved farther from the Aurora toward the nearby group of cargo shuttles. The four shuttles had been sitting in space for nearly twenty hours now, their crews having been rotated halfway through.

"Staging platform reports they have completed loading and are about to disconnect from the Aurora," Ensign Yosef reported.

"Very well." Cameron felt the shuttle lurch slightly as it applied its braking thrusters. The holographic display showed them pulling up near the cargo shuttles. Soon, the staging platform would join them, followed by the five jump

shuttles that would ferry the troops from the staging platform to the surface of Takara in short jumps.

"The Falcon has also launched," Ensign Yosef reported. "Loki is reporting that the comm link software appears to be working properly."

"Good." Cameron felt a slight relief pass through her. Without the software Deliza had developed, all the data and comm-traffic exchanges would have had to be manually sent and received. The automation would save them nearly a full minute with each exchange. In the beginning, it would not matter as much, as the shuttles would take at least five to ten minutes to reload between jumps. But once all combatants were in place, being able to exchange data and comm-traffic in seconds would become critical.

"Staging platform is free floating and stationary," Ensign Yosef reported. "The Aurora is launching her jump shuttles."

"Very well." Cameron could feel her nerves tingling. She was both excited and nervous. Running the operation was a huge responsibility, one that she felt ready to perform. Despite the fact that the local field commanders would be making their own decisions for the most part, they were all counting on her to not only keep them properly informed, but also to make recommendations based on the *big picture* to which only she was privy.

Cameron's mind wandered momentarily back to the Fleet Academy and its myriad of training simulations. They had thrown every conceivable challenge at the cadets, and after passing them time and time again, Cameron remembered feeling like she was ready for anything fate could throw at her. She realized now that she had been wrong.

* * *

"Senior Chief," Nathan said as he approached Marcus.

"Yes, sir," Marcus answered, turning away from the technician he had been talking with as the young man

departed to tend to his duties.

"Nice work you did with the staging platform."

"Thank you, sir. Just making do with what we got," Marcus stated. "Could've used a few more toilets, what with fifteen hundred men being crammed in there."

"None of them will be in there for more than an hour."

"Let's hope," Marcus added, knowing full well that so many things could go wrong.

"Anyway, good luck to you," Nathan stated as he continued on toward the insertion teams forming up in the forward end of the main hangar bay.

"Just keep them from punching any more holes in our sides, Captain. That's all I ask."

"I'll do my best," Nathan promised as he continued forward.

At the forward end of the main hangar bay, the ten insertion teams were gathered in their respective groups of eight. Outfitted in their complete space jump rigs, augmented with the Corinari's automated chute navigation system, they could barely move under the normal gravity being generated by the hangar deck's artificial gravity system. In another moment of brilliance, Senior Chief Taggart had devised the simple solution of converting a few ordnance trailers into taxis for the eighty space jumpers. Using two of the converted trailers, he could haul twenty jumpers per trip the length of the hangar deck to the starboard transfer airlock, enabling him to haul all eighty of them in only four trips. Once in the transfer airlock, the gravity would be lessened so the jumpers would be able to move about as if they only carried a normal parachute rig on their backs. The space-jump suits themselves were normally part of the pilot's seat, only being worn while sitting in the fighter itself. It had never been designed to be used in such a manner.

Nathan watched as the trailer packed with fully suited space -jumpers rolled past him, being towed by a deck

tractor and heading aft. He could see the faces of the men about to jump off the Aurora's deck at one hundred kilometers above the surface of Takara. Although each of these men were well trained in high altitude parachute jumps and jumps into enemy territory, none of them had ever jumped from space. As stoic as they were, the fear and doubt was evident in even the bravest of them.

As he approached, he watched the next group of twenty jumpers take their seats on either side of the converted trailer. As they each sat, a technician standing on the trailer behind them would snap their suits against the horizontal bar running behind them using the same fasteners that attached the hard-shell parachute pack to the seat in the cockpit of the fighters in which the suits were designed to be used. Once the last man was secured, the tractor began pulling the next group toward the aft end of the hangar.

The last group of twenty jumpers, teams nine and ten, were standing at the forward end of the bay. Corinari technicians were performing last minute checks on each of the jumpers, making sure they were ready to go. The last two teams, with the exception of Jessica, were composed entirely of Karuzari operatives.

"How is it in there?" Nathan asked Jessica as he approached.

"Lousy," she complained. "This thing weighs a ton, and it was designed to be worn over a skin-tight jump suit, not the costume they've got me wearing."

"Costume?" Nathan wondered. "I thought you were going down in imperial uniforms."

"There's no women in their military, remember?"

"Then what are you dressed as?"

Jessica rolled her eyes in disgust, not wanting to tell him. "Some kind of a serving wench or something. The damn skirt is all bunched up around my ass."

Nathan smiled. "I hope it isn't as short as the one you wore to the last Founder's day party. The idea is to *not*

attract attention.”

Jessica feigned a smile. “Funny.”

Nathan turned serious for a moment. “Listen, Jess, if there were any way I could keep you here...”

“What, are you getting all weepy on me here? I thought I warned you about that.”

“Right.”

“Besides, other than this stupid outfit I’m wearing under here, this is going to be a blast. I mean, come on... I’m jumping out of a spaceship and falling all the way to the surface. That’s going to look awfully good on the old resume, huh?”

Nathan smiled again. “Yeah, I guess it will. Let’s just hope somebody gets a chance to read it one day.” Nathan stared at her face for several moments as she continued fidgeting about, trying to get her bunched up skirt to fit more comfortably.

Jessica noticed Nathan’s stare. “The words you’re looking for are, ‘Good hunting.’”

“Of course,” Nathan answered. “Good hunting, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Thanks, you too. Now, can you close my visor for me?”

Nathan reached up, pulled her visor down, locked it in place, and stopped to look in her eyes once more. Knowing that no one was looking, Jessica winked once and puckered her lips as if blowing him a kiss, then smiled. Nathan patted her on the shoulder and moved on.

He moved past several more of the Karuzari jumpers. Many of their faces he recognized, having seen them in the corridors of the asteroid base. They all had the same look of determination, the ones he remembered from Marak and the others that had come aboard the Aurora just after they defeated the Campaglia when they first ended up in the Pentaurus cluster. These men had resolute conviction, a belief so strong that they were willing to sacrifice their very lives for their cause.

"Captain," Jalea nodded as he approached her.

"Good luck, Jalea," Nathan offered with only the appropriate amount of sentiment. Her mysterious hold over him had long vanished. For a moment, he wondered exactly when that had occurred, quickly concluding that it had been the interrogation of the imperial Ghatazhak prisoner that had made him realize the depth of her duplicity. She, too, believed in the cause of the Karuzari, but there was something much deeper within her that was her true motivation. She had lost both her parents and later her husband at the hands of the Ta'Akar empire, and Nathan had always wondered how much of that fueled the fires within her.

"Mister Dumar," Nathan nodded. "I trust you are ready for this."

"It may surprise you to know, Captain, that this is not my first space jump," Dumar answered.

"No, it would not surprise me," Nathan admitted. He paused for a moment. "I hope we will have more time together in the future," Nathan stated.

"Time, Captain?"

"I suspect that you, just like Tug, have many interesting tales to share."

"Indeed," Dumar agreed. "Keep those ships away from Takara, and perhaps we will all live long enough to finally exchange all of our stories."

"I'll do my best."

Nathan moved next to Tug who, as expected, sat next to Dumar. He had noticed that as Tug and Dumar had become closer, Jalea and Tug had become more distant. He could also tell that Jalea did not care for the influence that Dumar had on Tug, probably because it took away from her own influence over him. Nathan often wondered if he himself had any influence over Tug. He doubted that was the case, as Tug had always appeared to know exactly what he wanted at all times.

“Mister Tugwell,” Nathan said as he stopped in front of Tug.

“Captain Scott.”

“I have said it before, and I’ll say it again. I suspect that you still have many interesting stories to share with us.”

“I promise, Captain, should we survive this day, I will share all of them and more.”

“Just promise me that once you have completed your mission, the empire will fall as predicted.”

Tug could see the lingering doubt in Nathan’s eyes. “Captain, on your world, do your leaders tell you everything? Or do they hide certain aspects of their plans, making only those who require such information have it?”

“Of course we do,” Nathan told him. “They call it ‘need to know’. For example, we did not know about the existence of the jump drive until moments before our first test of it. Even our captain did not know.”

“Then trust in the fact that what I and Mister Dumar know is sufficient justification for the risk we are all about to take, even if neither he nor I can share it with you at this time.” Tug raised his arms, placing them on Nathan’s shoulders. His arms were heavier than normal due to the additional weight of his jump suit, and their weight was clearly felt on Nathan’s shoulders. “We do not withhold the information from you to deceive you, Captain, but to protect you should we fail at our task. You must believe me.”

Nathan looked at the old man’s face. He could see the decades of pain and sacrifice in his friend’s face, but today, he saw something else as well. Hope. Nathan cocked his head to one side and smiled. “I do believe you, old man, but you’re asking me to send hundreds, possibly thousands of men to their deaths. You’re even asking me to risk the billions of people on my own world.”

Tug looked at Nathan, studying him for a moment. He could see the desperation in the Captain’s eyes. He knew that Nathan would go through with the attack. His honor left

him little choice. However, the captain's honor was all the more reason that he should know exactly what they were all fighting for. "Hand me your data pad, Captain," Tug requested, extending his hand.

Nathan looked at him quizzically. Tug gestured yet again with his extended hand, and Nathan withdrew his data pad from his hip pouch and handed it to Tug.

Tug took the data pad and typed in a short message. He tipped the data pad slightly to his left so that Mister Dumar could see the message as well. Dumar looked at Tug as if questioning his decision to share the information with Nathan. Tug nodded and Dumar nodded his agreement back to him. Tug then handed the data pad back to Nathan.

Nathan stared at the data pad for several seconds before looking back at Tug's smiling face. "Son of a bitch," Nathan muttered.

Tug held one finger to his lips, signaling for Nathan to keep the information a secret. It was an unnecessary gesture, as Nathan was well aware of the implications.

Nathan stepped back, a smile on his face, as the technicians led the last of the jumpers to the trailer and locked them into place. It was the most genuine smile he had worn in many days. He looked at Jessica, who wore a suspicious look after witnessing the silent exchange between Tug and Nathan. She looked at him and mouthed the word, '*What?*' Nathan continued smiling and winked at her, making her even more curious.

The time had come, and Nathan turned, left the main hangar bay, and headed for the bridge.

Chapter Nine

Jessica stood at the end of the line directly behind Jalea, Dumar, and Tug. With her auto-visor set to its darkest setting, she could barely make out the silhouettes of the others in front of her, despite the bright lighting within the starboard transfer airlock. With its outer door open to space, Jessica could see out across the flight apron to the slope of the main drive section directly aft. The two Karuzari teams were lined up in two rows of ten, ready to depart as soon as they got the word.

"Five seconds to jump," Naralena's voice announced over the helmet comms.

Jessica remembered the last time she had walked out onto the flight deck. Her assault team had been assigned to board a disabled Jung ship just outside the Sol system. That action had not gone well, and she had barely made it back to the ship in time.

"Four..."

She had never been able to accept the astronomical odds of encountering an enemy ship at the exact location of

their first jump...

"Three..."

...let alone two of them.

"Two..."

Someone had sold them out. It was the only answer that made sense.

"One..."

Jessica closed her eyes tightly.

"Jump."

Even with her auto-visor at its darkest setting and her eyes tightly closed, she could still see the jump flash to some extent. As the flash cleared, the entire ship began to vibrate slightly.

"Jump complete. Stand by."

Jessica reached up and set her visor back to auto-mode. The visor quickly adjusted to the current lighting conditions, allowing her to see normally again. The line had not moved. They waited for the bridge crew to verify that their position over Takara was correct for their space jump. The Aurora had jumped in at less than half the required speed to maintain a low orbit over Takara, so she was literally falling from orbit toward the planet below and had only minutes before she would be overcome by the heat of reentry. It was a risky move, but necessary, as their suits were being used without their ejection seats, which meant they had insufficient thrust to slow themselves down to an acceptable reentry speed. She could feel her heart racing, her breath quickening. Her respirations were the only sounds within her suit.

"Teams nine and ten... jump, jump, jump," Naralena announced.

Jessica shook her hands at her sides as she waited for her turn to go, the vibrations of the ship becoming more intense. Both lines of Karuzari filed out of the transfer airlock onto the flight apron, breaking into a jog as they turned to port and quickened their stride. Jessica followed

the line out. The artificial gravity of the flight apron had been adjusted to enable them to jog while wearing the heavy and cumbersome space-jump rigs.

In pairs, they ran to the port edge of the Aurora's flight apron and jumped off its edge, their momentum carrying them away from the ship. Jessica and the Karuzari fighter next to her followed the pair before them, running off the edge of the deck to float freely in orbit above Takara. They coasted for nearly a minute in a long staggered line, drifting slowly away from the Aurora.

"Teams nine and ten," Naralena's voice called over the helmet comms, *"you are clear to activate auto-flight systems."*

Jessica reached over to her left arm and touched a button on the control pad on her forearm, activating her suit's auto-flight control system. She immediately felt her maneuvering jets fire from various points along her torso, forcing her to spin around suddenly. Her body was reoriented, with her face toward the planet below.

"Stand by for retro rocket ignition," the computerized voice announced in Corinairan. Jessica's Corinari suit technician had taught her the phrase while helping her prepare, knowing that it would be the second most dramatic jolt she would feel during her journey down to the surface of Takara. Even though they were already falling toward the surface, they still needed to separate themselves from the ship before the Aurora jumped away, as they had no idea what the effects might be on their suits. Even more importantly, they didn't want to be on the exact same targeting path that the ground-based air defense batteries might use to engage the Aurora, as that would end their journey just as quickly.

Jessica felt a sudden jolt, like someone had swung a bat and struck her on the underside of her backpack. The entire suit and the torso package that surrounded her felt like it slid upward a few dozen centimeters. She could feel the

crotch straps digging in between her legs and pulling tight against her hips. She could also swear that her head was now sitting a bit lower in her helmet than before. Her entire suit vibrated and shook as her retro rockets continued to burn. As she shook, Jessica shifted her eyes to her left and turned her head slightly toward the rest of the line. Each of them were also burning their retro rockets. The entire event only lasted thirty seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. Just as suddenly as it had started, the retro rockets shut down and everything was quiet once again.

“Shit!” Jessica exclaimed to herself. “That sucked.”

Without warning, her maneuvering rockets fired again, spinning her head over heels and rotating her body on its longitudinal axis so that she was diving toward it head first.

A computerized voice announced something in Corinairan. Jessica thought it said something about reentry and fifteen seconds... At least, she was pretty sure that's what it had announced. That technician had run a lot of phrases past her in a hurry. She hadn't really understood why he had been trying to teach her the phrases. After all, the entire process was automated. If something failed to happen properly, there would be nothing she could do but wait to burn up or slam into the ground.

The computer made another announcement. That one she did understand, and a sense of relief washed over her as the shield indicator on her visor display lit up, verifying that the energy bubble that surrounded her to deflect the heat of reentry away from her was fully operational.

“Teams nine and ten have begun atmospheric entry,” Naralena reported from the comm-station. “Teams one through eight are ready to go.”

“Time to second jump-off point?” Nathan asked from the command chair at the center of the Aurora's bridge.

“One minute, sir,” the navigator, Mister Riley, reported.

"Time to critical hull temp?" Nathan asked urgently.

"Two minutes, Captain," Mister Randeem answered from tactical. "We're already picking up some heat from the atmosphere."

"Comms," Nathan called, "translate the following and broadcast over all known Ta'Akar communications frequencies."

"Ready, sir."

"Attention Ta'Akar command, this is Captain Nathan Scott of the United Earth Ship Aurora. I speak on behalf of the Earth-Darvano Alliance. You are ordered to stand down all military forces and relinquish control of all systems other than Takara back to each system's local government. If you comply, you will be allowed to maintain sovereignty over Takara. If you refuse, all imperial military forces will be destroyed, the Takaran government will be disbanded, and your system will be placed under Alliance control. We will return for your answer in three days."

Nathan waited while Naralena translated and broadcast the message, watching the time display on the main view screen as the ship continued to vibrate against the thickening atmosphere of Takara.

"Message sent," Naralena reported. She turned and looked at him. "We don't really expect them to surrender, do we?"

"If only," Nathan answered. "I'm just giving them a reason for our brief presence in orbit over their world. If they think we are simply jumping in, transmitting a message, and jumping away, not only will they think we are bluffing, but they hopefully will not realize that we just launched our first strike teams."

"Ten seconds to jump-off point," Mister Riley announced.

"Naralena," Nathan said.

Naralena turned back to her comms, watching the digital time display as she keyed up teams one through eight on

her comm-panel. "Teams one through eight... jump, jump, jump," she announced as the time readout reached zero.

The first group of eight Corinari paratroopers jogged out of the Aurora's port transfer airlock, turning left and heading for the starboard edge of the flight apron. They ran right off the edge, drifting away in a slightly uneven line. Five seconds later, a second line emerged, also running off the starboard edge of the flight apron. One by one, six more groups of eight paratroopers did the same, each group following fifteen seconds behind the other. By the time the last group had left the Aurora's flight apron, the first group had already fired their maneuvering jets to reorient themselves into position in order to activate their retro rockets and begin their descent. Once the last group was properly oriented, all sixty-four men fired their retro rockets simultaneously.

"Teams one through eight have begun their descent," Naralena announced.

"They will begin atmospheric entry in ten seconds," Mister Navashee at the sensor station reported loudly in order to be heard over the increasingly violent rumbling of the ship as they continued to plow through the atmosphere.

"Hull temp?" Nathan inquired. He wanted to give the last group of jumpers time to get clear of the Aurora before he jumped, but he had to get the ship out of there before she got too hot and her heat shielded underside that had been designed for emergency aero-braking maneuvers began to fail.

"One thousand degrees Celsius and rising rapidly," Mister Riley reported. "Estimate thirty seconds to critical hull temp."

“Very well,” Nathan answered. “Mister Navashee, are those two closest frigates still maintaining the same course?”

“Yes, sir, same course and speed, five light minutes out.”

“Mister Riley, plot the first jump of a three jump series. I want to end up a few kilometers astern of those two ships when we finish the third jump.”

“Aye, Captain,” Mister Riley answered, immediately setting to his task.

“Tactical, load tubes one and two with conventional warheads, and load tubes three and four with fixed yield nukes. Set all four for snapshot. Also, bring the missile pod online and prepare to fire two pairs.”

“Loading tubes one and two with conventional, three and four with fixed yields, all for snapshot. Bringing missile pod online.”

“Let’s bring all rail guns up as well, Mister Randeen. We’ll fly between the two frigates and strafe them as we pass.”

“Aye, Captain, bringing up rail guns.”

“Naralena, tell flight ops to open the deck and be prepared to launch fighters.”

“Yes, sir,” Naralena answered.

“First jump plotted, sir!” Mister Riley reported from the navigator’s chair.

“Jump!” Nathan ordered, holding tightly onto the arms of his chair as the ship shook violently.

The perimeter shield around her glowed a pale, semi-opaque amber as it struggled to hold the steadily thickening atmosphere of Takara away from Jessica’s suit. Despite her shields, she could still feel the heat being generated by the friction of reentry as she continued to fall toward the planet below. She struggled with all her might to keep her hands at her sides and her legs together, knowing that any wild

movement could disrupt the shield's integrity, the result of which would be unpleasant.

As the atmosphere thickened, the sound of the air rushing past her shields intensified, eventually blocking out the sound of her own rapid breathing, interrupted only by the occasional expletive. The one thing she had always hated the most about floating in space was the sound of her breathing. Nothing made a person feel more isolated than to hear only their own respirations. Now, she longed to hear anything other than the incessant rumbling as she continued to plow through the air.

She watched the display on the inside of her helmet visor. The small maneuvering jets built into her reentry suit were maintaining her flight path automatically, keeping her angle such that her speed was reduced while not generating more heat than her shields could handle. She and the nineteen members of the Karuzari had begun their atmospheric entry just over five minutes ago, and by her clock, they had another five minutes to go.

The computerized voice announced something in Corinairan through her helmet comms. All she understood was the Corinairan word for 'fifty.' She scanned her visor display and found a bar graph that indicated her shield strength. *That has to be it,* she thought. *How long have I been falling?* She checked the displays again, cursing herself for not insisting that the display be translated into Angla before jumping. *How the hell did I miss that one?* She was reasonably certain that she had been in reentry for just over five minutes, and the entire reentry was supposed to last ten minutes. With just over half of her shield strength expended, it was going to be close. The suits had been designed for reentry into the Corinairan atmosphere, but Takara's atmosphere was a bit thicker. So much so that even the additional shield power that the suit designers had considered an adequate margin of error might not be enough to see them completely through reentry. It was a

calculated risk, and the suit technicians had assured them that they would make it, barely. However, it was a risk they had all been willing to take.

She watched the shield strength bar and the reentry timer so intently that she no longer cared about the view beyond her visor displays. The computerized voice made another announcement. Jessica could count in Corinairan. Her shield strength was down to twenty-five percent. She checked the reentry time again. Two minutes. There was nothing she could do except continue to plunge through the atmosphere and pray that those Corinairan geeks had been correct in their calculations.

* * *

"Distance to targets?" Nathan asked.

"One light minute, sir," Mister Randeem answered from the tactical station. "Target course and speed remain steady. Distance between the two targets also remains unchanged."

"Third jump plotted and locked," Mister Riley announced.

"Mister Chiles, as soon as we come out of the jump, put your nose on the port target. Once the first torpedo is clear and away, turn into the starboard target. After the second torpedo, steer us directly between the two targets and accelerate. I want to be past those ships when our torpedoes hit."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman answered, swallowing hard. Although he and his partner, Mister Riley, had already flown the Aurora in combat over Ancot, there had been no warships to deal with, only fighters, which had all been handled by Major Prechitt and his pilots.

"Ready all weapons," Nathan ordered. "Stand by on tubes one and two."

"Weapons are ready. Tubes one and two ready to fire," Mister Randeem responded.

"Here we go, people," Nathan stated calmly. "Jump."

The bridge filled with the brilliant blue-white jump flash, the main view screen automatically dimming a split second before the jump fields initiated the transition.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley answered.

"Come to port," Nathan ordered as he realized Mister Chiles was already doing so.

"Range to targets: twenty kilometers and closing fast," Mister Randeem reported from tactical.

"On port target," the helmsman called out.

"Snapshot tube one," Nathan ordered.

Mister Randeem pressed the fire button on his weapons console. "One away."

Everyone looked forward at the main view screen as the torpedo began to pass them.

"Coming to starboard target, three seconds," Mister Chiles reported.

"That's it, Mister Chiles," Nathan commended. He was happy that his new helmsman understood the situation and wasn't waiting for the order to act when the correct moment to execute his turn was painfully obvious.

"On the starboard target," the helmsman reported.

"Snapshot tube two."

"Two away."

"Adjust course and accelerate. Full power, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir. Altering course to pass between them," he announced as he steered the ship back slightly to port. "Mains coming up to full power."

Despite the Aurora's inertial dampeners, they could still feel her accelerate hard as her main drive came up sharply to full power. Nathan could imagine Vladimir's delight as his engines began spewing forth their massive amounts of thrust. Unlike the slower Defender class warships of Earth, the Aurora could accelerate a lot faster and could maneuver with the best of ships.

"Fifteen seconds to first torpedo impact," Mister Randeem reported. "Passing torpedo two."

"Both ships are powering up their shield generators," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "They'll be at full power in twelve seconds."

"Very well," Nathan responded.

"Passing torpedo one. Ten seconds to impact, five seconds until we're lateral with the targets."

"Stand by all rail guns. Target both ships... Fire!"

"Firing rail guns," Mister Randeem stated.

The ship hummed slightly, the vibrations from eight of her rail guns all firing away translating through the Aurora's skeleton. Even though he could not see the ships as they passed them by, Nathan could imagine their metal slugs slamming repeatedly into the unprotected hulls of the two imperial frigates.

"Three seconds to torpedo impact.....two.....one..... impact."

The first torpedo flew exactly down the middle of the port frigate's main propulsion nozzle, detonating when the nozzle narrowed to the point that the warhead's proximity fuse was activated. The detonation ignited the propellant being pumped into the frigates propulsion system as they tried to accelerate and evade, blowing the entire drive section apart and sending the frigate's forward section toppling slowly end over end.

Moments later, as the Aurora's rail gun fire pounded the second frigate's port side, the second torpedo struck the frigates aft section slightly to port of the main propulsion nozzle. The detonation obliterated the frigate's port engine nozzle and damaged their center bell, leaving only the starboard nozzle intact. The damage was nowhere near as severe as that of the first frigate, but she was severely damaged nonetheless.

"Port frigate is down. She's cracked in two!" Mister Navashee reported.

"What about the starboard frigate?" Nathan asked, reminding the excited sensor operator that there were two warships out there.

"Starboard frigate is, uh, she's still maneuvering sir, but she's got significant damage to her stern, and her shields are intermittent at best."

"Tactical, target all four missiles at the starboard frigate and fire when ready."

"Aye, sir."

"Starboard frigate is firing missiles!" Mister Navashee reported, his excitement suddenly subdued.

"Mister Riley, plot an escape jump, one light minute dead ahead, and execute when ready."

"Plotting jump," Mister Riley reported.

"Mister Willard, are we jamming?"

"Since the moment we jumped in, sir," Mister Willard reported, looking back over his shoulder at the captain.

"Multiple contacts! She's fired twelve missiles!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Jesus," Nathan mumbled. "I guess he's pissed."

"Missiles locked," Mister Randeen reported. "Firing four."

"His missiles are coming hot and fast, sir!" Mister Navashee reported. "Ten seconds to impact!"

"Mister Riley?" Nathan urged.

"Plotted and locked!" Mister Riley announced. "Jumping!"

The jump flash filled the bridge again, subsiding as quickly as it had come.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Helm, reduce speed and come about," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles responded, "reducing speed and coming about."

“Mister Navashee, I want to know the damage to that second frigate as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any contacts in the area?”

“Negative, Captain,” Mister Navashee responded. “Nearest contact is a cruiser, about ten light minutes out from us, fifteen from Takara.”

“Mister Riley, after you have an escape jump plotted, I want you to plot another jump series to put us directly astern of that cruiser.”

“Aye, Captain,” Mister Riley answered.

Nathan looked at the mission time display on the lower edge of the main view screen. The time had started counting forward the moment they had jumped into orbit above Takara. That was eight minutes ago. Even if the empire’s command center had sent out a general message to all warships to be on the alert the moment the Aurora had arrived in orbit, it would still take seven more minutes for that message to reach the next furthest ship, the cruiser that was ten light minutes away. That would still give him plenty of time to jump his way into position and fire on the cruiser before she was aware that their home system was under attack.

He waited impatiently for a report on the damage to the second frigate. If it was still a threat, he would have to either jump back and finish her off or unleash a squadron of fighters to do the job while he went after the cruiser. He could not take the chance that the second frigate might be able to return to Takara and reinforce the palace defenses or interfere with their own orbital maneuvers. Unfortunately, there was little he could do but wait. It took time for light and other forms of radiation to travel through space, despite the incredible speeds at which they traveled. That was both the blessing and the curse of physics. He was one light minute away from that second frigate, so he had to wait.

"Escape jump plotted. Plotting intercept series for the cruiser, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Very well."

"Turn complete, Captain," Mister Chiles reported from the helm. "We're on course back to the first engagement zone."

"Understood." Nathan rotated his chair slowly to his left as he waited impatiently for a report from his sensor operator. He glanced over his right shoulder at the time display again.

"Data coming in now, Captain," Mister Navashee reported. "The first is completely dead in space. No power, no life support, nothing. The second frigate is heavily damaged. Minimal power, no shields, no propulsion. She's broadcasting a distress call, sir."

"Yes!" Mister Randeem cheered from the tactical station.

"Two down, nine to go," Nathan muttered. They had just taken out two frigates using only two conventionally armed torpedoes, some rail gun fire, and four missiles—and all without any damage to the Aurora. He only hoped the rest of the empire's warships would be that easy. "Mister Randeem, reload tubes one and two with conventional torpedoes. Load the aft tubes, conventional in tube five and fixed yield in tube six. Rig them all for snapshot. I expect the cruiser will be a bit harder to destroy."

* * *

Jessica watched as the indicator bar for her shield strength went from orange to red and continued to fall. There were still thirty seconds left on her reentry timer. *If I survive this, I'm gonna beat the crap out of those geeks,* she thought.

Without warning, the semi-opaque nature of her shields began to fade, its amber hue giving way to reveal the darkness of the Takaran night below. As the shield began to flicker, she could almost make out the lights of the cities still

many kilometers below. The lights twinkled in the darkness, painting an almost serene view as her shield failed completely.

The full force of the air slammed into her as her shield collapsed and disappeared. She was surrounded by darkness as her ears were assaulted by the incessant pounding of the Takaran atmosphere against her helmet. The computerized voice reported something, but even if she could have heard it above the rumbling of the air outside her helmet, she would not have understood it. She continued to fall, waiting for her body to rapidly heat up and begin to burn.

It never happened. She tried to look around to see if she could spot the others, but it was too dark. She could not call them, as they had to maintain radio silence during their entire descent. Her shield indicator was gone now that the shield had failed completely, but she was still alive. She was still falling, but she had survived reentry. *I guess those geeks get to live for now*, she thought. There was still a long way to go.

The computerized voice started speaking once more, and again, she could barely hear it over the noise. It was talking a lot longer than usual. It was repeating something. She realized the voice was counting down to something in Corinairan. She pulled her arms in tight across her chest, grabbing the shoulder straps of her harness just above the hard plastic chest pack. She then crossed her legs and squeezed them together tightly.

The jolt was severe, pulling her entire harness upward. The wind was pushed out of her lungs in a one big sudden exhalation that fogged her visor and covered the inside of it with droplets of her own spit. The severe jolt only lasted a few seconds, after which it settled down to a constant pulling of the harness. She struggled to angle her head upward enough to see the barely visible image of her gray drogue chute as it filled high above her head. Relief washed

over her now that her drogue chute was fully deployed. Over the next few minutes, it would decelerate her considerably, eventually slowing her rate of descent enough that she could open her main chute safely. She made a mental note to herself; if she ever had to do this again, she would exhale right before the drogue chute opened.

Jessica continued looking about as she dangled beneath her drogue chute. She thought she could make out one or two of her team in the distance as the moonlight reflected off their faceplates. She looked down at the surface of the planet as it moved slowly from left to right. She checked the flight path display on the inside of her visor. It showed that she was on the proper glide slope for this part of her descent. With nothing else to look at, she continued to look downward, concentrating more to her left as that was the direction she was traveling. The distant city lights began to twinkle more frequently until they finally disappeared completely, obscured by cloud cover below her.

After several minutes of descending on her drogue chute, the computerized voice again began to countdown. Jessica again braced herself, drawing in her arms and legs and this time exhaling as the countdown reached the Corinairan word for zero. She felt something on her back pop, like doors springing open, after which she began to fall faster. She could feel her main chute paying out from behind her, the drogue chute pulling it up and away from her. Again she felt the harness dig into her, only this time with less force.

She looked up at her main chute, a big gray rectangle inflated high above her. During her special operations training on Earth, she had performed many jumps from many different altitudes. Back then, nothing ever felt as good as seeing your main chute open. Today was no different.

Jessica continued scanning from side to side, both above and below her, watching for the others in her team. They

may be considerably spread out as a result of the jump, but they were all headed for the same athletic field in one of the back spires of the palace grounds. Eventually, they would all be converging on the same target, and she needed to be ready to take control of her chute at a moment's notice in order to avoid colliding with one of her teammates.

She watched the glide path indicator on her visor display, noting that everything appeared to be going properly—except for one thing; she could no longer see the city lights below. Either every man, woman, and child in the city of Answari had suddenly turned off their lights, or the cloud cover was getting thick. A few thousand meters more and she would know.

She hoped that Dumar had survived his descent as well, since he had the comm-device needed to alert his contact of their pending arrival. If the lights were still on when they came down, they would surely be spotted and burned out of the night sky by energy weapons fire from the palace guards below.

She entered the cloud cover, and her visibility dropped to zero. The dense cloud was cold and wet, and she felt like it would never end. Within seconds, it did, and she could see the palace below. She could also see the others in her team more easily than before, which meant that those on the ground could see them as well.

Jessica instinctively reached for her weapon which was fastened to the front of her chest piece. She fumbled with the release mechanism, cursing herself for not spending more time familiarizing herself with the weapon before the jump. Then the lights below her all went dark. As relieved as the darkness made her feel, it also meant she couldn't see the ground rushing up at her. She focused her attention on the visor display, reaching up and grabbing the chute control tethers as her altitude rapidly counted down to zero. At just a few meters above the ground, she pulled hard on the back of the chute control tethers, flaring out and

stopping her forward momentum. Her feet touched the soft grass of the athletic field, and she stumbled forward, rolling onto her left side. Her chute continued forward as it collapsed, falling to the ground just beyond her point of impact. She immediately got to her knees, spun around to face away from the chute, and pressed the chute retraction button. The mechanism quickly reeled the chute into her backpack and closed. She managed to get her weapon disconnected from her chest pack and looked around.

"Jessica," Tug called in a whisper from nearby, "this way, quickly, before the lights come back on."

She could barely see his shadowy figure in the darkness, the clouds blocking the moonlight that had provided modest illumination during the first phase of their descent. She ran after him, bent over with her weapon held up and ready to fire. It was difficult going due to the extra weight of both the reentry suit and the auto-nav parachute rig, and if it had been much farther, she wondered if she could have made it.

Finally, she found herself huddled against the side of a maintenance building at the edge of the athletic field.

"How many made it?" she asked between breaths.

"Sixteen," Dumar reported.

"We lost four?" Jessica said in disbelief.

"Considering what we just did, sixteen is impressive," Tug commented as he began to remove his jump rig.

"Well where are the four?" Jessica wondered. "If they landed somewhere else, that might alert the guards..."

"I suspect they did not survive reentry," Tug explained, "which means their remains, if there were any, are a long way from here. Now everyone, inside the building. We will leave our suits here."

Jessica obliged, following them into the building as she tried to ascertain who had not made it from their teams. For a moment, she felt guilty for being disappointed that Jalea had survived. "That was something, wasn't it?" Jessica

exclaimed as they entered the dark building. She pulled her helmet off and tossed it to the ground.

"That was the easy part," Tug joked. "The worst is yet to come."

* * *

The city of Answari, the jewel in the crown of the Ta'Akar empire, waited silently for the nearing dawn. The city was covered in a low hanging blanket of predawn fog that rolled in from the massive bay along which the city was located, and there were few people on the streets at this hour. One of the capital city's many automated street cleaning vehicles sat on the side of the empty boulevard that ran past the number four air defense battery on the outskirts of the city. Another vehicle, much smaller than the street cleaner, pulled up behind it and came to a stop. Two men climbed out of the service vehicle's cab and made their way to the front of the street cleaner, pulling their collars up against the chilly fog.

"A crying shame it is, that we have to come out in such conditions," the first man complained to the elder technician.

"It's our job," the more seasoned man stated.

"It's our job to maintain these beasts during proper hours," the younger man disagreed, "not to be pulled out of our warm beds because some idiot upstairs doesn't take our service requests seriously." The younger man opened the access doors on the side of the street cleaner's drive section and turned on its inside light to take a look. "I reported the control unit on this one here more than a month ago. I'll bet you a week's pay they haven't even ordered the new one yet." The man turned back toward the service vehicle. "I'm going to need the tester..." The man stopped in mid sentence at the sight in the distance. Not more than ten meters behind their service vehicle, two men clad in black pressure suits floated down from out of the low hanging fog

and touched down gracefully in the street. “What in the name of Caius?” The technician turned around to face his partner as he spoke. “I think we’re being...”

The man’s eyes opened wide. Standing in front of his partner were two more of the black-suited men. No longer connected to their parachutes, they brandished energy weapons, both of which were aimed directly at him and his partner. “Whoa, don’t shoot, mate! We’re unarmed we are!” A sharp pain struck the man in the neck, and he fell to his knees. The Corinari paratrooper that had come up behind him caught the man before he hit the ground as a fourth paratrooper stabbed the other man in the neck, rendering him unconscious as well.

The second paratrooper checked the pulse of the fallen Takaran service technician nearest him. “What do we do with them?” he asked somberly.

“Put them back in their vehicle,” their leader instructed. “Make it look like they’re sleeping, and make it quick. We’ve got charges to set.”

Eight Corinari soldiers made their way quietly up the hill toward the air defense battery. Having discarded their pressure suits immediately after touching down, the team was now clad in flat black combat. As they continued up the hillside, they could barely make out the base of the massive plasma cannon. It was one of eight that would automatically protect the capital city against attack from as far above as high orbit over Takara. So thick was the fog at even this modest altitude, that when standing against the base, they could not see the barrels of the cannon itself. It was no matter, however, as they could see that which was needed.

As the eight men arrived at the base of the weapon, each man dropping to one knee. The leader signaled men at each end of the line to spread out in opposite directions. Two pairs of soldiers, on the right and the left, began to

work their way around the base of the cannon, their weapons held high in case they met armed resistance. The gun emplacements were constantly guarded. However, the cold, early morning fog could have driven off the guard, and the fact that no one had ever attempted an attack on the Takaran system, let alone the capital city of Answari, meant that the guards had likely grown complacent over the years. This was especially true of battery number two, which was the only gun that sat on an elevated hill, which placed it inside the fog layer. The younger guards that had been stuck on the night shift at one of the least prestigious postings available had no desire to brave the moist, chilly, morning air.

The team of two men that had gone right stopped momentarily. The lead man dropped to one knee and kept his weapon up and ready as he scanned the area for threats. Meanwhile, the second man stuck a small explosive charge to the side of the cannon base and activated its timer. He tapped the first man on the shoulder, and they proceeded on to the next preplanned location to set the next charge. One charge at a time, they worked their way around the weapon, being careful to avoid the line of sight from the control house atop the weapon, until they joined up with the two men that had gone in the opposite direction.

A minute later, the four men rejoined the rest of their team. Skillfully, the eight men descended the hill the way they had come, walking backward down the slope, their weapons still held high and ready. The first phase of their mission completed, they would now make their way through the empty city streets, avoiding all contact with the city's residents until they reached their assigned rally point. Once there, they would provide cover fire for the incoming jump shuttles that would begin arriving shortly.

“There is no other approach available,” the Corinari soldier reported to his squad leader. “The emplacement is surrounded on four sides by warehouses, all of which have their own security systems. Even if we could get past one of them, we would need ropes to get down into the gun yard.”

The squad leader studied the control house on the upper level of air defense battery number seven. “If we take the control house out with weapons fire, it may alert others. Even if no one around hears us, it will likely activate some type of automated alarm.”

“It will only take us a few minutes to set the charges,” the other Corinari soldier reminded his squad leader.

“After we take out the control house, we will set the charges to detonate by remote instead of time. If help comes sooner than expected, we will blow the charges early.”

“Won’t that jeopardize the other teams?”

“Perhaps. We will try to wait as long as possible and blow them at the correct time using the remote detonator. But we cannot take the chance that help will arrive early and disarm the devices. Even a single gun could ruin the entire mission and cost thousands of Corinari lives.”

“Understood,” the second Corinari confirmed.

“Shooters,” the squad leader called out. Three men from the group that had been huddled down against the building came forward, remaining low as they moved. “Target range is fifty-two meters, five meter up elevation. The control house on top of the gun base. On three we blast it, tight rounds, lowest destructive intensity. Let’s keep it as quiet as possible, but nothing lives, understood?”

The three men nodded as they adjusted their energy rifles to the appropriate settings and prepared to shoot.

“Move into a firing line when I start counting. Fire on my order. As soon as that control house is down, haul ass over there and set those charges as quickly as possible. This may bring trouble our way.” The squad leader looked at the faces

of the seven men on his team, ensuring they understood the plan. Satisfied that they did, he adjusted his own weapon and got ready to fire. "Three....."

The other three shooters moved out into the open, staying as low as possible.

"Two....."

The three shooters dropped to one knee and raised their weapons to take aim, as did the squad leader.

"One....."

All four men flipped off the safeties on their weapons. As they looked through their targeting scopes and zoomed in, they could all see the face of the guard as he noticed the four armed men taking aim at him. The guard's eyes grew wide in disbelief as he reached for his communications device.

"Fire."

A rapid succession of three shots of bright red slugs of energy struck the control house, shattering the glass window and destroying the inside of the room. With all four of the men firing in unison, a total of twelve bolts of energy ricocheted off the internal metal walls of the control house, sending flashes of light and debris in all directions. With their intensities set to the lowest destructive setting, their weapons made little more than a *zing* with each bolt they fired, and it was doubtful that anyone would hear the weapons fire from a distance. The end effect was devastating however, leaving the four men inside the control house in a smoldering bloody pile on the floor.

"Go," the squad leader ordered. The other four men went charging down the driveway that led from the street to the front gate of the gun yard. It took them only a moment to disable the gate's lock and force it open enough to get inside the perimeter. After which, they made their way to the base of the mighty gun.

"Spread out. Watch for anyone approaching," the squad leader ordered. "You're weapons free." The other three

shooters went off in separate directions to keep a lookout for approaching assistance from the Takarans. If they were lucky, none would come.

"Where is everyone else?" the first Corinari paratrooper asked the second.

"I do not know. I cannot find them anywhere."

"Should we call them?"

"We cannot break radio silence, Lomal," the second paratrooper warned.

"What if they did not make it down?"

"What?"

"What if they all burned up on descent?"

"All six of them?"

"It is possible," Lomal insisted.

"It is more likely that they landed off target and are trying to make their way to us."

"Or they could have been captured," the first paratrooper added.

"Doubtful. If that were the case, they would be at a heightened state of alert."

"What are we going to do, Jonah? We have no charges."

"We must attack," Lomal stated, reminding Jonah of their duty.

"Of course, but how? We are undoubtedly outnumbered."

Lomal thought for a moment. "We must approach with stealth and find a way to get close enough to take them without warning. Once we have killed the guards, we can figure out how to disable the gun from inside."

"Disable the gun? How do you propose we do that?" Jonah wondered.

"It must have an off switch."

"Maybe we should wait to see if the others find us," Jonah proposed. "We should at least wait until the shooting

starts. Then, we can call for back up.”

“By then it will be too late,” Lomal reminded him. “The jump shuttles will arrive, and this gun will burn them from the sky. We must act now.”

Jonah nodded his agreement. Lomal rose to move. “Follow me.” The two of them ran low along the fence line, staying as low as possible in the darkness to avoid detection. To their advantage, the guard in the control house was paying little attention to the well-lit perimeter of the gun yard, obviously content that there would never be anything to see out there. They continued along the fence and around to the far side of the gun yard. Satisfied that they were out of sight of the guard, Lomal pulled his cutters from his cohort’s pack and began slicing through the metal fence using the silent laser cutter. He quickly made a slice in the fence and pulled it back to create a small hole through which he and Jonah crawled.

Continuing to stay low, they ran across the yard, wanting to get to the gun base and out of the well-lit yard as quickly as possible. What they did not realize was that there were two technicians working at a power relay box just beyond the gun. The technicians took notice of the two Corinari paratroopers running across the yard and immediately notified the control house.

As Lomal and Jonah made their way around the corner of the gun’s base, they were met by four armed guards who immediately opened fire. Lomal managed to duck and roll, firing his weapon as he did so and taking out one of the four guards. Jonah was not as lucky and was sent flying backward, his chest and neck burning from two separate energy weapon blasts. Lomal scrambled to get another shot off, but it went wide. The surviving guards continued to fire, and Lomal fell backward, rolling out of the line of fire and around the corner of the gun’s base.

Lomal scrambled to his feet and threw himself against the wall of the base, moving back to the corner. He stuck his

gun out around the corner and fired in rapid succession, sweeping back and forth. He heard someone scream in agony and fall to the ground with a thud. The two remaining guards returned fire, forcing Lomal to withdraw his weapon back around the corner. He checked behind him, then began walking backward away from the corner, watching for the two remaining guards to peek their heads around the corner. As he continued backpedaling, one of the Takaran guards obliged him, receiving a quick shot to the face as his reward. As Lomal reached the other corner, he paused, hoping the fourth guard would be just as ignorant as the third one had been. After nearly ten seconds, he turned to head around the corner behind him, only to find himself face to face with the fourth guard who must have quickly circled around the gun to come up behind him. Lomal cursed himself for being so foolish as the fourth guard's shots struck Lomal about the head, left shoulder, and left hip. He fell to the ground, twisting to his left in agony as he fell, his weapon falling from his hand. As the guard scrambled toward him, Lomal pulled his combat knife from his right hip and waited. As soon as the guard drew near enough, he swung his right arm out in a wide arc, hoping to catch the guard unprepared. Lomal's knife slashed across the guard's abdomen, carving neatly through his outer coat, his uniform, and finally deep into his skin, drawing copious amounts of blood that sprayed out in the direction of the knife's swing. The guard grabbed his abdomen and fell to his knees, a gasp barely escaping his lips.

The force of his swing caused Lomal to roll over onto his belly, his arm splayed out to one side. He struggled for a moment to rise to his hands and knees, hoping to get the strength to finish off the last guard. He squinted to see his enemy, his vision blurring. The guard was young, clean shaven with perfect hair—no doubt the son of a noble house who had just recently entered the service and whose father had managed to get his son this safe assignment. The

young Takaran's face was pale as he was already going into shock. Blood continued to ooze up from between the young man's fingers as he tried to hold back the flow with his left hand. The young guard began to slowly raise his weapon, summoning every ounce of strength within himself to do so.

Lomal, still on his hands and knees, fought through his pain, pushing the guard's weapon aside with his left hand as he fell forward, his right arm extended, driving his knife into the young guard's chest. The guard made a gurgling sound as he tried to take a breath. Lomal removed his knife and pushed the guard backward. Lomal knelt there for several seconds. His wounds were serious, possibly even life-threatening, but he still had strength within him. All four guards were down, and he still had a chance to disable the weapon. He struggled to get to his feet, leaning against the big gun's base to steady himself as he rose. Finally, he was on his feet again. He could do this.

Suddenly, Lomal heard a high-pitched *zing* and felt a burning pain in the middle of his back. His vision blackened as the *zing* repeated itself two more times, and he fell forward onto the ground. As his life drained from his body, he realized there were more than four guards.

* * *

"What was that?" the woman asked her husband as she sat bolt upright in their bed.

"What was what?" her husband asked, still half asleep.

There was another distant thud and the house shook once more.

"That," she repeated.

"What?" he asked again, rolling over and opening his eyes slightly.

Another thud came, followed by one that was even louder and shook the house even more.

"Are you deaf, old man?" she wondered. "That!"

“Sounds like explosions,” the man said, sitting up and swinging his feet out of the bed. The thud repeated once more, shaking the house again as the old man stumbled on his way to the window. He threw open the curtain and gazed out into the foggy morning. The dawn had not yet broken. He could see a faint flash of light through the hazy fog as another even louder thud followed, shaking their home even more violently than before. “Stay here!” he ordered as he grabbed his boots and headed out the door.

The front porch of the small farmhouse swung open, and the old man came running out, his boots still untied and his coat hanging open. He strained to see something in the distance. The fog was not as bad as some days, but it was still too hazy to see anything other than a faint glow, as if something were burning.

An alert siren began its long wail in the distance, coming from the direction of the Answari airbase not two kilometers to the east of the old man’s farm. His wife came out onto the patio as well, her robe wrapped tightly around her. She, too, heard the siren. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” the old man admitted. He had lived on this farm for more than sixty years, as had his father before him. In all that time, he had never seen nor heard such explosions. He had heard the alert sirens from time to time as the nearby airbase conducted training exercises, but those had become infrequent over the past few years.

“Are we under attack?” his wife wondered.

“Don’t be silly,” the old man argued. “Who in their right mind would try to attack Answari? It would be suicide.”

A brilliant blue-white flash of light illuminated the hanging fog not more than twenty meters away from the old man and about forty meters above his fields. The flash was accompanied by the roar of jet engines as a forty year-old Takaran fighter, painted flat black and without markings, suddenly appeared from the flash of light and streaked across the field. The ship’s sudden arrival knocked the old

man backward onto the ground. As he scrambled to his feet, the old fighter launched four cruise missiles toward the Answari airbase, then pulled sharply upward.

“Get inside, woman!” the old man yelled as he turned and started running toward the house, his boots flopping on his feet. “We’re under attack!”

“Going vertical,” Josh announced as he pulled the Falcon’s nose sharply upward and maxed out his throttles.

“Jump point in thirty seconds,” Loki announced. “Missile impact in twenty.”

“How many guns did they get?” Josh wondered.

“Stand by,” Loki told him. He started scanning the area of Answari with thermal imaging, knowing that the exploded air defense batteries would likely be by far the hottest places in the area. “Uh oh, I only count six hot spots.”

“That means there are still two of them in service,” Josh realized.

“Five seconds to missile impact. Fifteen to jump point,” Loki announced.

“We’ve got to do something about those guns,” Josh told him.

“We just shot off all our missiles, Josh.”

“Then we’ll hit them with guns.”

“Are you nuts?” Loki asked. “Missile impact. Direct hit! All four! That airbase won’t be launching anything soon!” Loki looked at the jump clock. “Four seconds to jump.”

“Loki,” Josh said.

“Josh.”

“Fuck it!” Josh pulled the nose back even more as he began backing off on the throttles. He pulled their nose all the way back over until the ship was headed back on a reciprocal heading before rolling the interceptor to bring their wings level to the ground below once again. He then

pulled his throttles back even more and pushed the Falcon's nose down, sending them into a dive.

"Uh, Josh, you missed the jump point, you know," Loki reminded him.

"We've got to keep those guns busy while the first wave of shuttles jumps in, Loki. They're going to come in high because they don't know the city's building layout yet. Those guns will pick them off easy."

"We can't take out one of those batteries with just our guns, Josh!"

"No, but we can keep them targeting us instead of the jumpers!"

"Oh, that's a lovely idea," Loki stated. "And just how are we supposed to get close enough to shoot at them? One of them is already swinging about to target us, you know."

"Plot a jump. I'll come a few degrees to starboard of the first cannon," Josh explained. "Jump us in a few hundred meters before them. We'll fly to the right of the first and the left of the second on the other side of the city."

"That might work for the first one," Loki agreed as he struggled against the increased G-forces as Josh pulled the Falcon out of her dive and into level flight fifteen meters above the surface of Takara. "But we'll never make it across Answari before the second and maybe even the first gun manage to get a lock on us and turn us into ashes."

"Then we'll jump across the city to the next gun as well."

"You want me to calculate two quick jumps and an escape jump, all within about a minute?"

"You gonna talk or plot those jumps?" Josh asked.

"I'm plotting. I'm plotting." Loki began frantically plotting the next jump, his eyes darting back to the sensors that were locked on the closest air defense battery. "The first gun is coming to bear," he told Josh. A red indicator flashed. "EVASIVE!"

Josh yanked his flight stick, rolling the Falcon into a tight, spiraling roll to port as a bolt of red energy streaked past

them. He continued bouncing the fighter from side to side, changing his altitude frequently as more shots streaked past them. "Anytime now, Loki!"

"Jump!"

Josh hit the jump button next to his throttles. The cockpit filled with the blue-white jump flash for a moment. A split second later, it cleared, and they found themselves near the edge of the city, the first big gun coming up on their right. Josh turned the ship hard to starboard, sweeping around the backside of the air defense battery. "Say hello, Loki!"

Loki grabbed the gun controls and spun the turret cannon in the Falcon's nose to starboard, opening fire as he did so. The bolts of energy spewed forth from the turret at an astounding rate, streaking through the hazy morning fog on their way to their target.

The Falcon's energy cannon fire peppered the massive gun turret, striking all about her base and walking up its side and across its control house. The windows of the control house shattered, but the bolts of energy simply ricocheted off the control house's armored roof. Although the men controlling the big gun may have ducked for cover, the gun kept moving laterally as it tried unsuccessfully to catch up to the Falcon as it streaked past in the foggy darkness.

Five blue-white flashes of light suddenly appeared over the city of Answare in rapid succession. When the flashes cleared, there were five small cargo shuttles, each painted flat black, descending toward the city below.

"They're here!" Loki announced. "Come hard left!"

Josh pulled the Falcon to the left to get out of the way of the descending jump shuttles who had not expected the Falcon to be in the area.

“Are you still targeting the first gun?” Josh wondered, having noticed that they were no longer firing.

“I can’t target it with you whipping the ship about!” Loki argued. “Oh, shit! Both guns are swinging to target the shuttles.” Loki looked at the jump systems. “Come to one-two-seven now!”

Josh pulled the nose back to the right, bringing the ship onto the specified course. “One-two-seven!”

“Jump!” Loki ordered.

The Falcon disappeared in a brilliant flash of light. At the same moment, the first air defense battery fired, striking the closest shuttle dead on and turning it into a falling fireball of debris. The other shuttles dove quickly toward the surface, maneuvering wildly to avoid the buildings below.

The jump flash outside the cockpit of the Falcon faded away once again, and Loki opened his eyes and quickly verified their new position.

“Gun at eleven o’clock and passing, bringing the turret on target,” Loki announced. A moment later, the energy cannon turret in the Falcon’s nose lit up again, sending bolts of energy toward the second big gun emplacement. Although it made an impressive show, it did little to stop the gun from firing.

The first gun fired again, grazing the next closest shuttle in its aft port corner. Smoke billowed out of the shuttle as it continued to dive toward the surface. At the last moment, it pulled into a hover just five meters above the street. As her rear loading ramp swung down and away from her back side, two thick ropes came spilling out either side of the smoking shuttle’s ramp. She came to an unsteady hover, Corinari soldiers sliding down the ropes on either side, one after the other. As they hit the ground, they raised their weapons and scurried off toward the nearby buildings for cover, looking about for any resistance. So far, there was

none other than the two air defense batteries that had somehow managed to survive.

After all twenty men were down, the shuttle began to climb away, the ropes quickly retracting back up into the shuttle. The damaged shuttle struggled to climb and bring her nose up to get to the proper angle to jump away. Her jump emitters began to glow at various points across her canopy. Their blue-white light spilled out quickly, connecting all the emitters and blanketing the entire shuttle in the jump fields. However, several of the emitters, most notably on the back corner of the shuttle, were damaged and did not light up. The jump fields flashed, and there was a terrible noise, like electrical energy shorting across a metal surface. A moment later, the flash cleared, and the back corner of the shuttle fell to the ground, having not jumped away with the rest of the ship.

“Come to three-two-two, nose up twenty and jump!” Loki ordered.

“Did they make it?” Josh asked as he turned the ship hard to port after passing the second gun emplacement.

“Checking,” Loki assured him.

“Three-two-two,” Josh confirmed. “Twenty degrees up. Jumping!”

The cockpit filled with light for a brief moment, and they found themselves back in space, approaching the staging area.

“Did they make it?” Josh asked again.

“Three made it, I think,” Loki answered.

“What do you mean, ‘you think’?”

“I saw one go down, and another get hit. The one that got hit dropped her troops and then jumped away,” Loki reported.

“Then where are they?”

Loki looked at his sensors again. “Staging platform is dead ahead. Wait... I found the jumper. It’s jumper two,

it's... Oh God..."

"Shit." Josh stated in frustration, looking out of the front of his canopy as they passed close by Jumper two about fifty meters to port. The front two-thirds of the ship seemed intact. However, the entire back half was sliced away in an irregular line. The shuttle was rotating slightly as they passed by. As it turned, Josh and Loki could see inside the back of the shuttle's main cargo bay. The shuttle's crew chief was floating in the back of the shuttle, dead from either the sudden severing of his ship or the exposure to the cold vacuum of outer space. He could see all the way up to the cockpit of the shuttle, as the door that separated the cockpit from the cargo bay was open. He realized that the flight crew must also be dead. "Contact the C2," Josh ordered. "They need to know about those guns."

* * *

"There is no response from Jumper two," the communications technician announced.

"Their mass is wrong," Ensign Yosef told Cameron.

"Wrong?" Cameron asked from the plotting table in the middle of the C2. "What do you mean, 'wrong'?"

"I mean, it's not all there, sir," Ensign Yosef explained as she continued to scan. "I don't think the whole ship jumped back."

"Sir, I've got the Falcon on comms. They just returned."

"Put them up," Cameron ordered.

"C2, *Falcon*," Loki's voice called through the speakers. "*Two of Answari's guns are still in operation. Jumper one was destroyed, Jumper two was hit. By the looks of her, she unloaded her troops and then tried to jump back. The back third of her is missing.*"

"What about her crew?" Cameron asked over the comms.

"*They're all dead, sir,*" Loki responded. "*We tried engaging the guns with cannons, but all we could do was*

distract them at best. Request permission to meet up with the Aurora and reload. Maybe we can put a few missiles into them."

"Falcon, transmit all your flight and sensor logs to us for analysis, and stand by," Cameron ordered.

"Sir, Jumpers three, four, and five just returned. They're also reporting that jumper one is down. They're moving in to dock up and reload troops."

"Order all jumpers to load up and hold," Cameron ordered. "No one jumps back to Answari until I say so..."

"Sir," a sergeant operating one of the comm-stations interrupted, "Captain Waddell is down there with only eighty men. They won't last ten minutes without reinforcement—not even five if the citizens of Answari pickup weapons and start defending their city."

Cameron looked at the Corinari sergeant. The man had nearly twenty years in the service, and ten more before that in the imperial forces. The only reason he wasn't down on the streets of Answari right now was because he had been injured during the raid on the Ancot garrison. It had been a lucky break for Cameron, however, as she needed someone with battlefield experience and an understanding of how both the Ta'Akar and the Corinari worked. The elder sergeant fit the bill nicely. "Thank you, Sergeant. I'm well aware of that fact. But we need to find a way to take out those last two guns so we can get those jumpers in and out. We can't afford to lose any more jumpers or we won't be able to get troops to the ground fast enough to sustain the battle."

"Commander," Ensign Yosef interrupted as she studied the sensor data that had been transmitted from the Falcon's flight over Answari. "I think I may have an answer for you." Ensign Yosef pushed some buttons and transferred the images from the scans to the plotting table. A three-dimensional image of the city of Answari appeared on the table. Ensign Yosef moved from the console to the plotting

table as she spoke. "The two remaining guns are here and here," she explained, pointing at the two gun emplacements in the floating image. "If we jump in here, over this plaza, the surrounding high-rises will shield the jumpers from those last two guns."

"That's not much room to jump into," Cameron noted.

"They will need to make a two step jump," Ensign Yosef explained. "First they jump out here," she explained as she zoomed away from the image so fast that it rapidly changed into a view of the entire planet. "Then, they change course and turn into the planet, changing their attitude so that they are jumping straight down toward the plaza belly first."

"They'll need to have almost no forward momentum before they jump in," Cameron said, "and they won't have much of a margin for error, not while they're going straight at the planet."

"No, sir, they won't," Ensign Yosef agreed.

"I'm not sure," Cameron admitted as she zoomed the image back in and focused on the target plaza itself. "If there are any shooters in the surrounding buildings, the jumpers will still be sitting ducks, as will the men getting off of them."

"Put a few shooters on the ramps as they fast rope down," the sergeant suggested. "They can provide cover fire."

"They'll be sitting ducks as well," Cameron pointed out. "No, we need to get our forces to that plaza and secure it first."

"That's not exactly on the way to the palace, sir," the sergeant reminded her.

"It can't be helped," Cameron insisted. "You said it yourself, Sergeant; Captain Waddell needs to be reinforced."

"Someone's got to get the word to him, first," Ensign Yosef said.

"Get the Falcon back on comms," Cameron ordered.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported from the Aurora's navigation station.

"Contact, imperial cruiser dead ahead," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. "Five kilometers out. Still maintaining same course and speed."

"Actively jamming," Mister Willard reported.

"We're still matching his speed, Captain," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Snapshot one and two," Nathan ordered.

"Firing one and two," Mister Randeem responded as he pressed the torpedo launch buttons on his console for both tubes one and two.

"Helm, translate downward hard three hundred meters and maintain course and speed," Nathan ordered.

"Translating hard down, three hundred meters, Aye."

"One and two away," Mister Randeem reported.

"Navigator, plot a jump, ten kilometers forward from our current position, and jump when ready."

"Aye, sir."

"Ten seconds to torpedo impact," Mister Randeem announced.

"Stand by to fire tube five, Mister Randeem, and stand by on the missile pod. A full four shot."

"Aye, Captain."

"Target's shields are coming up, Captain," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"She's turning to port as well," Mister Randeem added. "Five seconds to impact."

"Navigator, new plot, a thousand kilometers out, ninety degrees off our current heading," Nathan ordered. "Helm, hard to starboard, come over ninety. Tactical, as soon as our aft tubes come to bear, snapshot tube six instead of five, fixed yield nuke."

"Torpedo impact!" Mister Randeem declared. "One only, the second torpedo missed."

“Keep an eye on our aft tubes, Mister Randeem,” Nathan reminded him, “and lock our missiles on the target.” Nathan turned to the sensor operator on his left. “Sensors, damage report on the target?”

“One moment,” Mister Navashee advised.

“Missiles locked on target.”

“Fire four,” Nathan ordered.

“Firing four,” Mister Randeem answered.

Nathan watched as four missiles streaked over his head on the main view screen that formed a quarter sphere over the front half of the Aurora’s bridge. The enemy cruiser was too distant for any of them to see with the naked eye, and the rapidly accelerating missiles also quickly disappeared from their sight.

“Damage to their starboard thrusters, Captain,” Mister Navashee reported. “Her aft shields are nearly at full power, but they’re weak on her starboard side.”

“Firing tube six,” Mister Randeem reported from tactical.

“Target is spinning up point-defenses,” Mister Navashee added.

“We’re being targeted, Captain!” Mister Willard reported.

“I thought we were jamming,” Nathan said, surprised by Mister Willard’s report.

“We are, but somehow she’s getting through. They may be targeting optically, sir, with lasers.”

“She’s firing missiles!” Mister Randeem reported. “Eight targets coming in fast.”

“She took out three of four,” Mister Navashee reported. “One hit, to her aft underside missile pod, the one she just fired from.”

“Too little too late,” Nathan muttered.

“Ten seconds until their missiles reach us, Captain,” Mister Randeem reported.

“Jump plotted,” Mister Riley announced.

“Jump,” Nathan ordered.

The bridge filled with the jump flash momentarily.

"Range to target?" Nathan asked as the flash cleared.

"One thousand fifty meters and growing," Mister Navashee reported.

"Helm, come hard about, put us back on course for that cruiser. Mister Navashee, that nuke should've hit by now. I need a damage assessment ASAP."

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Chiles, new plot. Put us one light minute past the target. We'll jump there, come about again, and then jump in right in front of her. She'll have to turn to avoid ramming us."

Mister Chiles looked over at Mister Riley from his seat at the helm, a look of concern on his face.

"Yes, sir," Mister Chiles responded.

"Target's aft shields are down," Mister Navashee reported from the sensors station.

"We should attack from her stern again," Mister Randeem suggested.

"If her captain's any good, he'll simply flip her end over the minute we launch from behind," Nathan disagreed. "He's not going to show us his unshielded side long enough for us to take a shot at him, not now." Nathan thought for a moment. "If one nuke can take down a shield that's nearly at full power, then maybe two nukes can take down a fully powered shield. Mister Randeem, reload tube six with a conventional torpedo. Reload one and two with fixed yield nukes, just like three and four. Rig all tubes for snapshot, same as before."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

"Sir, there are still eight missiles headed in our general direction. They're a thousand kilometers away, but they can still reach us."

"Can those missiles lock onto us?" Nathan asked Mister Willard.

"No, sir, they were laser guided. Unless the cruiser paints us, those missiles can't find us."

"She can see us, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "We're not that far away."

"How far out are they?"

"At least a couple minutes, sir," Mister Randeem reported.

"I've got the next jump plotted and locked, Captain," Mister Chiles reported.

"Might as well jump then..." Nathan started.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Belay that," Nathan ordered, canceling the jump.

"It's the Falcon, sir," Mister Randeem announced.

"Captain," Naralena called, "CIC reports the airbase at Answari is nonoperational, but two of the eight guns protecting Answari are still active. Two of our jump shuttles have been destroyed. Two flight crews and twenty troops lost. The Falcon has been ordered by C2 to jump back into Answari and transmit orders to the ground forces to secure a protected LZ for the jump shuttles. Josh is requesting to reload so he can engage the guns as well."

"CAG, Captain," Nathan called over the comms.

"*Go ahead sir,*" Major Prechitt answered over the comm-set.

"Have you been updated on the situation on Answari?"

"*Yes, sir. We just received the updated sit-rep from C2. The proposed jump plot is risky, but doable. I think we should let the Falcon give it a try.*"

"Agreed. Get the Falcon recycled ASAP. Also, get your first wave of atmospheric fighters ready to launch. We may be jumping back to Takara sooner than we expected."

"*Yes, sir.*"

"Comms, tell the Falcon we've got inbound missiles less than two minutes out, so he needs to get on deck fast."

"I'm sure he'll have no problem with that, Captain," Naralena answered as she queued up the Falcon.

Nathan smiled, remembering his first ride in the harvester back on Haven with Josh on the stick. Landing

quickly was not a problem for Josh.

“Copy, Aurora,” Loki announced. “We’re coming in.” Loki switched off his ship-to-ship comms. “You get that?” he asked Josh.

“I got it. I got it. Going in hot,” Josh announced.

Loki looked at the flight dynamics display, noticing that Josh was indeed coming in awfully fast, even for Josh. “Uh, Josh, we want to land, not crash.”

“No worries,” Josh mumbled as the Falcon passed rapidly over the Aurora’s main drive section. “Translating down.” Josh fired the topside thrusters, pushing the jump interceptor down toward the Aurora.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Loki exclaimed as the interceptor nearly slammed into the top of the Aurora before passing forward of her main drive section.

“You’re not going to turn into a whiny little girl again, are ya mate?” Josh teased.

“Funny.”

“Flaring,” Josh announced. He pulled the ship’s nose up forty five degrees and fired his vertical thrusters at full power, slowing his rate of descent to almost nothing within a few seconds. The angle also slowed his forward speed until it was only slightly faster than the Aurora’s, bring his closure rate to only a dozen meters per second. “Touchdown,” Josh announced as the interceptors landing gear slammed into the deck, its hydraulics absorbing most of the impact. He slammed on the wheel brakes, throwing the two of them slightly forward against their harnesses. The ship rolled forward along the Aurora’s flight apron, coming to stop under the entry canopy that led into the main hangar bay. Had the deck not been rigged as an open deck, they would’ve slammed into the transfer airlock doors before coming to a stop. Instead, they slowed down just enough to roll into the main hangar bay at a safe speed,

coming to a stop just before the aft most row of atmospheric fighters.

"That was fun," Josh declared as they rolled to a stop. The Aurora's jump flash spilled into the hangar bay through her open aft end as she jumped out of the path of the imperial cruiser's incoming missiles.

"I still say you have a twisted idea of what fun is," Loki argued.

Josh just smiled.

"Jump one complete," Mister Riley reported. "Calculating jump two."

"Coming about," Mister Chiles reported as he put the Aurora into a one hundred eighty degree turn.

"Mister Riley, can you plot a hypothetical jump?" Nathan asked.

"A hypothetical jump? I'm not sure what you mean, sir," Mister Riley admitted.

"I mean, can you plot a jump from a location that we are not yet at, to another location?"

"I guess so," Mister Riley told him, "but the system won't let us make that jump until we're at the proper jump point."

"Can we override that? Set it to let us activate a short, pre-calculated jump whenever we want?"

"I don't know, Captain," Mister Riley admitted.

"Jump control, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set.

"Go ahead, sir," Abby answered over the comm-set.

"Abby, can you hack the safeties on the jump drive? I want to be able to initiate short jumps whenever I want."

"How short are we talking about?" Abby asked.

"No more than a few kilometers."

"It is possible, yes, but I would not recommend it."

"Understood. How long will it take you?"

"A few minutes, but you must remember that, in order to jump safely, you require a clear path to your destination. You cannot jump through solid matter."

"I remember, Doctor. Rig the code and push it to the navigator's console, please."

"Yes, Captain."

"New plan, Captain?" Mister Chiles inquired.

"We need to hit her from behind, but he's going to try to deny us that shot. So we'll fire on him head on, translate down, then jump ahead a kilometer so that we're just on the other side of her. Then, we can fire point blank at her stern and jump away before she can hammer us."

"We're going to make two mini-jumps? Both pre-calculated?" Mister Riley asked.

"Yup," Nathan responded confidently. "So far, we've been using short jumps to get into firing position and escape again. But before, if we tried to pass by and shoot at their other side, we'd get hammered as we passed. If we jump past, we should have just enough time to fire and jump away again before they can retarget."

"We won't be able to use that tactic more than once or twice before they catch on," Mister Randeem observed.

"Once or twice per engagement," Nathan corrected. "As long as the other ships never have a chance to be warned, we can keep repeating the tactic successfully."

"I've reacquired the cruiser, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "She's turned toward Takara and is trying to make best speed with her remaining engines."

"Adjust your plot as we go, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered. "We'll jump as soon as the Falcon is away again."

* * *

Captain Waddell and his half-strength platoon of eighty men continued to work their way down the relatively empty streets of Answari. Air-raid sirens wailed in the distance, warning the citizens to remain inside for their own safety.

This was all the better to Captain Waddell, as it meant fewer civilians that might cause him and his men trouble.

They worked their way down the wide promenade of the central shopping district, four groups of ten men on each side of the plaza, leap-frogging each other along as they continued to move forward. A monorail car approached along the overhead railway, moving silently along the raised track. The men all froze against the buildings and storefronts, their weapons all trained on the short monorail train as it passed over them. It was empty.

"Probably automated," the sergeant told Captain Waddell.

"Any word from the second wave?" Waddell asked his sergeant.

"No, sir, but would they even call in? Aren't we supposed to be maintaining a radio blackout?"

"I'm pretty sure they know we're here by now, Sergeant," Captain Waddell told him. "Besides, they won't jump into the same place, not after what happened last time. They'll have to contact us once they get boots on the ground."

"I don't see how they're going to get back in, sir," the sergeant argued, "not with those guns out there. The only reason three ships made it was because we surprised them. I'm pretty sure they'll be ready for the next wave."

"Commander Taylor will figure something out, Sergeant. Meanwhile, we keep moving."

A flash of blue-white light appeared above the empty amphitheater in the college plaza. Tables and chairs that were arranged neatly for the next day's event were suddenly tossed about by a surge of wind as the Falcon dropped from the flash and fell the last twenty meters, her lift thrusters firing at full force. She came to a hover not more than four meters above the amphitheater's main floor.

A few more meters to the right and they would have crashed through the amphitheater's roof. The jump interceptor settled into a controlled hover, climbing slightly as it turned, and headed slowly away from its entry point.

"Jolly, Falcon, Flash traffic," the comm-set called. Captain Waddell signaled his sergeant to hold the platoon's forward advance.

"Falcon, Jolly. Go ahead," he called back.

"Jolly, Falcon. New orders. Rally at point Mary one-four by Robert one-seven. Secure as new jumper LZ. Next wave: ten mikes. End message."

"Jolly copies. What about those guns?"

"We're working on it, Jolly. Falcon out."

Captain Waddell looked on as his sergeant pulled out the holo-map and activated it. He looked at the map, finding the amphitheater at the location specified in the Falcon's message. "Can we make it there in ten minutes?"

"If we haul ass," the sergeant responded.

Captain Waddell looked at the sergeant funny, unfamiliar with the expression. "Let me guess, Lieutenant Commander Nash?" he asked, figuring the sergeant must have learned the expression from her.

"She has many colorful expressions, does she not?"

"Yes, she does. Very well, let's haul ass then," Waddell agreed, rising from his position.

"Here we go," Josh announced as he increased his throttles and the interceptor accelerated away from the amphitheater.

"Stay below the buildings," Loki reminded him.

Josh continued to accelerate as he dodged the interceptor between one building after another. "Just call my

route, mate,” Josh exclaimed. “We need to get as close to that gun as we can before we fire.”

“Take your next right, around that big round tower,” Loki ordered.

Josh pulled the ship to the right, banking slightly as they turned around the tower.

“Not too fast, Josh,” Loki reminded. “Go left. We’re not trying to outrun anybody here.”

“Some of them could have guns down there, Loki.”

“Since when do Takaran citizens carry guns?” Loki challenged.

“I’m just saying,” Josh countered.

“Go right around the tan building up ahead.”

Josh continued to bank and turn according to Loki’s instructions as the interceptor raced between the buildings, working its way ever closer to the nearest working air defense battery. For several minutes, they weaved between the myriad of buildings that made up the business district of Answari, working their way toward their target on the outskirts of the city.

“Whoa, did you see that?” Loki asked.

“See what? I’m too busy dodging buildings, Loki.”

“There are several troop transports down there. I think they’re making their way toward the original jump point.”

“We should warn Captain Waddell,” Josh said as he continued maneuvering.

“No time. Prepare to translate up. We’re almost there.”

“Just say when,” Josh answered.

“Ten seconds. Arming missiles,” Loki reported. “One more left coming up, the red building.”

“Got it,” Josh assured him as he started his turn.

“Three.....two.....one.....NOW!”

Josh maxed out the interceptor’s lift thrust, causing the small ship to jump up above the buildings. There, not more than a few hundred meters ahead of them, was their target,

one of the two air defense batteries that were still operating.

"There it is!" Josh reported. "Four hundred meters and closing fast."

"Locking missiles. Preparing to fire."

Josh continued staring out the front of his canopy. The gun battery was quickly swinging its barrels in their direction. "She's swinging around to fire on us Loki!"

"Firing four!" Loki announced.

The weapons bay doors on the underside of the interceptor slid open, and four missiles dropped out in rapid succession, each one's rocket motor lighting up as it cleared the bay. One by one, they sped off toward their target, accelerating rapidly.

"Missiles away."

"Banking right," Josh announced as he rolled the interceptor onto its starboard side and pulled the nose hard over. He slammed the forward propulsion nozzles all the way forward, sending both of them back hard into their flight seats as the interceptor began to accelerate hard. The barrels of the Takaran air defense battery continued to track after them, trailing the interceptor by a single degree.

"We're sliding to starboard, Josh," Loki grunted. "We don't have enough lift yet."

"Oops." Josh added thrust through his starboard maneuvering thrusters. It wouldn't be enough to keep them from sliding sideways into the ground forever, but it didn't have to. It only needed to last long enough for...

The first missile struck the base of the gun battery and detonated. The blast blew a large chunk of the base away as the second missile struck the same exact spot. Its detonation blasted even deeper into the base of the gun but did not yet penetrate the base completely. The third and fourth missiles struck a bit higher, blowing apart the vertical translation track and crippling one of the gun's double barrels.

Josh leveled the interceptors body and pulled her nose up toward the sky. "Let's get the fuck out of here!"

"Wait!" Loki warned. "It's not dead!"

"What?"

"It's crippled, but it's not dead. It's still moving—slowly, but moving. And it still has one working barrel. I think we could kill it with guns this time!"

"We couldn't last time!" Josh argued.

"Look at its power signature!" Loki told him as the interceptor continued to climb. "I think it may have lost some of its shields!" Loki suddenly turned pale. "Shit! The other gun! Roll right!"

Josh rolled the ship madly to starboard, rolling her over several times before pushing his nose down toward the farmland below. Bolts of energy rushed past them, barely missing them as they spiraled downward.

"What are you doing?" Loki yelled, holding onto the handle across the console hood.

"Gotta get down on the deck!" Josh grunted as the G-forces pushed him back in his seat and to the left side of the cockpit. "The gun's on the other side! The buildings will block his fire!"

A sharp jolt caused the interceptor to jump sideways. Alarms started sounding in the cockpit.

"We're hit!" Loki hollered as he frantically scanned the systems displays.

"No way!" Josh disagreed. He struggled to pull the interceptor out of her spiraling dive, pulling her level as she skimmed the tops of the highest trees below. "If one of those energy bolts had hit us, we'd be slag!"

"Checking," Josh announced. "Maybe it was a bird," Josh suggested.

"Then that was a big fucking bird!" Loki exclaimed.

"I think they have some big fucking birds on this planet, don't they?" Josh said. "We are by the ocean. Aren't ocean birds usually big?"

"How the hell should I know?!" Loki yelled. "I think we're still good," he added after scanning all the systems' displays.

"Great, now how are we going to finish that damned gun?" Josh wondered.

"Well, it can't track fast enough to hit us," Loki told him, "at least not the way you fly."

"Maybe, but the other gun can. Could we stay low in the city again, sneak up on her, and blast her?"

"No way," Loki said. "The shields are weakest across her top. Plus, she can't raise her barrel all the way upright any longer. The only way we can take her out is to dive on her, straight down."

"The other gun will cook us if we try."

"Damn. We'll have to bug out. Maybe we can reload and come back."

"What about that convoy?"

"I almost forgot," Loki admitted. "Jolly, Falcon," Loki called over his comm-set.

"Falcon, Jolly. Go."

"Jolly, Falcon. Takaran troop transports headed for original LZ."

"Falcon, Jolly. Count?"

"Jolly, Falcon. Count three, maybe four."

"Falcon, Jolly. Copy three, maybe four. Can you interdict?"

"Jolly, Falcon. Maybe, but we need to rearm to deal with the big guns."

"Falcon, Jolly. We copy. We'll see what we can do. Hurry back."

"Jolly, Falcon. Will do. Falcon out."

"Where to?" Josh asked.

"We'll jump back to the C2 first, see what Commander Taylor wants us to do."

"What do you mean, 'what she wants us to do'? We need to kill those guns, Loki."

"I know, Josh! I know! But we're not running the show here; she is!"

"Fuck!" Josh swore in frustration.

"And right now, she needs to know what the current situation is on Answari." Loki took a deep breath, trying to calm himself and keep the adrenaline from fogging up his mind. "Okay, come to one-nine-seven, nose up thirty. We jump in five."

* * *

"Here we go again, Gentlemen," Nathan said calmly. "Jump."

The jump flash momentarily filled the Aurora's bridge.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Contact! Dead Ahead!" Mister Navashee confirmed.

The sensor operator's confirmation was unnecessary, as Nathan and everyone else could see the target on the main view screen. It started out as only a small white glob, which rapidly grew into the shape of an imperial cruiser as it came right at them.

"Collision in thirty seconds!" Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station.

"Helm, hold your course," Nathan reminded. "Stand by to translate down."

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered.

"All rail guns, open fire," Nathan ordered. A moment later, he could feel the vibrations of the Aurora's rail guns as they launched their metal slugs at the enemy ship at incredible velocities. He doubted it would have much effect, especially with her forward shields up, but he wanted the cruiser's captain to believe that the rail guns were the primary threat at the moment.

"Firing guns. Target is holding course and deploying her forward missile battery. She'll be able to fire in five seconds."

"Snapshot, tubes three and four!"

"Firing tubes three and four," Mister Randeem answered.

Nathan watched as the two torpedoes streaked forward on either side of him.

"Helm, translate down," Nathan ordered.

"Ten seconds to torpedo impact," Mister Randeem announced.

Mister Chiles applied maximum downward thrust, sending the Aurora sliding downward so that she would barely miss the cruiser. "Clear line of sight, sir!"

"Skip us ahead, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, stand by aft tubes."

"Jumping."

The bridge filled with the jump flash once again.

"Tubes five and six ready," Mister Randeem reported.

"Helm, nose down slightly. Bring our stern tubes to bear on the cruiser."

"Pitching down," Mister Chiles reported.

"Fire tubes when you get a good shot, Mister Randeem," Nathan added.

Mister Randeem did not respond, as he was too busy studying his console, watching for the right moment to fire. All of their torpedoes were actually atmospheric cruise missiles used by Corinari fighters. They had been quickly adapted to be fired as torpedoes, but they were slow and had almost no maneuverability in space. They were like throwing spears, albeit spears with warheads, most of which were nuclear. "Firing five and six."

Nathan waited, holding his breath.

"Torpedoes away."

"First two nukes have hit!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Helm, come starboard ninety, and trim to the target's course. Tactical, stand by for another four shot of missiles," Nathan ordered.

"Coming starboard ninety and trimming," Mister Chiles answered.

“Impact on torpedoes five and six!” Mister Navashee reported in excitement.

“Damage assessment?” Nathan asked.

“Forward shields are down, all her main propulsion thrust nozzles are destroyed. She’s not going anywhere for a while, Captain,” Mister Navashee reported proudly.

“Very well. Mister Riley, plot a jump to the next engagement zone. Put us one light minute out from the next target’s last known position.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Captain, the cruiser’s still got her weapons, she can still fight. We should finish her off while her shields are down,” Mister Randeem argued.

“She can fight, yes, but only if someone comes into her range,” Nathan told him. “Our job is to keep imperial ships away from Answari, not to destroy them.”

“But sir, we cannot allow ships to survive. Not if they might still be repaired to come seeking revenge on us later...”

“Mister Randeem,” Nathan interrupted, his voice becoming a bit more stern. “We have a limited amount of time before every ship in the system has received Answari’s distress call and will be at full alert. At that point, we will no longer have the element of surprise. With all their shields up, our job will become far more difficult, so we need to disable as many targets as possible as quickly as possible.”

“Forgive me, Captain,” Mister Randeem apologized. “I am only concerned for the safety of my homeworld.”

“As are we all, Mister Randeem. We will return and destroy the cruiser if and when it becomes necessary.”

“Of course, sir.”

Nathan knew he should have chastised Mister Randeem more harshly, especially for questioning his decisions in the midst of battle. However, he understood the tactical officer’s point, and under normal circumstances, he would have agreed. Unfortunately, these were far from normal

circumstances, not since he read what Tug had written on his data pad. Before that, he would have agreed with Mister Randeem's desire to destroy the cruiser.

"Reload tubes one, two, and five with conventional torpedoes. Reload tube six with a fixed yield nuke."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem answered.

Nathan let out a long exhale. Those few words from Tug had changed everything.

* * *

"Falcon has returned," Ensign Yosef reported as she watched the data being transmitted from the jump interceptor unfold on the tactical plotting table before them. "It looks like they jumped into the new LZ successfully."

"Yes, but they were unable to take out any guns."

"They damaged one. Perhaps if they reload and make another run at it, they can destroy it completely."

"No doubt the gun teams are doing whatever they can to strengthen their defenses. Besides, we've got other things for them to do first." Cameron looked at the holographic map of the Takaran system being displayed above the plotting table. "What's the transmission time from Takara to the Avendahl in the shipyards over here?" she asked Ensign Yosef, pointing at the symbol hovering in the air in front of them.

"Six minutes," Ensign Yosef answered.

"Then they've already heard the call from Ansvari." Cameron keyed up her comm-set. "Falcon, C2. New orders."

"C2, Falcon. Go ahead, sir," Loki answered.

"Falcon, C2. Jump in and recon the Avendahl. We need to know if she's powering up yet. Then locate the Aurora, rearm, and return to staging."

"C2, Falcon. Understood," Loki answered.

"What about the jump shuttles?" Ensign Yosef asked.

"Send their pilots the data from the Falcon's jump into the new LZ and tell them to jump when ready, but one at a

time. There's not enough room there for all three of them to jump in at once. And let's try staggering their jump intervals slightly. If there are any imperial forces in the area, we don't want to be too predictable in our timings."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

The drone of emergency response vehicles could be heard in the distance as Captain Waddell and his meager platoon continued their double-time jog through the empty streets of Answari. The sky overhead was beginning to brighten, the fog already starting to burn away as the air began to warm with the rise of the Takaran sun. He could also hear the sound of at least one or two airships overhead—not the distinct sound of heavily laden military airships, but rather the smaller drones used by the news media. He was not surprised, as the invasion of Answari had to be the biggest news story in recent history. By the time the fog burned off, the skies would be crawling with such airships, regardless of whatever military restrictions would be placed over the skies of Answari. Normally, the Captain could care less about such coverage. However, those same news feeds could be used to convey the location, strength, and movement of his forces, and that he could not tolerate.

"Sergeant," he began as they entered the college district's main plaza. He slowed his advance as the amphitheater came into view. "Secure the perimeter. Get some shooters on the tops of nearby buildings. Those are news drones buzzing above us. They are probably responding to reports of the Falcon jumping in here. I want them gone."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant responded.

"And put men along the upper edges of the amphitheater. No one other than our men gets over those hills."

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant assured him. He looked up at the first few floors of the building nearest them, seeing several faces peering out from the windows above. “What about those civilians?” he asked, pointing toward the windows. “They might start coming out of their apartments.”

“Then scare them back in,” Captain Waddell ordered. “We don’t need to start shooting innocent bystanders. But if one of them makes a hostile move, drop them. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.” The sergeant turned and started bellowing out orders to his men.

Captain Waddell looked about the plaza, watching as his men dispersed according to the sergeant’s instructions. He looked at his digital time piece on his wrist. The next wave of jumpers would be coming in within minutes, which would nearly double his forces. He didn’t mind that at all, but he needed a lot more than double his current strength of eighty men if he was going to push on and engage the palace directly.

* * *

“Jump complete,” Loki reported. “Beginning scans.”

“Make it quick,” Josh commented. “These people already know what’s going on in Answari.”

“Oh shit,” Loki mumbled.

“What? Is the Avendahl powered up?”

“No, but there’s at least fifty fighters headed for Takara,” Loki explained.

“So? It will take them at least a couple hours to get there,” Josh told him. “This will all be over by then.”

“But it will only take them about a minute to reach us, Josh. We’re sitting right in their flight path.”

Josh fired his main engines and throttled them up to full power. The jump interceptor might be old, but she was fast. “Well, whose bright idea was it to jump in on a direct path between the shipyards and Takara?”

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking," Loki defended as he frantically plotted an escape jump.

"I'm coming to port," Josh announced. "Jump us to the Aurora's last known position."

"I'm working on it."

"Well work faster," Josh urged, looking down at his own tactical display. "Those fighters will be in firing range in fifteen seconds."

"Got it. Come to two-two-one, speed four thousand."

"Two-two-one at four thousand," Josh confirmed. "Gimme a sec."

"You have twelve," Loki told him.

"On course and speed," Josh announced.

"Jumping," Loki said as the interceptor's jump flash filled the cockpit.

* * *

The summit of the hill surrounding the amphitheater was lined with Corinari troops, all looking out at the plaza and the buildings surrounding them. Arranged in pairs, one man kept an eye on the streets while the other one scanned the windows and rooftops. The fog was beginning to lighten as the morning sky took on an amber glow. It momentarily turned blue-white, swirling about as the first shuttle jumped in about twenty meters directly overhead. The shuttle's engines screamed, applying maximum thrust as it fell from the foggy sky.

Captain Waddell cringed as he watched the shuttle fall, coming to a hover just three meters above the deck. After stabilizing for a moment, the pilot set the shuttle gently down on the large, uncovered stage at the center of the amphitheater, its landing gear deploying and locking into position only a moment before it touched the stage.

Sergeant Horvath hollered at the men in the shuttle to disembark quickly as the shuttle's loading ramp swung down to the stage with a thud. The men filed out of the

shuttle, immediately forming up in a kneeling position just shy of the crest behind the men guarding the perimeter.

As the last man's boots left the boarding ramp, the shuttle immediately began to raise its ramp, increasing its thrust and slowly rising off the stage. As the shuttle reached four meters in altitude, it rotated slowly to starboard and advanced over the hill and down the main promenade of the college square. It began to pitch its nose upward and climb, and just as it cleared the rooftops of the nearby buildings, it disappeared in another flash of blue-white light.

Captain Waddell looked about, scanning the twenty men that had just arrived. He looked at his watch. "Just over a minute," he said to the sergeant.

"We can do better," the sergeant muttered.

"As long as we don't lose anymore shuttles, that's all I care about." Captain Waddell looked at the buildings. More and more of the windows were filling with the faces of the young men and women that attended the very college they were currently borrowing as their landing zone. "We're building an audience."

"Safe bet imperial command knows where we are," Sergeant Horvath told the captain.

"They'll no doubt redirect those troop transports the Falcon spotted, maybe even send some airships."

"I thought the Falcon took out the airbase," the sergeant said.

"If I remember correctly, they often kept a few at the palace primarily as emergency transports."

"How long?"

"I figure fifteen, maybe twenty minutes if we're lucky."

"That'll only get us another one hundred pairs of boots on the ground."

"Setup a defense, Sergeant. We need to be ready."

"What about those people in the dorms staring at us? Maybe we should round them up and secure them somewhere before things get nasty."

"We can't spare the man power, Sergeant. Besides, those kids aren't armed."

"Yet," the sergeant added as another blue-white flash appeared above their heads and the next shuttle fell from the swirling fog.

* * *

"Jump two complete," Mister Riley reported. "Calculating final jump."

"Mister Navashee, confirm the target's course and speed, and update the track for the navigator," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"All torpedo tubes are loaded and ready, Captain," Mister Randeem reported. "Missile pod is deployed and standing by. All rail guns are ready."

"Very well."

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported.

"It's the Falcon," Mister Randeem reported from tactical.

"Receiving situation updates from the Falcon, sir," Naralena reported from the comm-station.

"What's going on?" Nathan asked.

"One moment, sir," Naralena told him.

"The Falcon is requesting to land and rearm again," Mister Randeem reported.

"Final jump plotted and locked," Mister Riley reported.

"Stand by, Mister Riley." Nathan signaled Mister Randeem to allow the Falcon to land.

"C2 is reporting they have been sending jumpers in one at a time to an alternate LZ. Sending image to main viewer."

An aerial view of the college square and the amphitheater appeared on the Aurora's main view screen. Nathan studied the map for a moment. "That's awfully tight."

"Loki reports that the shuttles have to come in straight down, jumping in only twenty meters above the ground to

avoid being targeted by the remaining air defense batteries.”

“*Captain, CIC,*” Master Chief Montrose called over the comm-set.

“Go ahead, Master Chief,” Nathan answered.

“Sir, that’s a lousy way to fight a ground war, sir.”

“Can you elaborate, Master Chief?” Nathan asked.

“Even if they can jump all fifteen hundred of them into that LZ—which is doubtful—as long as those guns are working, they’ve got no air support. Even worse, Takaran airships are bound to show up sooner or later, which means they’ll be in even bigger trouble.”

“Suggestions?”

“We need to get our air support down there to cover them.”

“Those guns will rip them apart, Master Chief,” Nathan protested.

“Probably, but there are only two guns left, Captain, and the Falcon damaged one of them. Surely a few of our birds could get in there and do some damage.”

“*Captain, CAG,*” Major Prechitt chimed in. “*That’s not going to work. Those guns can reach all the way to orbit. Our fighters won’t even make it down into the atmosphere to launch their missiles.*”

Nathan thought for a moment.

“Captain,” Naralena said, breaking the silence, “C2 is suggesting we try using the quads on the guns.”

“What, is she serious?” Nathan exclaimed. “We have no idea how accurate they’ll be from orbit.”

“*The atmosphere will undoubtedly have an effect,*” Major Prechitt added over the comm-set, “*not to mention the planet’s gravity. The collateral damage could be significant.*”

“*I’m certain Commander Taylor has considered that possibility, sir,*” Master Chief Montrose added from the CIC.

Nathan sighed. “Mister Riley, new plot. We need to be in orbit over Answari.”

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"Major, get the Falcon rearmed and off the deck as soon as possible. I've got a mission for him."

"Yes, sir," Major Prechitt answered over the comm-set.

"Jump control, Captain," Nathan called.

"*Captain, jump control. Go ahead,*" Abby answered over the comm-set.

"Doctor," Nathan began, "I have a physics problem for you to analyze."

* * *

Energy weapons fire slammed into the hillside surrounding the amphitheater as the Corinari troops stayed low, peeking their heads up only enough to return fire.

"They're trying to encircle us, Captain," Sergeant Horvath yelled out.

"We need more shooters on those two buildings," Captain Waddell ordered. "From there, they can keep them from getting around to our right."

"Impossible, sir," the sergeant told him. "Those damned students set a fire in the stairwell on our side, and the other side is held by Ansvari security forces."

Something exploded nearby, causing the Captain and his sergeant to duck down momentarily as dirt and debris showered them.

"Are you kidding me? Local security? Those aren't imperial regulars out there?"

"No, sir! Not yet anyway!"

"Tell our shooters up there to blow the top of the other stairway before those Ansvari troops get up onto the roof. If they take that roof, they'll have a clear firing line at the jump shuttles as they come in."

"Yes, sir."

The fog lit up with blue-white light once again as another shuttle dropped from the swirling fog and came to a quick landing on the amphitheater stage.

"How many does that make?" Captain Waddell asked.

"We're up to one hundred and eighty with this load," the sergeant answered.

"Is that all?"

"Sir, shooters on the roof are reporting inbound airships coming from the northeast."

"Northeast? The palace is in the opposite direction! Where the hell are they coming from?"

Having unloaded her troops, the shuttle lifted off quickly, heading down the promenade directly over the heads of the Answare security forces. The shuttle's crew chief stood on the shuttle's still-open rear cargo ramp, spraying the enemy below with energy weapons fire as the shuttle sped away. Several energy weapons blasts struck the shuttle, causing her to bounce violently and nearly knocking the crew chief off the ramp. Once clear of the security forces, the crew chief stepped back inside and closed the hatch. After which, the shuttle pitched up and jumped away.

"What the hell is wrong with that asshole?" Captain Waddell screamed. "Sergeant Horvath! Pass the word back to C2: all outbound shuttles are to exit to the south only. Do not fly over the enemy positions, and do not attempt to engage. We cannot afford to lose another shuttle, damn it!"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant promised.

Another shuttle jumped in above their heads, falling to a last second landing like the previous one.

"And be sure that one exits south as well!"

Energy weapons fire struck the grass around them, sending dirt flying up into their faces from down around their feet.

"What the hell?" the captain wondered. With a hill encircling their position, the only threat down in the lowest center area should have been from the occasional crowd control grenade launched into their perimeter. Captain Waddell looked around as he crouched down to present a smaller target, following the incoming fire from his eyes.

“There!” he shouted to the sergeant. “About ten floors up! Get our shooters to put some fire on those windows!”

“Yes, sir!” Sergeant Horvath answered.

Twenty more men came pouring out of the shuttle as it touched down, all of them immediately taking places on the hill crest to help return fire. The shuttle lifted off and turned south as the sergeant had instructed, pitching up and disappearing in its blue-white jump flash only a few moments later.

Energy weapons fire continued to rain down on them from above. “Sergeant! What the hell is taking our shooters so long?”

“They’re not responding, sir!” the sergeant reported.

More energy weapons fire began to rain down, this time from a different location. Captain Waddell had to scramble behind one of the overturned round metal tables to avoid getting hit by the incoming fire. “Sergeant, isn’t that where our shooters are?” There was no answer. Captain Waddell looked around as the next shuttle jumped in and rapidly descended to its landing on the stage. “Sergeant!” He pulled one of the other tables out of the way and found Sergeant Horvath lying on his left side, his body smoldering. He checked his pulse. “MEDIC!” he screamed out. As the nearest medic ran in a low crouch to aid the fallen sergeant, Captain Waddell looked around. His men were being picked off right and left. Men were falling to incoming energy weapons fire as they exited the shuttle that had just landed. The shuttle itself was even taking light energy weapons fire, and the captain knew that it was only a matter of time before the Ansvari security forces got something bigger up on one of those rooftops.

Captain Waddell keyed his comm-set. “Jumper five, Jolly! Flash traffic for C2!”

“Jolly, Jumper five. Go with traffic,” the copilot responded over the comm-set as the shuttle began to lift off.

"Jumper five, Jolly! Message reads: Find me another fucking LZ! This one is closed!"

"Jolly, Jumper five copies. Good luck," the copilot answered just before the shuttle jumped away.

Captain Waddell looked about, finally spotting a corporal that had just gotten off the shuttle. "Corporal!" he hollered, signaling for the corporal to come to him.

The corporal crawled over quickly, staying low behind the downed tables. "Yes, sir!"

"What's your name?" Captain Waddell asked.

"Davidge, sir! Corporal Torin Davidge!"

"Not anymore, Davidge," Captain Waddell told him. "You're now my platoon sergeant. Now grab that guy's comm-unit and pass the word; we're moving out to the south!"

Torin Davidge swallowed hard. "Yes, sir!" he answered as he scrambled for Sergeant Horvath's comm-unit.

"Jump complete," Loki announced.

"You know, you can stop saying that," Josh said. "Especially when we're jumping into the atmosphere. I mean it's pretty obvious, ain't it?"

"Just get our nose on the target so I can launch."

"It already is, my friend," Josh announced as they streaked low over the open farmland just beyond Answari.

"Twenty seconds to max range," Loki announced. "Uh oh, they've beefed up their shields."

"So we throw all four at him again," Josh announced.

"He's bringing his last barrel around. They'll have a bead on us in fifteen seconds."

"No problem, I can turn faster than they can."

"Not at this range, Josh. It's pretty much a tie."

"Then we'll have a few seconds lead on him."

"Not much room for error."

"Then I won't make one," Josh insisted.

“Firing four,” Loki announced.

Josh watched out his cockpit canopy, waiting for all four missiles to streak away before rolling the interceptor into a quick left turn. They held the turn until they were flying at a forty five degree angle to their previous course. Their new angle would make the air defense battery have to track to its right at its maximum rate of rotation, which meant that it should not catch up to them and be able to take a shot before their missiles reached the gun battery and hopefully destroyed it. He had considered pitching up slightly so they could jump away, but that would slow them down, possibly enough for the gun to catch them.

“Impact in twenty seconds,” Loki announced.

In small groups, the Corinari began falling back from the hillside, running back past the backside of the amphitheater stage and out over the hill to its south side. The Answari security forces had not been able to work their way around that far yet in their attempt to cut off their last escape route, which was one of the reasons Captain Waddell had chosen to move out when he had.

As the last ten men withdrew down the hill and back toward the stage in order to make their way to the south exit, two Answari security airships came swooping in low. They slowed to almost a hover as two men leaned out either side of each of the two airships. The men began showering the retreating Corinari with energy weapons fire, burning them down with ease.

Captain Waddell stopped his run and spun around at the sound of the new energy weapons fire. He was still close enough to the amphitheater to see the two airships and the energy weapons fire they were raining down on the last of his men to leave the now closed landing zone. “Everyone against the walls! Stay in cover! Use the doorways! Pay attention to the location of those airships when you move!”

Waddell turned to his new sergeant. "Davidge! Send two heavy guns a few blocks ahead, and have them get up on top of something. I want those airships off our backs!"

"Yes, sir!" Davidge answered.

A series of four distant explosions were heard. Captain Waddell turned toward the sound and saw an orange fireball lighting up the last of the lingering fog in the distance.

"Scratch one gun!" Loki announced with glee.

"Hell yes!" Josh cried out as he turned the interceptor toward the city. "Now, let's go harass the other one." Josh pulled his nose up just enough to clear the shorter buildings, leaving only the taller ones to weave through.

"Uh, Josh, what are you doing?"

"Trying to draw the other gun's attention," Josh explained.

"Of course. And why would that be, again?"

"To keep his attention on us, of course. Is it working?"

"Well, he's almost got us locked in, so..."

Josh ducked the interceptor back down below the tops of the shorter buildings as a hail of energy bolts streaked over their heads.

"It's working," Josh said. "Call my route, Loki. Get us to that LZ. Let's see if we can't help out the ground pounders."

Captain Waddell fell through the glass doors of a clothing store, landing amongst the shards of broken glass and pieces of the door's frame and sliding into a rack of women's clothing. Energy weapons fire from above peppered the door frame, the wall, and the main window. It burned several holes in the window before it finally shattered, sending even more glass flying in on top of the fallen captain. As soon as the firing stopped, Sergeant Davidge came running in.

“Captain! Are you all right, sir?!” he called as he scrambled to the captain’s side. He quickly pulled away the women’s clothing that had been knocked off the rack and had fallen on the captain when he fell through the shop’s front door to avoid the airship’s gun fire.

“I’m fine!” the captain assured him. “Where are the heavy shooters?”

“I don’t know, sir. They’re no longer answering,” Sergeant Davidge told him. “The airships must have gotten them.”

Captain Waddell scrambled to his feet and returned to the door, stepping carefully through the mangled door frame to try to get a look at the airships. He looked out, peeking around the edge of the building’s wall. At the far end of the street, the direction they were trying to escape to, one of the airships was circling about, maintaining a high rate of speed to avoid the sporadic energy weapons fire being sent up by his troops as they momentarily stuck their heads out to return fire.

“Those airships are playing us perfectly,” he explained with disdain. One of them draws our fire and the other picks us off when we poke our heads out to shoot. They’re trying to slow us down so the ground forces can get into position and surround us.”

“What are we going to do, sir?” Sergeant Davidge asked.

Captain Waddell leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes to think. According to the original plan, they should have already been approaching the palace by this time, about to engage the palace guards in order to create a diversion and allow the Karuzari insertion teams to do their thing.

“*Jolly, Weasel five*,” a voice called over the captain’s comm-set.

“Weasel five, go for Jolly,” the captain answered. It was one of the strike teams that had jumped in to deal with the Answari air defense batteries.

"Jolly, Weasel five. We're two clicks north of your position, assuming those airships are over you now."

"Yup, that's us, Weasel five. What's the good word?"

"I'm afraid I don't have one, Jolly. According to my recon drone, you've got the entire Answari security force coming up the street from behind you. I suggest you double-time it out of there before they climb up your backside."

"Those birds have got us pinned in good, Weasel five. Anything you can do for us?"

"Sorry, Jolly. We're too far out. I'm afraid you may have to sacrifice a few lads to get those birds out of your hair."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that. Jolly out."

"Sir?" Sergeant Davidge wondered, having overheard the comm chatter.

"We need to take down those airships, Sergeant. On my mark, the first four squads jump out and open fire. At the same time, the next four squads run down a side street and try to get a shot from another angle."

"Sir, those guys are going to get burned," Sergeant Davidge protested.

"I know, Sergeant. But if we don't do something soon, we're all going to end up getting burned. There's no other choice..." Captain Waddell's voice trailed off as he heard something in the distance—the high pitched whine of jet engines.

"Jolly, Falcon. Get your heads down! Engaging in five!" Loki called over the comm-set.

Captain Waddell keyed his comm-set to the entire platoon. "Friendly fire incoming! Everyone take cover!"

Josh pulled the interceptor around the last building, firing his braking thrusters. He came around and ended up face to face with the two airships that had been hammering the Corinari for the last few minutes. "They're all yours, Loki,"

Josh announced as he brought the interceptor to a hover less than ten meters above the street.

Loki swung the nose turret onto the first airship and opened fire, sending a few thousand slugs into the target. The airship disintegrated in midair, small and medium-sized pieces of debris falling from the sky as her fuel ignited in a fireball in the air. The second airship broke away and ducked behind the building, making a run for it.

"I don't think so," Josh said as he increased his thrust and caused the interceptor to leap upward. He applied just enough forward thrust at the same time, jumping over the building in between him and the other airship. As the interceptor fell back down on the opposite side of the building, several large energy bolts flew overhead, fired from the other air defense battery not more than four kilometers away. He slid the ship to his left, poking out from behind the next building as the airship came around the opposite side. Again Loki opened fire, catching the tail of the airship and sending it spiraling out of control. It slammed into the building and exploded, burning fuel spilling down the side of the building itself.

"Jolly, Falcon. Bag two," Loki announced.

"Falcon, Jolly. Thanks boys!" Captain Waddell answered over the comms.

"Bag two?" Josh teased.

"I always wanted to say something like that," Loki admitted. "Sounded cool, didn't it?"

"Coming about," Josh announced as he smiled and turned the airship to the left toward the advancing Answari security forces.

"Jolly, Falcon. New orders. C2 says reinforcements arriving shortly. Head for primary objective ASAP."

"Falcon, Jolly copies. What about the Answari security forces on our ass?"

"We'll take care of the cops, Captain," Loki answered.

"And that last gun?"

"Have faith, sir. C2s got a plan," Loki assured him as he trained the interceptor's cannon on the pursuing security forces and opened up again.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "We're in position to jump into orbit over Takara."

"Remember, we need to be directly over that last gun and in as low an orbit as possible," Nathan reminded his navigator. "I want to be able to shoot as soon as possible. The longer it takes for use to get into firing position, the more time that gun has to take *us* out."

"Understood, sir," Mister Riley assured him. "I've got the data from the Falcon's last jump. I'll get us in the right spot, sir."

"I know you will, Mister Riley."

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy has done all that he can to tighten up the targeting of the quad rail guns, but he warns that they have never even been test fired and calibrated. He cannot promise better than a zero point two five margin of error."

"That's a pretty big margin of error," Nathan observed. "What does that translate into as far as surface area from our firing altitude?"

"A circular error probability of at least zero point five kilometers, I'm afraid," Mister Randeen answered.

"Well, we can't use the minis," Nathan reflected. "Their velocity is much less, and their rounds will be more easily affected by the atmosphere. They might not do as much damage, but their spread could be ten times that of the quads. Besides, we're only going to get one shot at this. We have to kill that gun on the first try."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeen agreed.

"Flight ops reports the flight apron is full and ready to go," Naralena reported from comms.

"How many did they squeeze in?" Nathan asked.

"Twenty-five, sir."

"Half the atmospheric wing. Not bad," Nathan commented.

"Jump plotted and locked, Captain," Mister Riley reported.

"Our current speed matches that of our intended orbital speed over Takara, sir," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Very well, time to jump?"

"One minute," Mister Riley reported. "The Falcon should be in position by then."

"Very well." Nathan sat back in his command chair, wondering about the wisdom of his next move. If Vladimir's calculations were correct, there would be a lot of collateral damage, which could include hundreds of civilian casualties. Commander Taylor and Ensign Yosef had analyzed the recon images from the Falcon, just as Master Chief Montrose and his aides in the CIC had done. Most of the guns were either surrounded by industrial parks or were on the edge of the city in areas of sparse population. Unfortunately, that last gun had several large residential towers within the five hundred meter potential blast radius that the Cheng had predicted, as well as several sprawling residential tracts that had sprung up decades after the guns had been erected.

Nathan took little solace in the knowledge that his second in command in the C2 had taken all of this into account when making her recommendations. She knew as well as Nathan did that they had very little time to get their forces down in their entirety if they were going to be successful. Eventually, the Ta'Akar would find a way to get more forces into the area. Once they did, the Corinari would be overrun, and the diversion would be over. Without that diversion drawing their attention, Tug and his insertion team could easily be discovered and quickly executed. If the mission failed now, the Aurora would have to fall back to the Darvano system and try to mount a defense against the four

ships that were en route to destroy them. That would take months, months that they would be away from Earth. He could try to send a jump shuttle with details of the jump drive and its successes, but even if they made it all the way back to Earth, it might still be too little too late.

Nathan tried to make himself believe that the hundreds that might die in his rail gun fire in the next minute would pale in comparison to the tens of thousands that had died on Corinair in the past months. He tried to use their deaths to justify his next action, but he could not. He remembered someone from Earth's post-plague history, a general whose name escaped him, saying that part of being a leader was living with the terrible decisions one was forced to make. It was yet one more thing Nathan hated about the burden of command.

* * *

"Damn! That was close!" Josh exclaimed as he ducked the interceptor back behind the building. They had been working their way through the maze of buildings, trying to get to the same side of Answari as her last working air defense battery.

"One more left, then we break out into open territory," Loki reported.

"How's our time?"

"Fifteen seconds."

"All right then," Josh said as he pulled the interceptor into a hard left around the last tall building on the edge of the city. He finished his turn and leveled the interceptor's wings, slamming his throttles up to full power. "Here we go!"

The interceptor accelerated rapidly, the force of acceleration pushing them back into their flight seats despite the inertial dampeners working to counter them. Had the dampeners not been working, both of their lungs would have collapsed under their own weight.

The buildings rapidly fell away behind them as the interceptor shot out into the open, streaking over the tops of the smaller buildings and homes that lay beyond the older city.

"She's tracking us," Loki announced. "She'll have guns on us in ten seconds. Keep coming left."

"Uh, I really don't want to get closer to that gun, if you don't mind," Josh declared.

"If you don't, she'll have us in five. Come left!"

Josh pushed the ship slightly to the left. "Time?"

"Five seconds."

"I meant time to guns," Josh insisted.

"Same."

Josh pushed the nose to the left a little more. "How about now?"

"Two second lead. She's firing."

Massive bolts of energy leapt out from the gun in the distance off the port side. The bolts passed behind them, but not by much, and with each successive blast, the bolts of energy grew closer.

"Down to one," Loki announced.

"Where the fuck is she?" Josh cursed as the bolts of energy continued to streak just aft of the interceptor. He moved the interceptor's nose to the left one last time, hoping to gain another second in his lead over the gun's track.

"She should be here by now," Loki agreed. "Still at two."

"I can't turn anymore or we'll start losing our lead, Loki."

"Shit! Back at one!"

"Screw this," Josh announced. "Hang on!" Josh yanked his control stick hard to the right and pulled his nose up slightly. The interceptor pitched up and began a tumbling turn to the right, rolling up and over the path of the air defense gun's energy bolts as they streaked past the Falcon.

Loki barely had time to grab one of the hand rails with his right hand, his left arm flailing wildly and bouncing off

the inside of the canopy that covered them. "What the hell!"

"Sorry, Loki, but I couldn't hold that turn any longer," Josh reported. "There were hills coming up and we would've had to climb. We would've lost airspeed and gotten fried."

"So you thought turning back into the red hot bolts of plasma was the right move?"

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?!"

"Where the hell are they?" Loki declared, practically pleading.

As if on cue, Naralena's voice came across his comm-set.

"Falcon, Aurora. Bug out. Firing in fifteen seconds."

"Finally!" Loki said.

"Hell yeah!" Josh cried.

"Aurora, Falcon copies. The gun is breaking off of us and turning toward you. Estimate ten seconds until she has a firing solution on you."

"Roll complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"All four quads are loaded and locked on target," Mister Randeem reported. "We'll be directly overhead in three....."

"Sensors! Has the Falcon cleared the area?" Nathan asked.

"Two....."

"They just jumped, sir!" Mister Navashee reported.

"One....."

"Fire all quads!" Nathan ordered.

For the first time since she was launched, the Aurora's four, massive, quad-barreled rail guns flashed in rapid succession as they sent thousands of solid metal-alloy slugs raining downward from orbit. The pilots sitting in the cockpits of the twenty-five atmospheric fighters waiting on

the flight apron watched as the guns tracked ever so slightly, trying to compensate for both the Aurora's orbit as well as the planet's rotation below. In less than twenty seconds, the Aurora's four guns had expended their ammunition, sending over ten thousand slugs down toward the last big gun defending Answari.

"Quads are dry," Mister Randeem announced. "Twenty seconds until our first rounds strike the target."

"Kill the gravity on the flight apron," Nathan ordered. "Translate downward, Mister Chiles."

"Translating downward."

"Fighters are aloft," Mister Randeem reported. "They're moving away."

"The gun is firing!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Escape jump! Get us out of here, Mister Riley!" Nathan ordered.

"Ten seconds until we can jump, sir!"

The first energy bolts from Anwsari's last air defense gun struck the Aurora about the top of her midsection, smashing into the two quad guns on her starboard side.

"Roll the ship!" Nathan ordered as the impact of the energy bolts threatened to knock him out of his seat.

As the ship rolled to starboard, the endless stream of energy bolts walked across her midsection, obliterating the aft edge of her flight deck. As she continued to roll, the last few bolts slammed into her outer heat exchangers, causing massive damage to the first and second panels.

"Hull breach!" Mister Randeem reported. "Just aft of the flight apron, port side."

"All contact lost in section twenty-seven, decks three and four!" Naralena reported.

"Coming over!" Mister Chiles reported.

Residents in the area of the air defense battery held their ears and huddled under tables and in closets in their homes, the sound of the massive gun's two barrels thundering like angry Gods. Suddenly, the booming sound of the guns was replaced by the roar of thousands of sonic booms as ten thousand rail gun slugs the size of a man's head rained down at four times the speed of sound. The slugs slammed into the ground, the buildings, the streets and parks, and especially the massive air defense gun itself, destroying everything they struck. The barrage lasted twenty seconds, and by the time it was over, a massive dust cloud had enveloped the entire kilometer wide area around the gun, and it was rapidly spreading outward. Funneled in some places by the corridors between the taller building, the destructive shock wave flipped over vehicles, pulled trees up out of the ground, and blew out every window for more than a kilometer beyond the initial impact area.

"Dear God," Captain Waddell exclaimed. The ground had shaken with a ferocity he had never experienced and had continued to do so throughout the bombardment. Even at more than five kilometers out, he and his men had been forced to stop their advancement and grab something to maintain their balance. Now, in the distance, he could see the dust cloud expanding over the far side of the city.

"What have they done?" Sergeant Davidge exclaimed in disbelief.

"What they had to," Captain Waddell mumbled. "What we had to."

"Jolly, Eagle leader. Passing fifty kilometers. ETA to engagement area: two mikes," the lead pilot in the air support wing called over the captain's comm-set.

"Eagle leader, Jolly copies." Captain Waddell shook off the horror of the moment, as there was still work to be

done. "Let's move out, Sergeant. We need to get to the new LZ. We've got a war to fight."

* * *

"We've got heavy damage to our midsection," Vladimir reported over the comms to Cameron in the C2. "A hull breach in section two-seven. Decks three and four in that section are open to space. Lost twelve crew and five more injured in that section alone. One heat exchanger is offline. Another is completely destroyed. We lost two quads, but we don't have any more ammunition for them anyway."

"Copy that, Cheng," Cameron answered as she studied the data being transmitted from the Aurora's Combat Information Center. Under normal circumstances, the Aurora's CIC was where Cameron would be during battle. Instead, she could only get an update from her CIC when the Aurora either jumped back to the staging area or sent an update via another jump-capable vessel.

Cameron looked at the external cameras and zoomed in on the Aurora sitting off their starboard side. "Captain, if you roll forty-five to port, I can send you some good pictures of your exterior damage."

"Not sure I want to see them," Nathan admitted, "but I have a feeling Vlad will."

"Da! Davai!" Vladimir chimed in across the comms.

"Any word on the collateral damage?" Nathan asked over comms.

"Not yet, sir," Cameron answered as she watched the Aurora roll. She began transmitting images back to Vladimir. "We sent the Falcon back in to recon the damage and make sure the skies are clear before we start jumping troops back into the area."

"Good thinking," Nathan told her.

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Cameron spoke. "It had to be done, sir."

"Yeah, I know."

"C2, Falcon," Loki's voice interrupted.

"Falcon, C2. Go ahead," Cameron answered.

"C2, Falcon. Gun is destroyed, skies are clear, and our fighters are in place to provide air cover."

"Copy that," Cameron answered. She turned to Ensign Yosef. *"Get the jumpers going again."* She returned to her comm-set. *"Falcon, C2. Collateral damage?"*

"C2, Falcon, hard to say, sir. There's a huge dust cloud covering the entire area. It has got to be at least a few kilometers across by now. My scans show most of the buildings within one hundred meters have been flattened. From one hundred meters out to about five hundred meters, the damage varies, but even then, nothing seems to have been left undamaged."

"Is that damage from rail gun rounds or from flying debris?" Nathan asked.

"Impossible to tell, Captain. My guess is the farther out you go, the more it's from debris or the shock wave. Maybe after the wind blows the dust cloud away we'll be able to get a better look..."

"Which way is the wind blowing?" Cameron interrupted.

"To the north," Loki answered.

"Toward the palace?" Cameron asked.

"Yes, sir, I think. Yes, that would be toward the palace."

"We're getting his data feed now, sir," Ensign Yosef commented.

"What's our next move, Commander?" Nathan asked.

"Sir, we're way behind schedule here. I suggest we take advantage of that dust cloud, as well as the chaos we just created, and get as many men down to the surface of Takara as possible."

"Agreed. What do you want us to do?"

"Load up the heavy cargo shuttles and jump them to Takaran orbit. They can fly down themselves and get their Kalibris up and running. That will give our ground forces much better close-air support."

"What about the other ships in the system?" Nathan wondered.

"The Avendahl still hasn't shown any signs of powering up, and there are only four more ships that are in effective range. They haven't received the distress call yet. According to Dumar, none of those ships carry more than a few hundred troops. If we get all our forces down now and get back on schedule, we can wrap this up before any other ships can react and move in to reinforce Answari."

"But what about those four ships?" Nathan asked. *"By the time we move the heavies into orbit, those four ships will be on full alert."*

"Two of them will, the other two will not. You can attack the two that are not first and still catch them by surprise."

"Don't suppose the closer two are frigates, huh?"

"No, sir, they're cruisers. But you don't have to destroy them, Captain. You just have to keep them occupied for a while."

"Easier said than done," Nathan commented.

"This is the best course of action, sir," Cameron insisted.

"It would give us some time to get the heat exchanger back online," Vladimir added.

"Very well, Commander. It's your call. We'll start loading the heavies now."

"Understood. C2 out." Cameron sighed as she looked at the images that had been transmitted of the blast area by the Falcon's reconnaissance cameras. "Damn, Loki wasn't kidding, was he?"

"No, sir, he wasn't," Ensign Yosef agreed in a hushed voice.

* * *

Three at a time, the jump shuttles appeared amidst blue-white flashes in the sky. They flew over the city with impunity, protected by circling Corinari fighter craft, no longer threatened by the mighty guns of Answari. Each time they appeared, they found an intersection near the column of Corinari ground troops that were marching toward the palace of Ta'Akar. No longer under fire, they landed in the streets and released their loads of fresh soldiers before rising up into the sky to disappear in a flash once again.

"We're up to nearly seven hundred," Sergeant Davidge reported to Captain Waddell as they marched down the main boulevard. "That's three companies, sir."

"That's good news, Sergeant," Captain Waddell agreed. He stopped for a moment, pulling out his holo-map device and activating it. "We're going to reach our staging point shortly. When we do, I want to set up a command post and a permanent landing zone. There's an athletic field here with several tall buildings nearby to use for snipers and observers. This is where we'll stage. The field will give us plenty of room for air operations. I want a whole company to secure that position. When the Aurora launches the heavy cargo shuttles, direct them to that field. I want those airships up and running as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"Jolly, Weasel leader."

Captain Waddell tapped his comm-set. "Weasel leader, go for Jolly."

"Jolly, Weasel leader. Enemy column of Tak regulars en route to your position. They just left the palace grounds. They'll be on you in five mikes."

"Weasel leader, Jolly. Anything you can do about them?" Captain Waddell asked.

"Jolly, Weasel leader. Affirmative. Will engage once they are out of range of palace triple A. ETA to contact: three mikes."

"Weasel leader, Jolly. Keep me updated."

"Will do, Jolly. Weasel leader out."

Captain Waddell looked up as Weasel leader's fighter streaked overhead, wagging his wings at his fellow Corinari below.

Captain Waddell smiled. He knew his job was far from over, but he and his men hadn't been fired on for nearly ten minutes. Considering they were marching down the main boulevard of their enemy's capital city, that was a miracle in itself. Although the plan had gone anything but perfect to this point, one thing was for sure: they had caught the Ta'Akar completely off guard.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "We're in low orbit over Takara."

"Contacts?" Nathan asked.

"No warships in orbit, Captain," Mister Navashee reported. "Just the usual spaceports and transfer stations, along with a few hundred comm-sats. However, fighters have scrambled from at least three nearby airbases on the surface."

"Are they headed to orbit?" Nathan wondered.

"No, sir, they are all headed for Answari."

"ETA?"

"The closest one will arrive in approximately thirty minutes, sir."

"They must have scrambled them the moment the Answari base was attacked," Nathan surmised.

"From their position relative to their departure point, that's a good guess, sir."

"Comms, let Major Prechitt know about those fighters," Nathan ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"And tell flight ops they have a green deck. Let's get those cargo shuttles off the deck."

Major Prechitt studied the tactical map being transmitted to his plotting table in the Aurora's flight operations center from her CIC. He had twenty-five fighters running air cover for the ground forces in Answari at the moment. However, there were at least seventy-five enemy fighters en route to Answari from three different directions.

"Captain, CAG," Major Prechitt called into his comm-set.

"*CAG, go for Captain,*" Nathan answered.

"Sir, I recommend we scramble the rest of our atmospheric birds to intercept the southeast group of bogeys."

"*What about the fighters we already have down there?*" Nathan asked.

"They've been on station for nearly fifteen minutes, sir. I'd rather send freshly fueled birds to tackle the bogeys. From our current position, they'll burn far less fuel dropping down from orbit than the birds on the surface will spend running full throttle at lower altitudes."

"*Understood,*" Nathan answered. "*Make it happen, Major.*"

"Lieutenant," Major Prechitt called to his operations officer. "Scramble the rest of our atmospheric fighters. I

want them to intercept the group coming in from the southeast.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

In the Aurora’s main hangar bay, Takaran fighters captured from Ancot started rolling out of the bay in pairs onto the flight apron aft of the hangar bay. As they rolled out onto the apron and into open space, they thrust upward and climbed away from the Aurora, clearing her main propulsion section just as it passed under them. Within five minutes, all twenty-five captured fighters had left the ship, formed up into an attack group, and had begun their descent into the atmosphere of Takara.

The four heavy cargo shuttles came in low across the Answari skyline, dropping down quickly onto the athletic field that Captain Waddell and his men had setup as a secure staging area. No sooner had their rear loading ramps been lowered than Corinari troops had gone charging inside. Moments later, those same troops were hauling out everything from medical supplies and food rations to portable heavy gun emplacements and shoulder-fired rocket launchers. Once emptied of supplies, the airship mechanics that had come down in the heavy shuttles began rolling out the carefully folded up Kalibri airships. Two airships were rolled out of each heavy cargo shuttle. As the airship mechanics began to unfold the small, agile airships to prepare them for use, the troops ran back inside the heavy cargo shuttles and carried out the remaining equipment and supplies.

“Let’s get all this stuff over to the supply area and tracked,” one of the supply sergeants hollered at his men as the next wave of jump shuttles appeared in bright blue

flashes above the staging area. "I want to know how much we have of everything."

"The heavy cargo shuttles have off-loaded and are standing by at the staging point, Captain," Naralena reported.

"Understood," Nathan answered.

"The shuttles aren't returning, sir?" Mister Randeem asked, somewhat surprised by the news.

"They don't have the fuel to make it back to orbit," Nathan explained as he turned toward the tactical station directly behind him, "and even if they could, we don't have a way to refuel them since they're too big to enter our hangar bay."

"They'll be sitting ducks if those fighters break through," the young tactical officer pointed out.

"Acceptable losses, Mister Randeem," Nathan answered calmly. "How long until our fighters intercept that first group of bogeys?"

"Two minutes, sir."

"Comms, ask flight ops how long the first group can maintain cover over Answari before they're bingo fuel." Nathan looked back at Mister Randeem. Although a quick learner and a good ship-to-ship combat tactician, he knew little about the logistics of flight operations, and it was evident by the look on his face that he wasn't sure why his captain was asking such questions. "At some point, we're going to have to resume our attacks on imperial warships. I don't want to leave our fighters down there to run out of fuel before we get back."

"Sir, Captain Waddell reports that the last of his people are on the ground," Naralena announced. "He's sending up his wounded using the jump shuttles. He also asks that we send additional medical supplies down to him ASAP."

“Why?” Nathan asked. “I didn’t think he had that many wounded yet.”

“He’s getting requests for medical aid from Answari residents. It seems the local emergency response system is overwhelmed at the moment. The Captain has walking wounded gathering at his perimeter.”

“There’s something we didn’t think of,” Nathan muttered. “Very well. Tell the quartermaster to ready all the aid we can spare on short notice, but remind Captain Waddell that he is not there to provide aid, even to civilians. That will come later, hopefully.”

* * *

Jessica did her best to keep her eyes forward and her head down as was expected of a female palace servant. She was not crazy about the costume she had been stuck wearing for this mission and found herself envious of Jalea, who due to her age, could not have portrayed a servant and had instead been costumed as a senior physician assigned to the emperor’s private medical staff. Jessica could not wait to lose the pointed heels and skirt and get back into a basic day uniform and combat boots. It was surprising how much more vulnerable she felt in her current outfit.

So far, Mister Dumar—who had been going by the name of Schiller since they dropped into the palace grounds under cover of darkness—had managed to get their group of sixteen impostors deep into the palace’s underground command complex. There was but one more checkpoint through which they needed to pass, after which, they would be inside the command center’s secure perimeter and would be free to move in for their final attack.

The fact that they had made it so far with barely a challenge as to their identity and purpose was proof that Mister Dumar’s expertise in Ta’Akar procedures was due to far more imperial service than he had disclosed on his original resume. It was also proof that his assertions about

the lackadaisical nature of the palace security forces was also correct. Three decades without a single threat to palace security had made them overconfident and lazy, even in the face of a real attack on the capital city in which the palace resided. Jessica could not help but wonder who and what Mister Dumar really was or if they might all be walking into a trap. Although the logic of such a trap played out correctly in her head, her instincts told her otherwise, and it was those instincts that kept her playing the part of a royal servant. That, and the idea that this crazy plan might actually work.

She stood patiently, staring at the boots of the Karuzari in a palace guard's uniform standing in front of her and listening intently as Mister Dumar chatted up the officer at the last security checkpoint. The two of them walked down the line of soldiers—which stood two abreast—as they chatted in Takaran. They paused at Jessica and Jalea, who stood side by side halfway down the line of guards. Although she did not meet his eyes, Jessica could feel the Takaran nobleman's eyes on her cleavage as he pretended to inspect her tray of medical herbs and aromatics. The officer knew that such things were favored by the emperor, especially during times of great stress, of which this was without doubt. He made a comment to her, which she did not understand but was certain was lewd in nature. She smiled slightly and said nothing, maintaining her gaze on the boots of the man standing before her. Jalea did respond to the man, however, and in fairly stern tones that spoke of the confidence expected of a physician chosen to serve the emperor himself.

Again, Jessica hated the subservient role she was forced to play, and it took every ounce of self-control not to break the arm of the officer when his hand reached behind her and squeezed her ass. Instead, she offered no reaction other than a slight smile so as not to raise suspicion.

The officer glanced at the rest of the line, then turned to the door guard and barked a command. As the door opened and the line began to move forward into the final section, Jessica made a mental note to come back later and break the officer's arm.

* * *

Streams of energy weapons fire spread outward from the gun towers on the palace wall as the Corinari troops attempted to advance on the palace itself. Without any cover, the Corinari were forced into the nearby buildings where they worked their way to the upper floors in order to get better lines of fire. However, the palace guards had little regard for the buildings themselves, and continually blasted away at them, sending debris and sometimes entire walls crumbling to the ground in order to get at the men attempting to hide within. Even those that attempted to fire shoulder-launched rockets from a building several blocks away failed. So thick was the air defense layer that even a rock thrown in anger toward the palace would be obliterated by the rapid-fire, mini, air defense turrets located strategically along the palace walls. Within minutes of the attack, it had become apparent that, although the empire's original defense planners cared little about protecting the city of Answari itself, they cared deeply about protecting the palace against attack. It was also apparent that the emperor did not trust his own subjects that surrounded him on a daily basis.

Everything they threw at the palace was intercepted. Only direct energy weapons fire made it through, and the walls of the palace had been designed to resist such weapons. The Corinari had lost one hundred men in the first ten minutes of the attack, and the situation did not appear to be improving. Six fighters had been lost attempting to destroy the palace's anti-aircraft defenses, and the attack had only resulted in the destruction of one of the palace's

may guns. Captain Waddell knew he dared not commit any of his close air support Kalibri airships to the attack lest he lose them all in short order. However, at the current rate of attrition, he knew that it was only a matter of time before his entire invasion force became combat-ineffective. The most frustrating aspect of it all was the knowledge that they were not fighting and dying in order to capture the palace, but rather to convince its defenders that such was their intent, all in the name of diversion.

Major Prechitt studied the holographic map of the airspace surrounding the greater Answari area, specifically the air battle that was just concluding on the outskirts of the city itself. A flight of twenty-five of his fighters configured for atmospheric operations had been sent down to deal with the incoming threat to the ground forces in Answari. It had been more difficult to obtain air-superiority over the capital city, and he was not about to lose it.

Fortunately, his fighters had been successful in their interception efforts, but not without losses. Nearly a third of their numbers—eight fighters—had been lost. However, the enemy had lost more than twice as many and had been forced to retreat for the time being. It was a victory, but a small one at best. In another forty minutes, a second wave of fighters from a more distant airbase would challenge their control of Answari airspace. Twenty minutes after that, a third wave would do the same. They might successfully repel the second attack, and maybe even the third. However, the Ta'Akar had hundreds of fighters spread out over a dozen airbases around the planet, and the Corinari had only thirty-eight atmospheric fighters left at their disposal. He, too, was fighting a war of attrition, and it was one he would undoubtedly lose if asked to continue at length.

"We have successfully repelled the first wave," the flight operations officer reported triumphantly.

"Yes, we have," Major Prechitt acknowledged, "but let's not get too happy, not just yet. This is far from over, Lieutenant."

"Of course, sir. Your orders?"

"Has the first group finished refueling?"

"Yes, sir. They are launching now."

"Have them make planetfall and return to Answari. They are to stage on the ground outside of the city, away from all possible threats, to conserve fuel until needed."

"I apologize, sir, but I do not understand."

"We must get all of our atmospheric fighters refueled and back down to the surface, ready to fight, as the Aurora must return to action elsewhere in the Takaran system. Therefore, our fighters must conserve fuel by remaining on the ground until needed. We do not know when we will be able to return."

"Of course, sir. I will instruct them to reserve enough fuel to return to orbit."

"If possible, yes," the major added. He knew full well that would not likely be the case.

* * *

"C2, Falcon," Loki's voice called over the speakers.

"Falcon, go for C2," Cameron answered. Despite the fact that she had comm-techs to handle such matters, she preferred to get the information directly.

"C2, Falcon. The first wave of imperial fighters was successfully intercepted. However, we lost eight fighters."

"Anyone eject?"

"Unknown, sir. They're probably maintaining comm silence for now. Not a bad idea, considering."

"And the second wave?"

"Still thirty minutes out. Major Prechitt had all remaining thirty-eight atmospheric fighters refueled and ordered them

parked on the surface for now to save fuel. I think he's worried that the Aurora won't get back before his birds run dry."

"What about the jumpers?" Cameron asked. "We expected them back by now."

"Captain is using them to funnel additional medical supplies down to the staging area. Captain Waddell's forces are taking heavy casualties now that they're attacking the palace directly. That place is heavily fortified. Apparently, he's getting wounded civilians as well as a few imperial troops along with his own wounded. The shuttles are going to take our wounded back to the Aurora before she jumps out to start engaging ships again. I suspect the shuttles will become available after that."

"What about air support? Are they able to help out with the palace?" Cameron asked.

"They lost four fighters trying and couldn't even get close. The palace has a lot of triple-A; makes it hard. Besides, the major doesn't want to waste the fuel as he's saving it for the intercepts coming up. The Kalibris are up and running, but they're being used more for rearguard protection as smaller imperial units try to flank our guys. But they're fusion-electric and can run for months."

"Falcon, C2 copies. How are your fuel levels?"

"C2, Falcon. We're good," Loki answered. *"We've just topped off, and we don't burn much jumping around—only when we go down into the atmosphere."*

"Very well, jump back to the Aurora and verify her next engagement zone," Cameron ordered. "After that, recon the shipyards again. I want to know the status of the Avendahl, as well as those fighters your spotted last time."

"C2, Falcon copies. Will verify Aurora's next target, recon shipyards, and return. Falcon out."

"Well, we're certainly neck deep now, aren't we?" Cameron stated. "Are you getting a data stream?"

“Yes, putting it up now,” Ensign Yosef reported. The holographic view floating above the plotting table changed, its information having been updated.

“He wasn’t kidding about the heavy losses,” Cameron admitted. She watched as one of several side videos played in midair next to the main battle map. She saw images of fighters getting blown out of the sky as they attempted to make high-speed attack passes, followed by images of heavy gunners and Corinari attempting to fire shoulder-launched rockets, all being gunned down by heavy energy weapons fire coming from the palace walls. “Jesus, do these men even know this is a diversionary action?” she asked. She knew they did, but she also knew that the Corinari were too proud to hold back. They would take the fight to the palace as if they meant to topple her walls by themselves.

* * *

“We’re running out of time,” Nathan told Captain Waddell over the comms. “We need to get back out there and continue running interference against those warships, or your situation down there is going to get a lot worse.”

“Understood, sir,” Captain Waddell answered. *“We should be okay until you return. Just don’t be gone too long.”*

“We’ll be back as quick as we can. Meanwhile, the shuttles are on their way back down to you. We put as much aviation fuel as possible in them for your fighters, but it’s only enough to completely refuel maybe six or seven of them at best.”

“Thank you, Captain. We transferred all the remaining fuel from the heavy cargo shuttles into one. The three empty shuttles are being used as medical aid stations right now.”

“Good luck to you, Captain,” Nathan said. “Aurora out.” Nathan tapped his comm-set again to place another call. “Cheng, Captain.”

"Captain, go for Cheng," Vladimir's voice answered.

"How are we doing?"

"Number two heat exchanger is back online, but it is only running at sixty-two percent capacity."

"Will that be enough?"

"Da, as long as we do not lose more."

"Good work." Nathan switched off his comm-set and turned his attention to the tactical display on the main view screen. "Mister Navashee, how long until that group of fighters coming in from the shipyards reaches Takara?"

"Eighty-two minutes, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"Very well. Mister Riley, new jump plot. I want to be one light minute astern of targets six and seven. Once we verify their position and course, I intend to run another stern attack, just as we did with those first two frigates."

"Aye, captain," Mister Riley answered.

"Helm," Nathan continued, "take us out of orbit and in the general direction of targets four and five. Tactical, how are we loaded?"

"Conventional warheads in tubes one, two, and five. Fixed yield nukes in tubes three, four, and six," Mister Randeem reported. "We still have eight working mini rail guns with eighty percent of our ammo load and seventy-nine ship-to-ship missiles at our disposal."

"Very well."

"Jump plotted and locked, Captain," Mister Riley reported.

"Jump when ready," Nathan ordered.

Mister Riley watched the ships position on the navigational display, as well as the countdown timer for their arrival at the jump point. Although his jump plot was calculated based on jumping from a certain point in space and at a certain speed on the proper course, the effect of jumping a few seconds too early or too late would make little difference in their arrival point, especially at the slower speed they were traveling now. Still, he preferred to keep it

as accurate as possible, saving the 'seat of your pants' stuff, as the captain called it, for those moments when there was no other choice.

Seconds later, the jump flash once again washed through the Aurora's bridge, subdued just enough to protect the bridge crew's vision by the filters built into the main view screen.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Position verified," Mister Navashee reported. "We are one light minute directly astern of the target. However, the target has changed, sir."

"Changed how?" Nathan asked.

"It's no longer showing as two ships, Captain—only one."

"Mister Navashee is correct, sir," Mister Randeem agreed. "I'm only seeing one contact as well, but it doesn't match anything in our database. Wait, one moment. I'm getting matches, Captain."

"Matches?" Nathan wondered. "I thought you said it was one contact."

"It's showing as one contact, but it has parameters matching two different ships—an imperial cruiser and a frigate." Mister Randeem looked at the captain. "Sir, I think it's the same two ships, targets four and five, only docked together."

"Docked?" It seemed an odd thing for two ships to do during a war, but then again, these two ships had not yet received word of the battle raging in the heart of their system. "How long until those ships receive the distress call from Answari?"

"Two and a half minutes, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Captain," Mister Willard interrupted, "they can't power up their shields while they're docked. In fact, they can't power them up until both ships are at least one hundred meters apart. If they attempt to raise their shields before

then, their shield energy will jump between ships and overload the emitters on both ships.”

“So if we attack them while they’re docked, they’ll either have to wait to power up their shields, by which time it will be too late, or they’ll power them up anyway and fry their own shields, allowing us to attack after their shields have completely failed.” Nathan smiled, not believing his luck. “How long will it take them to move apart enough to activate their shields safely?” Nathan asked.

“Assuming they uncouple and begin thrusting the moment they see us, maybe thirty seconds,” Mister Chiles answered.

“Mister Riley, new jump plot. Put us one kilometer astern of the target.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mister Randeem, stand by to snapshot tube one.”

“The nuke, sir?”

“Yes, the nuke. Better to use one nuke than two conventional torpedoes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll target the cruiser. We’ll fire, then jump ahead one kilometer to watch the fireworks. If necessary, we’ll fire from the stern tubes as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Randeem answered.

“Mister Riley, did Doctor Sorenson get those overrides in place?”

“Yes, sir,” the navigator answered. “We can jump up to five kilometers using a pre-written jump algorithm.”

“Excellent.”

“Jump plotted and locked, sir,” Mister Riley reported.

“Whenever you’re ready, Mister Riley,” Nathan advised.

“Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

The jump flash washed across the bridge.

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported.

“Target is one kilometer dead ahead.”

"Bring us to bear on the cruiser, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," the helmsman answered as he adjusted their course slightly.

"Fire when ready, Mister Randeem," Nathan announced.

"Almost there," Mister Randeem mumbled. "A little more to port, Mister Chiles."

"Ships are separating!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing one!"

Nathan paused, waiting for the torpedo to streak by on the forward view screen as it launched from the leading port side edge of the Aurora's main drive section. "Translate down! Stand by, two click jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Torpedo impact in ten seconds!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Translating down," Mister Chiles reported as he fired the topside thrusters to push the Aurora downward in relation to the targets in front of him.

"Five seconds to impact!" Mister Randeem updated from the tactical station.

"Translation complete!" Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley announced from the navigator's chair.

The blue-white jump flash swept across the bridge again.

"Jump complete!"

"Two seconds, one.....impact."

"Rear camera to main view screen!" Nathan ordered. The main view screen quickly switched to the rear most camera that sat atop the stern of the Aurora. A brilliant flash of light filled the screen, already beginning to fade as the image shifted. "Magnify!" The camera zoomed in quickly and smoothly until they could see the two ships located just over one kilometer behind them. The secondary explosions in the cruiser had split it into several large sections, one of which slammed into the frigate only two hundred meters off

the cruiser's starboard side. The massive piece of debris drilled into the frigate's hull, penetrating deep and setting off additional secondary explosions within the frigate. Moments later, the frigate broke apart, the force of the internal explosions proving too much for her structure to withstand.

Cheers erupted from the bridge. It was not the first ship they had destroyed this day, but it had been the most rewarding, having spent only a single torpedo on the attack. The odds of catching a pair of ships in such a compromising position were astronomical. The odds of being able to take advantage of the opportunity and destroy two targets with a single shot were even greater. Abby's father had been correct, the jump drive was changing everything, and for the first time today, Nathan was beginning to believe that they were going to defeat the empire and liberate the Pentaurus cluster. Even more importantly, they were going to be able to return to Earth long before the Jung attacked.

Nathan looked at the mission clock. "Mister Navashee, how long until targets six and seven receive Answari's distress call?"

"Five minutes, sir."

"Then we'd better get moving. Mister Randeem, reload tube one, fixed yield nuke. Mister Chiles, same attack plan; jump us in one kilometer off her stern."

"Yes, sir."

"How many jumps to set that up?" Nathan asked.

"Two, sir," Mister Riley reported. "First jump will put us one light minute out. Second jump puts us in attack position."

"Very well, start your plots."

"Aye, Captain."

"New contact," Mister Navashee reported.

"It's the Falcon, sir," Mister Randeem reported.

"They're verifying our next target for C2 before they go to recon the Avendahl again."

“Very well, sync them with our CIC,” Nathan ordered. “I’m sure Commander Taylor will enjoy the data from that last engagement,” he added with pride.

* * *

“The second wave of imperial fighters has been defeated,” Sergeant Davidge reported.

“Losses?” Captain Waddell inquired as he studied the holographic map on the portable table in front of him. The makeshift command post had been thrown together in one of the small maintenance buildings for the athletic field that the Corinari ground forces were using as a staging area.

“I’m afraid they were heavy, sir. We lost eighteen of twenty-five fighters.”

“Survivors?”

“Several of the pilots report seeing chutes, but no one could confirm that of the pilots that ejected had made it safely to the ground.”

“That means we are down to twenty fighters,” Captain Waddell realized.

“Actually, we are down to an effective squadron of ten,” the sergeant corrected. “Two of those that returned are badly damaged and will not be able to go up again. The rest are low on fuel. If we combine the fuel from all the working fighters, as well as the fuel transferred from the heavy cargo shuttles, we have enough to fully refuel and rearm ten fighters. However, there is another wave of thirty imperial fighters due in forty minutes. Our pilots will be outnumbered three to one.”

“Then our pilots will have to fly three times better than those of the empire,” Captain Waddell stated.

“Sir, even Corinari pilots cannot out fly such odds. If the Aurora does not return soon, we will lose the skies to the empire and this attack will be over.”

Captain Waddell looked the sergeant straight in the eyes. “This attack ends when the Ta’Akar surrender or when

there are no more Corinari left to fight. Is that understood, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir." The sergeant saluted smartly and exited the small building.

Captain Waddell returned to his holo-map, studying it carefully as the continuous stream of data from his men on the front lines caused it to shift every few seconds. The constantly updated display was both a blessing and a curse, providing both a real-time situation report and a constant distraction. The men defending the palace of the Ta'Akar had already laid waste to the first row of buildings in front of the palace's main entrance in order to deny Corinari rockets a decent line of fire. However, his men had acted quickly, setting up secondary strike points from the tops of building farther out. This had allowed them to knock out several of the heavy guns being used to defend the palace. For the first time since they began their direct attack on the palace, they were at least holding their own.

"Captain," a man called from behind.

Captain Waddell turned to look at the face of the unfamiliar voice. "I know you," he stated, sensing a familiarity in the younger man's face.

"Yes, sir. Durham, sir. Corporal Miles Durham."

"From Osland? Of course, you lived down the street from us. You played ball on the same team as..."

"Sir, you must come quickly," the young man interrupted. "Tanner, he is here."

Captain Waddell's expression changed, confusion coming over him. "What?" Waddell's expression changed again, grave concern sweeping over him as he noticed the medical insignia on Corporal Durham's unit patch.

"Sir, please," the young man urged.

Tug led the column of sixteen around the corner into a side corridor leading to a maintenance room. He gestured

for two of his men to watch the corners as they began to remove their uniform shirts, revealing the reflective body armor underneath. "There are no more security checkpoints. Our masquerade is almost at an end. The first team will attack the main entrance to the command center," Tug explained as he activated a small holo-map unit he held in his palm. "Here, approach the door as if you are expecting to enter. When they question you, attack."

"Whoa," Jessica objected. "How's that going to work?"

"It will not," Dumar admitted, "but the attempt will force the personal guards to move Caius to his safe room, over here," he explained, pointing to the location of the safe room on the map. "From the safe room, he will either wait out the attack or await rescue."

"How does getting Caius into a safe room help us?" Jessica asked.

"He will not reach his safe room," Tug assured her. "To get there, he must first pass through the secure throne room. We will be waiting for him."

"How are you going to get in there?"

Dumar smiled. "I was once the head of internal security for this palace. I will get us in."

Jessica looked angry. She stepped closer to Tug and Dumar. "When this is over, you both have a lot of explaining to do," she told them in no uncertain terms.

"You will lead the attack on the command center," Tug told her.

"I had a feeling you were going to say that. Attacking the command center head-on *is* suicide, you know."

"And laying in wait to capture the emperor is not?" Tug countered.

"Good point." Jessica sighed. "What the hell, let's get this over with," she said as she donned his armor.

"We must get into position. Do not attack until you receive the signal," Tug instructed.

"I remember." Jessica watched as Tug's team of eight turned to head out. "Hey, Tug," she called quietly, "good luck."

Tug smiled. "To you as well, Lieutenant Commander."

Captain Waddell followed the corporal into the back of one of the heavy cargo shuttles that was being used as a makeshift medical bay. There were four such medical bays in operation, and they were already beginning to overflow with wounded. On his way in, they had passed many times more people, both Takaran civilians and Corinari. Captain Waddell was surprised when he was led to a corner of the bay where several wounded imperial troops lay. "Where did these men come from?"

"As best we can tell, they were off duty, on leave maybe, and in the city during the attack. They were mixed in with the civilians," the corporal explained. "This way, sir."

As they made their way forward, the captain noticed that everyone in this section of the bay seemed to be far worse off than the others he had seen earlier. The corporal suddenly stopped and turned to face the captain. "His injuries are grave, sir." The corporal looked down as the captain stared at his son lying not more than a meter past the corporal.

Captain Waddell tried to speak, but choked on the first word. "Will he survive?"

Corporal Durham hesitated for a moment, not wanting to be the one to break the news that was sure to break his captain's heart. "No, sir. He will not."

The captain's eyes began to well up as he held back his sorrow. "How long?" he asked softly, again choking on the words.

"Minutes, sir," the corporal responded. "Minutes."

"I don't understand; why is nothing being done for him?"

“He has been triaged out, sir. His injuries are too severe. I have given him something for the pain, but only because he is your son. My sergeant will have my...”

The captain put his hand on the corporal’s shoulder, “Thank you, Miles.”

“Yes, sir,” the corporal answered, looking down once more as he turned away to leave the captain with his dying son and return to his duties.

Captain Waddell wiped the tears from his face and knelt down on the ground next to his son. The blanket covering him was saturated with blood, and there was obvious deformity to his son’s legs. Several large bandages were also loosely piled on his abdomen and chest. These, too, were saturated with blood, his son’s blood. Waddell reached down and brushed his son’s hair out of his eyes. His skin was stained with dried blood and dirt. It felt cold to his touch, colder than it should. He had not seen him for over a year, since his forced service had begun. Last they had heard from him, he had been assigned as a gunner’s mate and would be serving on Norwitt. The news had come as a relief, as Norwitt was a relatively safe posting. He could not understand how his son had come to be on Takara, let alone in her capital city.

His son’s eyes began to open at his father’s touch. He coughed, lightly at first, wincing in pain as he did so. The coughing became worse for a moment, then subsided. Despite the medication given to him by Corporal Durham, the pain was obvious on his son’s face. He stared at his father’s face in disbelief for what seemed an eternity before trying to speak. His voice was broken, his throat dry and his words unintelligible.

“Do not speak, Tanner,” his father told him as he fought back the tears. “You must save your strength.”

Tanner coughed again and again, so much so that his father feared the end was upon them. Finally, he settled

down. "Do not tell mother," he whispered in a dry and raspy voice. "She will be angry with me."

"Yes, best we don't speak of this to her," he agreed, if only to ease his son's mind.

Tanner began to wheeze, small gurgling sounds coming from his chest as he started coughing again. A look of desperation washed over the young man's face as he realized his pending demise. He looked to his father for help, seeing hopelessness in his father's eyes. Tanner's eyes also began to well up. "Father," he said as he coughed, "I do not wish to die in this uniform. I do not want to die for the empire." Tanner raised his left hand. It shook as he grabbed his father's arm. "I wish to die for our people, as a Corinari."

"Of course, my son," the captain told him as he removed his battle vest. "Of course." Captain Waddell removed his combat uniform shirt and laid it over his son, making sure the patch of the Corinari was visible. His son turned his head slightly to gaze upon the gold and red eagle under the Corinairan star. He smiled slightly as his last breath passed his lips, his eyes fixed on the symbol of his people.

Captain Waddell stared at his son's still face for several seconds, grimacing to control his anguish. Finally, he pulled the uniform shirt up over his son's face. His head hung down as he tried to maintain his composure. He had men to lead, a battle to fight, a war to win. But right now, it was all he could do not to break down and cry.

"Captain," the sergeant's voice called from behind, "I am sorry, sir, but you are needed in the command shack."

"What is it?" the captain asked, annoyed by the intrusion during his moment of grief.

"We have breached the palace wall," Sergeant Davidge exclaimed.

Captain Waddell raised his head, picked up his battle vest, and rose to his feet. As he put the battle vest back on, he turned and headed toward the exit, his composure

returning in the face of an even greater challenge. As he came down the ramp, he spotted the Corporal "Durham!"

The corporal came running at the captain's call. "Yes, sir!"

"See to it that my son is tagged as a fallen Corinari." The captain looked at the corporal. "See to it that his body is returned to Corinair so he can rest on the Walk of Heroes."

"Yes, sir."

The captain patted the side of the corporal's neck affectionately, remembering the young lad who used to walk with Tanner to their ball games. "Thank you, Miles," he told him as he strode off.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "Calculating attack jump."

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Mister Navashee, update the course and speed of target six, and feed the updated track data to navigation."

"Yes, sir," Mister Navashee answered.

"Mister Randeem, target six is one of their newer cruisers, correct?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir, the Tattarak," the tactical officer answered. "Her shields have been improved, as have her guns. She still uses the same missile and targeting systems as the other ships of the line. She also carries about fifty fighters and a sizable landing force, including Ghatazhak."

"Perhaps we should replace the conventional warhead in tube five with a fixed yield nuke," Nathan stated, "in case she manages to get her shields up before our first torpedoes strike. Then we can launch two back at her after we jump past."

"Yes, sir."

"Captain!" Mister Navashee called. "Target six is not where she is supposed to be."

"What do you mean?" Nathan asked. "Where is she?"

"That's just it, sir. She isn't there. She's gone."

"Scan the area; widen your scans. She's got to be out there somewhere. Even if she only recently changed course..."

"Unless she went to FTL," Mister Randeem interrupted.

The thought had not occurred to Nathan. "She's too far out to have already received Answari's distress call."

"Still one minute until the distress call would reach her, sir," Mister Navashee said.

"Is it possible we miscalculated?"

"No, sir," Mister Navashee insisted. "We made our calculations based on the speed of light and the assumption that the distress call went out the moment the Aurora originally jumped into Takaran orbit. We even worked in a twenty percent margin of error."

"Could she have gone to FTL for some other reason, something unrelated to our attack?" Mister Randeem postulated.

"It's possible, I suppose," Nathan admitted. He turned back to the sensor operator. "Anything?"

"No, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "She must have gone to FTL."

"Sir," Mister Randeem began, "since we have no way of knowing where she went, we should assume the worst case scenario, which is that she returned to Takara for reasons unknown."

"And when she gets there, she'll see that Answari is under siege and offer support," Nathan added. "Mister Riley, plot a jump back to Takara and jump when ready."

* * *

"C2, Falcon," Loki called over comms.

"Falcon, go for C2," Cameron answered.

"Avendahl is powering up. Repeat, the Avendahl is powering up. We believe she is making preparations to get underway."

"Falcon, C2. Locate the Aurora and update. She should be engaging target six by now."

"C2, Falcon copies. Will contact Aurora at engagement zone four and update. Falcon out."

Cameron turned her head to look at Ensign Yosef. "The situation just got worse."

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "Settling into low orbit over Takara."

"Threat board?" Nathan asked.

"Same civilian traffic as before," Mister Randeem reported, "only less."

"The civies are probably scattering," Nathan observed. "They don't want to get caught in a battle. No sign of target six?"

"No, sir. The Tattarak is not in the area unless she is on the back side of the planet."

"CAG, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set.

"Captain, go for CAG."

"Major, I need to know the back side of the planet is clear, particularly of that missing cruiser."

"Captain, CAG. I'll launch a patrol. Should have an answer for you in twenty minutes."

"Copy that. You might also want to recall any fighters that still have enough fuel to make it to orbit. We should have enough time to recycle them before we leave."

"Will do, sir. CAG out."

"Captain, there are fifty fighters in bound from the shipyards," Mister Navashee reported. "They are probably from the Avendahl. However, they are still more than an hour from Takara."

"Hopefully this will be over by the time they get here," Nathan commented.

"Sir," Naralena called, "I'm receiving reports from Corinari ground forces. They have breached the palace wall

and are attempting to push into the compound. Captain Waddell is reporting heavy casualties and is requesting medevac.”

“Have them evac their wounded to us using the jump shuttles, and warn medical. Also, tell the quartermaster to send down additional medical supplies.”

Corinari soldiers stationed on distant rooftops continued to launch precision shoulder-fired rockets at the remaining gun emplacements in the palace wall and towers. With ground troops now engaged in a close-quarters exchange of energy weapons fire in and around the breach in the palace wall, the remaining gunners were tempted to fire on the ground troops below rather than targeting the more distant rooftops which were at their maximum effective range. Those that chose to target the ground forces had made a fatal error, as doing so allowed the Corinari rockets to fire unchecked, resulting in the loss of even more gun emplacements.

Captain Waddell stared at the tactical map as icons indicating each of his men in the battle field disappeared one by one. He was losing a man every few seconds. This was no longer a diversion. His men intended to take the castle themselves, regardless of anything the Karuzari insertion teams might do. He supposed it was inevitable, as every man under his command, whether they had lost someone during the vicious attacks on his world or not, sought revenge at some level. It was only human nature.

Despite the ongoing casualty rate, the blue icons continued to mass at the breach point. As the icons continued to blink out, the rest of them surged forward into the breach. Those at the lead disappeared at an even faster rate, but there were many more coming up to take their

places. Soon, red icons were beginning to disappear at an equal rate.

Captain Waddell took his messaging unit and quickly tapped out a message, touching the send button as soon as he was done. The time had come.

Jessica felt a vibration in the waistband of her royal serving girl costume. She pulled out the messaging unit and looked at the small, dimly lit screen. The message read, 'Wall breached. Storming grounds. Attack now.' "It's time," Jessica whispered to the seven Karuzari standing in the corridor with her. She placed the messaging unit back in her waistband. She picked up her tray of medicinals and took a deep breath. "Let's do it."

Captain Waddell continued to watch the tactical holomap as his forces rushed into the palace grounds through the breach. The red icons representing the palace guards were beginning to disappear at a faster rate than those of his own men. They were getting the upper hand. More importantly, the fact that they were advancing into the palace itself practically guaranteed that the Karuzari attack on the Ta'Akar underground command bunker would drive Caius to his safe room and into the hands of his waiting captors.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported. "Just came out of FTL!" he spun his head to look at the captain. "It's the Tattarak."

"ID confirmed," Mister Randeem stated. "She's launching ships."

"How many? What type?"

“Landing craft and fighters, sir. Checking configurations,” Mister Randeem answered.

“Helm, put us on an intercept course with that cruiser,” Nathan ordered. “Tactical, lock missiles on the cruiser and fire four. Stand by tubes one and two. Reload all conventionals with fixed yield nukes. Stand by all rail guns.”

“Attempting to acquire target lock,” Mister Randeem reported as he steadied himself against the Aurora’s acceleration.

“She’s jamming,” Mister Willard reported.

“Optical targeting, Mister Randeem,” Nathan ordered.

“Switching to optical. ID’s confirmed. Those are drop ships and close-air support fighters. They’re the type used by the Ghatazhak.”

Nathan felt a cold chill go down his spine as he remembered the stories about the ruthless special forces of the Ta’Akar. The Ghatazhak they had enraged during interrogation was not easily forgotten.

“Good line of sight. Firing four missiles,” Mister Randeem reported.

“Her shields are already up, sir,” Mister Navashee reported from the sensors station.

“Max torpedo range in ten seconds,” Mister Chiles reported from the navigator’s chair.

“Target is spinning up point-defenses,” Mister Navashee reported.

“We’ll fire torpedoes, then translate down and jump forward, just like before. Only this time, we’ll be firing the first batch from further out.”

“All four missiles were intercepted by her point-defenses,” Mister Randeem reported. “All conventionals have been reloaded with fixed yields and are ready to fire.”

“Max torpedo range in five seconds,” Mister Riley reported.

“Target is firing missiles!” Mister Navashee called out.

"Time to impact: fifteen seconds," Mister Randeem announced.

"Max range!"

"Snapshot tubes one and two. FIRE!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing one and two," Mister Randeem reported.
"Torpedoes one and two away!"

"Helm, translate down! Jump ahead two clicks when clear!" Nathan ordered.

Mister Chiles slid the Aurora downward, quickly getting the ship far enough below the enemy cruiser that they could jump forward. "Clear path," he announced.

"Jumping!" Mister Riley reported.

The bridge was momentarily flooded with the light from the jump flash.

"Angle on the stern. Line up the tubes," Nathan ordered.
"Tactical, fire five and six when you have a solution."

"Aye, sir."

"Comms, scramble our fighters!" Nathan ordered. "Let's get as many of them as we can before they hit the surface."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Firing tubes five and six!" Mister Randeem reported.
"Five and six away!"

"Torpedoes one and two have impacted," Mister Navashee reported. "Her stern shields are down fifty percent but still intact. No significant damage."

"Torpedoes five and six impact in ten seconds," Mister Randeem reported.

"Flight ops reports fighters are launching now, Captain," Naralena reported. "They need five minutes to complete the launch cycle."

"Helm, maintain course and speed," Nathan ordered.

"Target is firing again," Mister Navashee reported. "Eight contacts. Impact in twenty seconds."

"Let's use what point-defense we have, Mister Randeem," Nathan told the tactical officer.

“Setting rail guns to point-defense mode,” the tactical officer replied.

“Try to be selective in your targeting,” Nathan told him. “Let’s make every burst count.”

“Torpedo impacts!” Mister Navashee reported. “Two nuclear detonations!”

“Firing point-defense,” Mister Randeem reported. “Two down.....three down.....four down.” Mister Randeem rechecked his displays before continuing. “Four missiles got through, Captain. Impact in five seconds.”

“All hands, brace for impact,” Nathan ordered. Naralena relayed his warning throughout the ship from the comm station.

“Two.....one.....”

Four explosions rocked the Aurora, tossing the bridge crew about violently. Nathan was thrown forward out of his chair as if the entire ship had hit a wall in space, sending its loose contents flying. He tumbled forward and slammed shoulder first into the center console of the helm, which sent a wave of pain down his arm.

“Damage report!” Nathan ordered as he scrambled to his feet.

“Still coming in, sir,” Naralena answered.

“I mean to them,” Nathan corrected.

“Their forward shields are down, sir!” Mister Navashee reported. “She’s lost two missile pods as well. She may have some damage to maneuvering as well. She’s trying to turn, but doing so very slowly.”

“How many fighters have we launched?” Nathan asked.

“Only ten!” Naralena reported a moment later. “They had to stop to reset their launch systems. They will resume launch operations in one minute.”

“Too late. Red deck!” Nathan told her. “Mister Chiles, kill mains and flip us end over. Bring our forward tubes onto that cruiser as quick as you can.”

"Red deck, aye," Naralena answered as she keyed up flight operations.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered. "Mains at zero. Flipping over."

"Tactical, fire tubes three and four as soon as you have a shot!"

"Standing by on three and four, aye," Mister Randeem confirmed.

Nathan watched the forward view screen as the Aurora flipped end over and the planet Takara slid quickly up over their heads and behind them. When the motion stopped, the imperial cruiser Tattarak appeared on the view screen as a small white blob only slightly larger than the stars in the background.

"Firing tubes three and four," Mister Randeem reported.

On the main view screen, the two torpedoes streaked past them from either side, quickly shrinking into the darkness as they accelerated away from the Aurora toward their target.

"Twenty-five seconds to impact."

"Target is still trying to turn, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"She's trying to get her undamaged missile pods on us," Mister Randeem added.

"Helm, pitch down ninety relative to flight path. I want our nose pointed toward the planet."

"Pitching ninety down," Mister Chiles reported.

"Comms, green deck. Warn flight ops of our new orientation and tell them to get those fighters off the deck."

"Estimate target will complete their yaw maneuver in fifteen seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"Time to torpedo impact?" Nathan wondered.

"Ten seconds."

"Put the cruiser up on the viewer and magnify," Nathan ordered. A moment later, he could see the Tattarak clearly. Her nose had a lot of damage from the two nuclear

detonations, and her two forward missile pods were a mangled mess. He could also see shield emitters sparking and flashing as they tried to establish a connection to their neighboring nodes in order to reform the cruiser's protective energy shield. The cruiser was indeed turning slowly, but turning nonetheless. Not only was she trying to get her undamaged missile pods in position to fire on the Aurora, but she was also trying to get her shielded side facing her enemy as well.

As he watched, the Aurora's two torpedoes streaked into view and intercepted the cruiser. Two bright flashes of light obscured the entire cruiser from view for several moments as the torpedoes' nuclear warheads detonated. When the flashes cleared moments later, the ship was at a slightly different angle and had taken on an odd color in her midship.

"Increase magnification," Nathan ordered. The image reformed with an even closer picture. There was a massive section missing from the middle of the cruiser, as if half of her hull had been blown away. He could see the open decks inside the ship, and he could see debris and even bodies drifting out of the exposed sections. It looked like someone had taken a large bite out the Tattarak's side and now her contents were floating out into space. The image had everyone transfixed for several seconds.

"Captain," Naralena called, breaking the silence, "the Tattarak is hailing us."

Nathan turned and looked at her, still holding his sore shoulder. "What do they want?"

"They're surrendering, sir. They're asking for aid."

"Are they kidding?" Mister Randeem spurted.

Nathan shot a disapproving glance at his tactical officer. "Tell them to recall the Ghatazhak."

"Captain..." Mister Randeem began to object.

"I'm not going to warn you again, Mister Randeem," Nathan scolded sharply.

"Captain, the Tattarak's captain may be trying to deceive us," Mister Willard warned.

"The thought had occurred to me," Nathan assured him, remembering that, on more than one occasion, both Tug and Mister Dumar had expressed their distrust of Takaran nobility. "I've had my fill of Takaran boarding parties; trust me."

"The Tattarak claims they do not have the authority to recall the Ghatazhak," Naralena reported.

"Tell them that we cannot offer aid at this time, but we will discontinue our attack on the condition that they abandon ship." Nathan turned to Mister Willard. "They do have escape pods, right?"

"Yes, sir, they do," Mister Willard assured him.

Captain Waddell listened to the comm-traffic as the Aurora's fighters pursued the Ghatazhak landing crafts that descended from the skies over Answari. With the tactical display set to monitor the aerial battle, he watched as the Corinari pilots descended from orbit at maximum speeds in order to reach their targets and engage them before the enemy could land and begin their ground attack. One by one, red triangular icons blinked out as Corinari fighters destroyed them. However, the Takaran escorts were doing their best to protect the Ghatazhak landing craft, and blue triangles were disappearing from the holographic display nearly as rapidly.

"They're not going to get them all, are they?" Sergeant Davidge said.

"No, they're not," Captain Waddell agreed. He let out a sigh. "Pass the word along the perimeter. We're about to be hit hard."

The Ghatazhak landers were not multi-role spacecraft. They were designed for one purpose: to put the highly trained, highly motivated, highly loyal imperial warriors on the surface with accuracy and speed. Resembling an I-beam, their fuselage was an open concept that allowed twenty Ghatazhak, all clad in pressurized combat armor, to stand along either side of the long ships with their weapons pointed outward in order to fire at will on approach. The Ghatazhak shock troops took great advantage of that ability, blasting away even the most remote threats that they spotted on descent. Twenty high-powered energy rifles rained down their fire from either side of the first lander as its four engine pods swung downward to stop their descent and settle in on their landing site. As their skids touched the ground, the restraints that connected the back of each shock troop to the body of the craft released, and the troops stepped forward on the narrow platform that ran beneath them, dropping the half meter to the ground at a run.

The physical augmentation systems of the Ghatazhak combat suits gave them both speed and strength in addition to armor. It gave them an almost God-like ability to destroy their opponents on the battlefield, a fact that they enjoyed immensely. The Ghatazhak had no fear of death. They only feared death without honor. The only way for a Ghatazhak to die was in the service of his emperor and the destruction of the empire's enemies.

A total of five landers delivered their loads of warriors, and within a minute, the Ghatazhak shock troops were advancing through the security perimeter of the Corinari staging area behind a wall of energy weapons fire. As they advanced, they left a wake of death and destruction behind them. As soon as they were safely inside the perimeter, they began breaking up into fire teams of four or five, spreading out to increase their rate of destruction. There were over four hundred heavily armed men within the

staging area, and in less than five minutes, the Ghatazhak had reduced that number by half.

The group of seven Karuzari agents dressed as palace security made their way in a proper column to the entrance of the underground command center. Jessica, dressed in her servant girl outfit, stood in the middle of the group, holding her tray of medicinals like a proper palace servant. As they came to a stop, one of the guards at the door spoke to the lead man in their column. He was speaking in Takaran, as was the Karuzari agent that answered him. It quickly became apparent that the guard did not believe that any of them belonged there, as the first two men in line immediately attacked the guards at the door, taking them both by surprise and killing them instantly.

Jessica screamed, playing her part and dropping her tray of medicinals as four more palace guards rushed past her to engage the rest of the Karuzari agents posing as palace security personnel. As a guard passed her, she stuck out her foot and tripped him, sending him diving face first into the man in front of him. The foremost man's boot kicked the falling palace guard's face, causing him to bite through his lip.

Seeing that the servant was somehow part of the attempt to attack the command center, one of the charging guards came at Jessica. She ducked, dropping to her bare knees as the man charged and driving her right fist into his gut as he lunged. The man doubled over, and she drove her knee into his face, removing his weapon from his holster as he fell to the floor, blood pouring from his nose.

Jessica pointed her confiscated weapon and fired it into the back of the head of the palace guard attempting to subdue one of her cohorts with a choke hold, sending his limp body to the ground as well. As she approached the main entrance to the command center, the other members

of her group managed to dispose of their opponents and joined her. A moment later, they burst through the door into the command center itself, weapons firing. Jessica dove to her right, finding a console to use as cover as energy weapons fire ricocheted about the room. She continued to move, popping up from behind the long console every so often to deliver a deadly shot of energy to another member of the palace staff, be they security or technical. As she moved to the right side of the room, she could see Caius dressed in flowing red robes, as he was led out the back exit by two of his personal security forces.

The exchange of fire lasted several more seconds until, finally, the last armed member of the palace staff fell. The remaining technicians simply raised their hands in surrender to the three surviving attackers.

"Secure these people and hold this room!" she ordered as she headed for the back of the room.

"Where are you going?" one of two surviving Karuzari agents asked in Angla.

"After Caius!" she answered as she exited out the back.

"Captain, the Falcon has just jumped in," Mister Navashee reported.

"*Aurora, Falcon,*" Loki's voice called over the comms.

"Falcon, go for Aurora," Nathan answered.

"*Sir, the Avendahl has powered up and is about to leave the shipyards!*" Loki reported.

"New jump," Nathan ordered. "Take us to the shipyards, Mister Chiles."

"Yes, sir, plotting now."

Nathan tapped his comm-set to make a call. "CAG, Captain."

"*Captain, go for CAG,*" Major Prechitt answered.

"We have to go. Do you have any more birds on deck?"

"*Ten, sir, including mine.*"

“Then get them launched,” Nathan ordered. “All of them. Get down to the surface and engage whatever you can. Once you expend your fuel and ordnance, ditch your ships and find a hole to hide in. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Major Prechitt answered. “May I ask where you’re going?”

“To face the Avendahl, Major,” Nathan told him, “and I think it best that you and your ships remain here.”

“Understood, sir. Good hunting.”

“Get out! Get out! Get out!” Captain Waddell yelled as he grabbed one of his communications technicians and shoved him toward the exit. Heavy energy weapons fire from advancing Ghatazhak shock troops zeroed in on the maintenance building they had been using as a command center, and it was starting to pour in, blasting gaping holes in the walls as they ran out of the building.

The building exploded as the Captain ran from it, sending him falling forward. He scrambled to his feet again, his rifle in his right hand, his left hand grabbing for Sergeant Davidge and lifting him back to his feet as well. “Over there!” he bellowed, pointing in the direction of the heavy cargo shuttles.

Captain Waddell took off across the compound followed by Sergeant Davidge and the two surviving technicians from the command shack that had just been blown apart by Ghatazhak rocket fire. Bolts of energy flew at them from all sides, striking the grassy field and the dead bodies of his men that littered the staging area. Corinari fighters streaked overhead, engaging the Ghatazhak escorts to prevent them from providing close-air support to their brethren.

An agonizing scream caused Captain Waddell to look back as one of his technicians fell to energy weapons fire. In front of him, he saw his men taking cover behind the bodies

of their fallen comrades. They returned fire in a desperate attempt to stop the Ghatazhak advance.

“Keep moving, Sergeant!” the captain ordered as they ran. “Everyone, fall back to the cargo shuttles!” he yelled at his men as he passed. He keyed up his comm-set to call every last man in the staging area. “Fall back to the cargo shuttles! Everyone get inside the shuttles!”

Sergeant Davidge reached the first cargo shuttle, bounding up the ramp with Captain Waddell right behind him. He waved for the rest of the men still fighting to join them inside the shuttles. Captain Waddell keyed his comm-set again. “Attention, all Corinari ships in the airspace around the staging area! This is Captain Waddell, commander of the Corinari ground forces, requesting that you drop all ordnance on the staging area! Repeat! Drop all ordnance inside the perimeter! Try to keep the big stuff away from the cargo shuttles if you can! Strike in two minutes! Repeat! Strike in two minutes! Danger close!”

Major Prechitt dove through the Takaran atmosphere at ten times the speed of sound as he led the last ten fighters from the Aurora down to Answari to help out in whatever way possible. The sound of Captain Waddell’s command sent a cold wave over him. The man was asking them to dump their weapons directly on his position. He knew that even one piece of stray ordnance could destroy any of those heavy cargo shuttles with ease.

He looked at his display, counting his fighters in the area. There were six left over the skies of Answari, along with his ten that were diving down on the city and would be there in just over two minutes.

“Talon flight, Talon one. This is the CAG. We’ll make two passes. First, missiles to the outer areas. Then we put our cannons on the center around the shuttles. Try not to hit them if possible, but I want every Ghatazhak blown to hell,

no exceptions.” Major Prechitt adjusted his frequency and made another call. “Waddell, Prechitt.”

“Prechitt, go for Waddell,” the captain’s voice answered.

“Captain, we copy your request. We’ll be down to the deck and firing on your position in two minutes. Get everyone inside and button up the doors. We’ll do our best not to hit you directly.”

“Just kill the fuckers!” Captain Waddell answered. *“All of them!”*

“Copy that,” the major answered. After a pause, he added, “Corinari.”

Captain Waddell’s voice came back, *“Hup, hup, hup,”* although it lacked the usual enthusiasm.

Captain Waddell leaned out the rear loading hatch of one of the heavy cargo shuttles, yelling for the last of his surviving troops to get inside the shuttles. On the horizon, he could see the Corinari fighters dropping in to begin their attack run. “Close them up!” he ordered. Before the words finished leaving his mouth, the ramps on all four shuttles began to rise. He watched with some amount of satisfaction as the Ghatazhak, now realizing what was about to happen, began to spin around and fire on the incoming fighters. If he was going to die, at least these shock troops would die with him. Just before the hatch finished closing, he could see the puff of the missiles as they launched from the incoming fighters. As the hatch slammed shut, the shuttle began to shake with increasing violence as the missiles struck the ground and the repeated explosions walked toward them. The explosions became louder and the shaking more violent, forcing him to cover his ears. Just as he was sure his head was about to explode, everything went black.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's chair.

"Scanning for the Avendahl," Mister Navashee announced.

"Load all torpedo tubes with fixed yield nukes, Mister Randeem," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir. Loading all tubes with fixed yields," the tactical officer answered.

"I've got her, Captain," the sensor operator reported. "Three light minutes from our current position. She's about five hundred thousand kilometers away from the shipyards on course for Takara. ETA is one hour at current speed, but she is accelerating smoothly, sir."

"Assuming a constant rate of acceleration, as well as enough time at max deceleration in order to fall into orbit, what's your best guess?" Nathan asked his sensor operator.

"One moment, sir."

Nathan looked puzzled.

"Captain?" Mister Willard inquired, noticing the captain's puzzled look.

"The Tattarak went to FTL to get across the system in minutes," Nathan observed. "Why doesn't the Avendahl do the same?"

"The Tattarak was at least twice as far away," Mister Randeem speculated. "Perhaps she didn't feel it necessary given her proximity."

"With your homeworld under attack?" Nathan commented.

"Best guess is thirty-two minutes, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"See, that's just too long," Nathan insisted. "She should have gone to FTL."

"Maybe she cannot," Mister Willard suggested. "She wasn't due to leave the shipyards for at least another week, after all. Perhaps her FTL is still offline?"

“Mister Navashee, what type of power signatures are you detecting?” Nathan asked as he paced to his left toward the sensor station. “Is she running her anti-matter reactors, or is she using the zero-point energy device?”

“Checking now,” Mister Navashee answered as he studied his displays.

“All torpedoes loaded, Captain,” Mister Randeem reported.

“Jump plotted, sir,” Mister Riley announced. “I can put us one kilometer out if you like.”

“Her anti-matter reactors are online, sir,” Mister Navashee reported, “but she’s running her ZPED as well; at least I think so. I’ve never seen readings like this. And her anti-matter reactors are at minimal output levels.”

“Like she’s got them lit just in case,” Nathan muttered. “Yeah, she’s running on her ZPED.” Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out with a sigh. He had hoped that the Avendahl would not be operational, and that if victorious, they would be able to study her or possibly even borrow her ZPED technology in order to get them back to Earth more quickly. However, if that was not to be the case, he knew he had but one acceptable course of action.

“Gentlemen,” Nathan began, “the Avendahl is by far the most powerful ship in the empire. If she is allowed to reach Takara, not only will this mission fail, but the entire Darvano system, and possibly the Savoy system, will suffer greatly for our failure. She is far more powerful than us, and she knows that we’re coming, so she’ll be ready. What she doesn’t have is the jump drive. That is our advantage. We will strike fast and hard, then jump away quickly. We’ll repeat this process until we either wear her shields down or find a weakness in her defenses that we can exploit.”

Nathan stood in the middle of the bridge and looked at the faces of his bridge crew. There was doubt, and there was fear, but there was also confidence. Until little more than a month ago, he hadn’t known any of them. Six months ago,

he hadn't known any of them existed, especially this far out in space. Yet here they all were, brave men about to hurl themselves into battle with the odds against them. These were the types of moments Nathan had studied in history. These were the type of men who had made those moments. Although he did not feel worthy of the moment, he certainly felt honored.

"Stand by to jump, Mister Riley," Nathan stated calmly.

"Standing by."

"Mister Chiles, as soon as we jump in, line us up for a forward shot. Once those shots are off, translate up so that our belly is toward her guns."

"We know the maneuvers, Captain," Mister Chiles assured him.

"Of course." Nathan turned to Mister Randeen. "You fire as soon as he gets the tubes lined up. All four forward tubes."

"Understood, Captain," Mister Randeen replied.

"Mister Riley, jump us in," Nathan ordered as he took his seat.

"Jumping."

The bridge filled momentarily with the blue-white flash of the jump. When the light cleared, the Avendahl loomed large on the view screen in front of them. Even at a kilometer away, she was big enough to make out plainly, and she was rapidly growing in size.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Lining up," Mister Chiles reported.

"Target is firing missiles," Mister Navashee reported.

"She must have already been at battle stations," Nathan muttered to himself.

"Firing one through four!" Mister Randeen announced.

"Twelve missiles inbound!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Twelve?" Nathan asked, somewhat shocked. Apparently, that ship really wanted them dead and gone.

"All torpedoes away!" Mister Randeen reported.

Mister Chiles quickly applied as much upward thrust as possible, pushing the upward in relation to its flight path. "Translating up. Clear jump line in fifteen seconds."

"Missile impact in twenty," Mister Navashee reported.

"Torpedo impact in twenty-five seconds," Mister Randeen added.

"Can you translate any faster?" Nathan asked in frustration. They were cutting it too close for his liking.

"Sorry, sir, the Avendahl's a much bigger ship."

Nathan could kick himself for not taking that into consideration to begin with. "Stand by for a two click jump."

"Five seconds," Mister Chiles reported.

"Ten seconds," Mister Navashee added. Mister Randeen chose not to add to the list of countdowns. The torpedoes would hit regardless, and the captain had other things to worry about at the moment.

"Clear jump line," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jumping," Mister Riley announced.

Just before the bridge filled with the jump flash, Nathan could swear he could see the tips of all twelve of the Avendahl's missiles coming right at them.

"Jump complete."

"Translating down and lining up the stern tubes."

"Standing by to fire tubes five and six."

Nathan smiled. His crew was doing everything by the numbers without having to be told.

"Torpedo impact in five seconds," Mister Navashee announced.

"Bring up the rear camera and magnify," Nathan ordered.

The image on the view screen changed to the view from the rear camera just as the first torpedo impacted the Avendahl's stern. The image magnified as the second torpedo flashed, marking its detonation. Two more flashes followed.

"Four good hits," Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing tubes five and six," Mister Randeem reported.

"Damage assessments?" Nathan asked.

"Five and six away," Mister Randeem added. "Twenty seconds to impact."

"She's firing again!" Mister Navashee announced. "Six missiles this time."

"Escape jump, Captain?" Mister Riley wondered.

"One light minute ahead, Mister Riley. Jump on my order."

"Yes, sir. Plotting."

"Time to missile impact?" Nathan asked.

"Fifteen seconds," Mister Navashee answered. "I'm not showing any damage, sir. Her shields in the impact area are showing a significant drain, by maybe thirty percent."

"Jump plotted and locked," Mister Riley reported.

"Five seconds to missile impact."

"Jump," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping."

"Main viewer to standard," Nathan ordered as the jump flash cleared.

"Jump complete."

"Helm come one hundred degrees to port, twenty degrees down angle," Nathan added. "Mister Riley, the next jump should put us off her port beam and about forty-five degrees below her, one light minute off the target."

"Yes, sir. Plotting."

"Coming about now, Captain," Mister Chiles answered as he started his turn to port and lowered the Aurora's nose according to orders.

"Torpedoes five and six should have hit by now, Captain," Mister Randeem reminded him.

"Get me a damage assessment as soon as you can, Mister Navashee."

"Yes, sir, but it will take a minute since we're a light minute out."

"I'm well aware of that, thank you. As soon as Einstein allows you," Nathan stated, forgetting that his Corinairan crew might not understand his reference.

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Tactical, reload all tubes, fixed yields again."

"Reloading."

"Let's see if we can't get off some missiles as well," Nathan added.

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"First jump plotted," Mister Riley added.

"Jump when ready," Nathan ordered.

"Captain, the Avendahl suffered no discernible damage," Mister Navashee reported. "However, her stern shields did suffer a thirty percent decrease in strength."

"Jumping."

The jump flash swept the bridge.

"Not much of a drain," Nathan commented as he did the math. Between his fixed and variable yield nukes, he only had a total of sixteen torpedoes left. Even if the Avendahl did not recharge her weakened shields, which was unlikely, it would take the majority of his weapons to wear her shields down to the point of collapse. If he used up his torpedo arsenal on the Avendahl, he would have nothing left to engage other ships. In addition, if Tug's plan was unsuccessful and Caius remained in power, he would still need to deal with the four ships that were currently on their way to punish the Darvano system.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported. "Plotting attack jump."

"Captain, those strange readings have increased," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station. "Her energy levels are off my standard scales. I'm picking up some minor gravity distortions as well. I've never seen anything like it."

"Is it possible she's increasing the output of her ZPED?" Nathan wondered.

"It's hard for me to speculate, sir. I don't know how a zero-point energy device works," Mister Navashee admitted.

"Send your readings to jump control," Nathan ordered as he tapped his comm-set. "Doctor Sorenson, Captain."

"Go ahead, Captain," Abby answered over the comm-set.

"Abby, we're sending you some sensor readings that we can't make sense of. They're coming from the Avendahl. We think she may be increasing the output of her ZPED. Will you take a look and see if you can make sense of it?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Captain, the Avendahl is extending her shields," Mister Navashee reported.

"How far?"

"Five hundred meters and still expanding."

"Is she going to launch fighters?" Mister Randeem wondered.

"Why?" Nathan asked. "She's got to believe that she's more than powerful enough to deal with us on her own."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to be bothered, so she's sending her fighters to deal with us."

"She could be preparing to go to FTL," Mister Willard suggested.

"That would make more sense," Nathan admitted. "Leave a bunch of fighters behind to harass us while she FTLs it to Takara to save Answari." Nathan turned to the sensor operator. "Has she launched any ships?"

"No, sir, and her shield radius is up to fifteen hundred meters and still expanding," Mister Navashee reported.

"What?" Nathan couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Captain, if the Avendahl has analyzed our torpedoes and our attack strategy, she may be attempting to compensate," Mister Randeem said. "If they have discovered that our torpedoes are unguided weapons, her captain may believe that they have a maximum effective targeting range of one kilometer."

"But why extend shields?" Nathan wondered.

"Our last attack did drain their aft shields by thirty percent," Mister Randeem pointed out. "Maybe her captain is trying to increase his intercept zone..."

"In case one of our nukes gets through his shields," Nathan realized. "That would also explain the increase in his ZPED output... to extend his shields so far out." Nathan turned back to the sensor operator. "Mister Navashee, are his shields still expanding?"

"No, sir. They've stopped at two kilometers."

"That's plenty of room to intercept an incoming torpedo using point-defenses," Mister Randeem stated.

"Yes, it is," Nathan agreed. "But it's also plenty of room to maneuver," he added with a smile. "Mister Riley, new plot. Jump us one light minute astern of her. We'll come about and jump in from behind again. Only this time, we'll jump inside her shields."

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered.

"Helm, we'll go in slower than before. I want plenty of time to maneuver and jump away this time."

"Aye, Captain," Mister Chiles answered.

"Mister Randeem, I intend to launch a full spread of nukes and missiles as soon as we jump in."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir, we'll need to make another jump to get aft of her before we can jump in and strike again," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's chair.

"Understood. Get us where we need to be, Mister Riley."

"Yes, sir, jumping."

As the jump flash washed across the bridge, Nathan remembered the last time the Aurora had jumped in so close to a ZPED powered imperial battleship. It had not been on purpose, but rather the result of a desperate blind jump to escape an anti-matter explosion. That 'super-jump' as he referred to it, had thrown them a thousand light years from

home and started a chain of events that led to this very moment.

"Jump complete. Plotting attack jump," Mister Riley reported.

The destruction of the battleship Campaglia had only been possible by the unavoidable collision between the Aurora and her adversary. That collision had caused severe damage to the Aurora and had killed half her crew, including their captain and executive officer. Nathan had no intention of repeating that event.

"Are her shields still expanded?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir, holding at two kilometers."

"He will expect us to make another run at his stern, sir," Mister Randeem stated.

"Yes, he will," Nathan confirmed, "and he'll probably have every gun he's got on his backside ready to fire the moment we appear." Nathan turned to Mister Randeem. "We will take a beating; of this I have no doubt. But I need him to believe he can out think us. I need him to believe that we will do what is expected."

"A risky strategy," Mister Randeem said.

"Perhaps," Nathan admitted. "We have an expression on Earth, Mister Randeem. 'If you don't bet big, you don't win big.'"

Mister Randeem smiled, responding with something in Corinairan. "We have a similar expression."

"Jump plotted, sir," Mister Riley reported.

"Very well. Mister Randeem?"

"All weapons ready, sir."

"Jump when ready, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three....."

Nathan set his eyes on the forward view screen.

"Two....."

In a moment, the Avendahl would appear as a small object that would grow to fill the screen in less than a minute.

"One....."

"*Captain, jump control,*" his comm-set called.

"Jumping....."

The bridge filled momentarily with the blue-white flash of the jump drive. When it cleared a split second later, the Avendahl filled the screen.

"Jump compl..." Mister Riley's words trailed as he realized they had jumped in closer than expected.

"Helm! Hard to starboard! Roll forty-five degrees as you turn!" Nathan ordered. By the time he finished his command, the ship was already rolling over to her starboard side and turning hard. Rail gun fire pounded the Aurora's nose as she turned and rolled, the slugs walking across and down her length onto her more heavily reinforced underside.

"Taking fire!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Return fire! Helm, keep turning until our aft tubes are on her! Tactical, stand by to fire five and six!"

"Sir!" Mister Randeem called out. "We're only two hundred meters out. If we use nukes..."

"Aft tubes coming onto target in three seconds," Mister Chiles called out.

"We'll take our chances!" Nathan insisted as the Avendahl's rail guns continued to rock the ship.

"Two....."

"Five and six ready," Mister Randeem confirmed. "Rail guns are firing."

"One....."

"Stand by, two click jump!"

"Zero....."

"Fire torpedoes!" Nathan ordered.

"*Captain, jump control,*" Abby called over the comm-set again.

"Firing five and six," Mister Randeem answered.

"Clear jump path ahead," Mister Chiles reported.

"Helm! Full speed ahead!"

"Full speed ahead, aye!" Mister Chiles responded as he brought the Aurora's main drive up to full power.

"Five seconds to torpedo impact!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Jump!" Nathan ordered. Nothing happened.

"Three seconds," Mister Randeem reported.

"Jump, Mister Riley!" Nathan repeated.

"Two....."

"I tried, sir! The jump drive isn't responding!"

"One....."

"Alert all decks! Incoming radiation!" Nathan ordered.

"Impact."

For a moment, the rail gun fire all but ceased, only to pick up again from a different angle as it continued to pound away at their underside.

"Radiation levels spiking across our stern!" Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge suddenly shifted under their feet, sliding violently from left to right and nearly knocking Nathan out of the command seat. "What the hell was that?!" Nathan asked as the bridge shook several more times.

"Debris!" Mister Navashee reported.

"That means we hit something," Mister Randeem added.

"Mister Riley, why aren't we able to jump?" Nathan asked.

"Unknown, sir. The jump fields don't want to form."

"Damn! Helm, continue course and speed. Get us as far away as you can," Nathan ordered.

"*Captain!*" Abby's voice called over the comm-set a third time.

"Yes, Doctor?!" Nathan finally responded.

"*There's something about the Avendahl's ZPED that interferes with our jump fields!*"

"What?"

"*Our jump fields! They will not engage as long as we are in close proximity to that ZPED! You must get some distance*

between us and that ZPED in order for the jump fields to generate!"

"How far?!" Nathan asked.

"Based on their current output, maybe five kilometers!"

"Distance from target?" Nathan asked.

"Fifteen hundred meters and increasing!" Mister Navashee answered.

"Could that explain why we jumped in considerably closer than expected?" Nathan asked Abby over the comm-set.

"Possibly, I don't know yet," Abby admitted.

"Captain!" Naralena interrupted. "Engineering reports damage to our secondary heat exchangers. He is taking reactors three and four offline to reduce our heat output."

"Is that going to affect our main propulsion?" Nathan asked.

"Main drive is still showing full power, Captain," Mister Chiles reported.

"Then shouldn't we be moving off faster?"

"Yes, sir, we should," Mister Chiles agreed. "I can't explain it!"

"Two kilometers from the target and increasing," Mister Navashee updated.

"Medical reporting casualties, sir," Naralena reported.

"Close the secondary heat exchanger doors!" Nathan ordered, chiding himself for not ordering them closed when he rolled the ship to show the Avendahl their underside.

"Target is firing!" Mister Navashee reported. "Four missiles inbound!"

"Switch rail guns to point-defense mode!" Nathan ordered.

"Rail guns to point-defense," Mister Randeen responded.

"Missile impact in fifteen seconds!" Mister Navashee updated. "Distance from the Avendahl is twenty-five hundred meters and increasing."

"One missile down!" Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. "Two down!"

"She's firing again. Four more inbound."

"We're down to three hundred thousand point-defense rounds," Mister Randeem reported. "Three down. First wave defeated. We can't keep this up for much more than ten minutes, sir, even with selective firing. Sooner or later, we're going to run out of point-defense rounds."

"The Avendahl is accelerating!" Mister Navashee interrupted. "She's trying to keep up with us."

"Engineering reports heat levels are reaching critical levels. If they get much higher, they'll have to take reactor two offline as well."

"If we lose another reactor, we won't be able to use all of our rail guns at once," Mister Randeem warned. "Second wave of missiles has been defeated. Point-defense down to two-fifty."

"Is she firing again?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "Current range from the Avendahl is three kilometers and still increasing, although at a slightly slower rate."

"She's probably waiting to finish her turn in order to use her forward missile batteries, Captain," Mister Randeem suggested.

"When she finishes her turn, she'll be able to accelerate faster," Mister Chiles added.

"You think she'll be able to keep up with us?" Nathan asked.

"Under normal circumstances, not a chance," Mister Chiles assured him, "but I still don't know why we're not pulling away from her as fast as we should be."

"She'll finish her turn in twenty seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"We're starting to take a lot of rail gun fire on our stern, sir," Mister Randeem reported from tactical. "She may be trying to take out our main drive."

"Not with rail guns she's not," Nathan insisted. "The heat from our drive will melt her rounds before they even touch us. She's aiming for our stern guns. If she can take them out, she's got a better chance at putting a missile up our ass."

"Ten seconds until she finishes her turn."

"Range?" Nathan asked.

"Three point five kilometers and still increasing slowly," Mister Navashee answered.

"Helm, reverse your turn and roll one eighty to port. Let's show her our topside this time so we can bring more guns onto her."

"Coming hard to port and rolling one-eighty, aye," the helmsman answered.

"Mister Willard, anything you can do to keep her from targeting us?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir. The Avendahl's missiles are internally guided. I can try to jam their tracking systems, but as quickly as they reach us, I doubt I'll have much luck. They're not doing much maneuvering on their way over."

"We're crossing her bow," Mister Navashee reported. "She's firing again. Four more inbound; twenty-five seconds out."

"Is it just me, or do those seem like awfully slow missiles?" Nathan wondered.

"The battleships use larger, longer-range missiles," Mister Randeem explained. "They take longer to accelerate than the short-range missiles. It does make them easier to intercept at this distance."

"Ours are short-range, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then shouldn't we be firing them?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem acknowledged. "Firing four."

"Ten seconds to enemy missile impact," Mister Navashee reported. "Two still inbound."

"Three down," Mister Randeem reported. "Fourth missile is still coming. Impact in five seconds."

"All hands, brace for impact!" Nathan ordered.

Naralena repeated the captain's warning ship-wide. A second later, the missile struck the Aurora.

"Hull breach, main drive, just aft of reactor four!" Mister Randeem reported as he held onto the tactical console to brace himself against the force of the missile impact as it reverberated throughout the ship.

"Range from the Avendahl?"

"Four kilometers, sir."

"Are we still gaining ground?" Nathan asked, surprised that they were not yet to a safe jump range.

"No, sir, range is decreasing."

"What?" Nathan couldn't believe it. A ship that large should not be able to keep up with the Aurora. After all, the Avendahl was more than four times their size with considerably more mass.

"It's down to three point nine five kilometers and falling," Mister Navashee reported, double-checking his readings. "If it continues to fall at this rate..."

"Fire in pump room four!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Damage Control! Captain!" Nathan called over the comm-set. "What's our status?"

"We've got an out of control fire in the number four propellant pump room!" Master Chief Montrose answered over the comm-set. *"We need to clear everyone out so we can vent the section to space!"*

"How much time?"

"One minute!" The master chief answered.

"Too long!"

"It would help if we could shutdown the pump."

"Negative, Master Chief," Nathan told him. "We can't afford to lose any more propulsion. The Avendahl's gaining on us as it is."

"Captain..."

"Vent it now, COB. That's an order!" Nathan yelled.

"*Aye, sir,*" the master chief answered, clicking off his comm-set.

"Showing a twenty percent drop in output on pump four," Mister Chiles reported.

"The pump is overheating, Captain," Mister Riley added.

"Range from Avendahl is three point eight five kilometers and falling," Mister Navashee reported.

"Thirty percent drop," Mister Chiles continued.

"Come on, COB," Nathan mumbled.

"Range is three point six five."

"Atmospheric pressure in pump room four is falling," Mister Randeem reported. "The whole section is depressurizing."

Nathan could feel his heart sink. Along with the fire in the pump room, men were dying in the back of his ship, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Holding at thirty percent."

"Range at three point four five."

"Fire is out, sir. Zero pressure."

"Pump four output increasing. Seventy-five percent. Eighty percent. Eighty-five." Mister Chiles turned and looked at the captain. "Holding at eight-five, sir."

"The pump must have been damaged by the heat," Mister Riley stated.

"Range to Avendahl?" Nathan asked.

"Three point three and falling slowly," Mister Navashee reported. "At our current closure rate, we'll be too close to defend against her missiles in fifteen minutes."

"Captain, I've fired three rounds of missiles so far. None of them have gotten through," Mister Randeem reported. "The Avendahl's point-defense systems are just too good. Shall I continue firing?"

"Stand by," Nathan ordered. "Are we still on course for Takara?" he asked the navigator.

"Roughly, yes," Mister Riley answered.

"She's firing missiles again, Captain," Mister Navashee announced.

"Point-defense, Mister Randeem," Nathan ordered solemnly.

"Aye, sir, but we're down to two hundred thousand rounds."

"That's good for maybe three more volleys," Nathan surmised.

"By that time, we'll be close enough for them to finish us off with torpedoes."

"Why haven't they used their energy weapons?" Nathan wondered.

"They may not be hooked into the ZPED power systems yet," Mister Willard speculated.

"All four missiles intercepted," Mister Randeem reported. "Down to one fifty."

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported. "It's the Falcon."

"Receiving data stream," Naralena announced. Her face turned grim. "Sir, the staging area in Answari was overrun by Ghatazhak forces. At the request of Captain Waddell, Major Prechitt and his squadron dumped their ordnance directly on the staging area."

"Any survivors?" Nathan asked in shock.

"Unknown, sir."

"Any word from Lieutenant Commander Nash or the Karuzari?"

"No, sir," Naralena answered. "The Falcon is asking if they can be of assistance."

"Warn them to keep their distance. We don't need them getting caught up in here as well."

"Target is firing again. Four inbound."

"Helm, reverse your turn and roll to starboard," Nathan ordered, hoping to buy a few extra seconds for his point-defense systems to intercept the incoming missiles by forcing them to turn hard as well.

“Hard to starboard and rolling,” Mister Chiles answered as the Aurora rolled to her right and reversed her turn.

Nathan concentrated on his situation. His ship was damaged, but still able to fight. The Avendahl was closing on him and would be able to take him out in no more than fifteen minutes, if not sooner. If he straightened out to line up his tubes to fire his simple line-of-sight torpedoes, he would just draw the enemy closer still. His ground forces had been overrun, and the status of the insertion team responsible for capturing the emperor was unknown. If he failed to destroy the Avendahl and Caius was removed from power, there was no telling what the Avendahl’s captain would do with such a superior weapon at his disposal. At the very least, if he destroyed the Avendahl, even if the emperor remained in power, the Corinairans might stand a chance. After all, they had the jump drive technology, the Takaran fabrication systems, and even several months to use them to develop a defense against the battle group that was en route to the Darvano system at that very moment. Even if the Aurora did not survive the battle, destroying the Avendahl was the only safe option.

“Twenty seconds to missile impact,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Point-defense is firing,” Mister Randeem announced.

“Mister Willard,” Nathan began, “do we still have the Yamaro’s transponder?”

“One missile down,” Mister Randeem reported.

“Yes, sir,” Mister Willard answered, “but it is no longer connected to the Aurora’s comm-array. We rigged it with a battery and its own mini dish when we used it to add a message to the comm-drone from the Savoy system.”

“Two down.”

“Where is it?” Nathan asked.

“It’s still in the shop at the aft end of the starboard fighter alley.”

“How long will it take to reconnect it?” Nathan asked.

"Three down."

"There is no need," Mister Willard assured him. "Simply turn it on and place it on the flight apron. The signal is more than strong enough to provide a tracking signal for the KKV's."

"All four missiles intercepted. Down to one hundred thousand rounds, sir."

"Very well," Nathan acknowledged, his attention still on Mister Willard. "What's the flight time for the KKV's to here, at top speed?"

"From the closest KKV platform, about eight minutes, sir."

"How long to prepare the strike code?"

"A few minutes, sir."

"Do it," Nathan ordered.

"How many?"

"All eight," Nathan answered. "Three hundred meter spread, two rows of four. We can't afford to miss."

"Yes, sir," Mister Willard acknowledged.

"And get someone on that transponder," Nathan added.

"Yes, sir."

"Captain?" Mister Randeem began, albeit without much vigor. "Is there no other way?"

"I'm afraid not, Mister Randeem," Nathan answered. "That ship must be destroyed at all costs. That includes us." Nathan stood up and straightened his uniform shirt. "Gentlemen, we will have to maintain the battle for nearly ten minutes. During that time, we must convince the Avendahl that we are doing everything within our power to destroy her. She will not follow us blindly to her doom. She has to believe that she is only moments from destroying us, all the way up to the last moment. Helm, you will continue a series of sudden changes in direction, maintaining maximum power throughout. Tactical, whenever we reverse our turn, you'll have a moment when you can fire torpedoes as our tubes line up briefly. It isn't going to be easy, but it's

better to fire and miss than to die with a bay full of unused weapons. Maintain point-defense as needed until we run out of rounds, then switch to slugs and do what you can. And feel free to continuously fire missiles at her as well."

Nathan paused for a moment. "Comms, patch me through to the Falcon."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered. "Channel open."

"Falcon, Captain Scott."

"Captain Scott, go for Falcon," Loki's voice answered over the comm-set.

"Guys, in a few moments you're going to receive the strike code for the KKV's. You are to jump out to the platform and transmit the package, then return to verify the launch time. After that, I need you to notify the C2 of the situation. We'll draw the KKV's in with the Yamaro's transponder, just like we did with the Wallach. We'll try to get out of the way before it's too late, but without the jump drive, that's unlikely."

"Captain, let us take the transponder in," Josh suggested.

"Someone has to get the launch code out to the platform, and our jump drive is offline," Nathan explained. "I appreciate the offer, Josh, but I've got another mission in mind for you. After this is over, I need you and Loki to try to reach Earth. Theoretically, you should be able to make a thousand little jumps to get there. Tell them what happened out here. Tell them that the jump drive works. Give them the technology of the Pentaurus cluster so they can defend themselves against the Jung." Nathan waited for a response from Josh for nearly thirty seconds. "Josh?"

"We'll get it done, sir," Loki responded.

"The strike code is ready, sir."

"Transmit the package to the Falcon."

Nathan took a deep breath.

"Strike package received," Loki announced.

"Don't let me down, guys," Nathan told them.

"We won't sir," Loki answered. *"Good hunting."*

For a ship that was in the midst of a battle, the bridge seemed oddly quiet for a moment.

"The Falcon has jumped away, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"Then let's get to work, gentlemen. Stand by on tubes one and two, Mister Randeem."

* * *

"C2, Falcon," Loki called over the comms.

"Falcon, go for C2," Cameron answered.

"C2, Falcon. The Aurora is using the KKV's. We just transmitted the launch package. She's going to act as decoy again, just like with the Wallach."

"Things must be pretty bad," Cameron commented to Ensign Yosef.

"Falcon, C2. Are they using the Yamaro's transponder again?"

"Affirmative," Loki answered.

"Why didn't they assign you as decoy?" Cameron asked. "You're much faster and a lot harder for the Avendahl's guns to hit."

"I know. We suggested that," Loki explained, *"but the Aurora's stuck about three clicks away from the Avendahl and can't escape."*

"What? Why not?"

"Something about the Avendahl's ZPED is interfering with their jump drive fields."

"Can't they outrun her using the sub-light drive?"

"They were, but something was holding them back. Just before they were about to get far enough away to jump, they took a hit and lost some propulsion. They've been losing distance steadily since. The Captain's trying to lure in the KKV's before he gets so close that the Avendahl tears him apart."

"Shit," Cameron muttered to herself. She took a moment to compose her thoughts. "Any word from the Karuzari?"

"Negative, we were hoping you had heard something."

"Nothing since you last updated us," Cameron assured him. "Damn it!" Cameron's mind was spinning. Everything about their plan seemed to be coming apart. Her only hope was that the battle of Answari was not yet lost.

"Sir?" Loki called. *"He made us promise to jump all the way to Earth to tell them what happened and share our technology with them,"* he explained solemnly.

"Don't worry, Loki," Cameron told him. "You'll get your chance. I promise, no matter how this all turns out, the word will get back to Earth."

"Yes, sir."

Cameron took a deep breath. "Falcon, C2. New orders. Jump back to Takara and monitor the situation. Attempt to make contact with ground forces and the insertion team, then report back."

"Yes, sir."

"And send a jump shuttle back here to us just in case. We don't want to be left stranded out here if everything goes to hell."

"Yes, sir. Falcon out."

Cameron stared long and hard at the holo-map hovering above her plotting table. With the Aurora sacrificing herself to ensure the destruction of the Avendahl, it was going to be a long time before any of them got back to Earth. And if Tug's insertion team failed, they were going to have to find some way to defend Corinair. Despite her belief that Nathan had made the right decision in forming the Alliance, she was starting to believe that taking a jump shuttle and making a thousand short jumps to get home might be the best course of action.

* * *

Caius and his guards strode quickly down the hallway, crossing the final corridor before entering the dimly lit safe room. "If the attack follows us, seal this door!" the emperor bellowed as he entered the chamber.

Two of the six guards accompanying him stopped and took up positions on either side of the doorway, facing out, their backs to the safe room.

"How did those people get past security?!" the emperor yelled at the leader of his guard detail.

"I do not know, sire," the guard responded respectfully.

"And how did a thousand Corinari get into Answari? I suppose it was that magical disappearing ship from Earth the Admiralty was rambling on about. The very idea is preposterous. Those old fools are just worried that their fleet will be downsized now that the Karuzari are no longer..."

The emperor's words were cut short by energy weapons fire from deeper within the chamber as Tug and his team came out of hiding. The guards quickly returned fire, stepping in front of the emperor to protect him from harm. The first two guards immediately fell, their wounds still sizzling from the energy weapons' blasts. Three of the Karuzari fell as well, victim to the rapid-fire energy weapons carried by the emperor's personal guards. The two guards at the door responded as well, moving to the sides to get a clear line of fire around the emperor. Weapons fire continued to fly for several more seconds until, finally, there were only four people standing.

"Stop where you are!" Tug ordered with more conviction than he had ever mustered in his long life.

Caius stopped just short of the exit, his back still to his attackers.

"Hands high!" Tug added. The emperor raised his hands above his shoulders, his red robes falling down his arms toward his torso. He waved his hands back and forth, spinning them from front to back to show that they were empty. "Do not shoot. I am not armed." The emperor waited

for a moment, half expecting to be shot in the back at any moment. When he realized that was not about to happen, he continued. "State your demands, and I will consider them."

"We have no demands," Tug began. "We are here to place you under arrest."

"Under arrest?" Caius asked, turning slowly as his hands lowered a bit. "Are you mad? On what authority?" he laughed. "And for what charges?"

"For the crimes of genocide against the people of Corinair and Taroa, to start, and for the murder of your father, King Austyn of Takara..."

"Do I know you, sir?" Caius asked, squinting to see their faces through the shadows and the haze caused by the still burning tapestries and upholstery damaged by the energy weapons fire.

"...and for the attempted murder of your brother, Casimir, the prince of Takara and the true heir to the throne."

Jalea's eyes shifted to Tug for a brief instant, his accusations about the deaths of the former leaders of Takara coming as a surprise to her.

"Don't be absurd," Caius argued. "And what evidence have you?"

"Witnesses," Tug told him as they continued to move toward the emperor, "to the attacks on Corinair and Taroa, and to the attempted murder of Casimir..."

"Impossible," Caius protested. "Casimir died in space, alone."

"He was not alone," Dumar stated as he stepped out of the shadows.

"You!" Caius sneered. "I paid you for your silence!"

"A payment that I deeply regret accepting," Dumar told him. "Had I known that the prince was alive, I assure you, I would never have considered your offer, sire."

"I will have your head for this betrayal," Caius seethed.

"Doubtful," Dumar responded confidently.

"I do not understand," Jalea confessed from the shadows. The more the others talked, the more confused she became.

"Max was not the only one there when your assassins struck, dear brother." Tug stepped out of the shadows, the light from above casting odd shadows across his face.

Caius gasped, his mouth hanging open at the sight of his older brother. "This cannot be," he hissed. "You are long dead. I saw the gun camera video! I saw your interceptor explode!"

"I nearly was dead," Tug admitted. "What you saw explode was the assassin's missiles as I slipped into FTL. Had I not been rescued by an unknowing cargo ship, I most certainly would have died from my injuries—that or suffocated in the cold of deep space. By the time I recovered from my wounds, I had lost all interest in returning. My father was dead. My brother was corrupting all that his fathers before him had built. I was happy on Haven growing molo. But you could not control yourself, Caius. Takara was not enough. You wanted more. You wanted an empire..."

"Enough!" Jalea screamed as she leapt from the shadows, grabbing Caius by his robes and putting her gun to his face. "No more talk!"

"Jalea!" Tug yelled. "Do not..."

"You bastard!" she screamed. "All this time, I believed in you. I believed in our cause!"

"Jalea," Tug begged.

"All the talk of liberation, of freedom. You only wanted your title and your throne! You are no better than this arrogant little fool!" She shoved her gun in Caius's mouth.

"Do not!" Tug yelled, raising his own weapon and pointing it at them. Dumar raised his weapon as well.

Jalea began to circle to her right, pulling Caius along with her, holding him in front of her as a shield. Tug and Dumar

circled to match her movements, keeping themselves and their weapons facing her and Caius.

"And to think I shared my bed with you, with someone of the same blood as this parasite!" Jalea spit at Tug. "There will be no arrest! He will pay for what he has done! He will pay for the deaths of my mother, my father, and my husband!"

"Jalea, no," Tug begged. "He must stand trial for his crimes. It is the only way..."

"NO!" she screamed putting the gun to his head again.

"DROP IT!" Jessica screamed from the doorway as she arrived.

Jalea spun her head to her left toward Jessica's voice, her eyes going wide. As she did so, Caius grabbed her gun hand and twisted outward to her right, breaking her fingers and stripping her gun from her hand as she screamed in pain. In an instant, he was behind her, the gun at her temple with her serving as his shield.

"I see you have acquired one of our weapons," Caius said, smiling arrogantly. "And now, dear brother, since you are the only substantial proof of your claims..." Caius moved his weapon away from Jalea, took aim at Tug and fired. Dumar instinctively dove in front of Tug to protect him, taking Caius's shot in his chest as he fell to the floor at Tug's feet.

Jessica fired three quick shots from the doorway. The first shot struck Jalea in her chest, the second shot in her face. The third shot found its mark, striking Caius in the face as Jalea's dead weight escaped his grasp. Caius's body tensed from the deadly face wound, his weapon still loosely aimed at Tug until he collapsed to the floor next to Jalea.

"Oops," Jessica stated, realizing she had killed both Caius and Jalea. "Who are we kidding? The bitch had it coming." The sound of boots on the stone floors in the corridor caused Jessica to spin around, her weapon raised.

A dozen armed palace guards charged the room, hollering in Takaran. Although she did not understand their demands, she knew it was time to surrender. The leader of the squad stepped forward, taking notice of the body of his emperor on the floor. He muttered something vile at Tug in Takaran, to which Tug responded in a confident and demanding tone. They argued for a moment, neither one willing to yield their position until Mister Dumar, who lay on the ground, finally summoned the strength to speak. He barked back at the squad leader as if giving an order, then followed his command with a series of what Jessica recognized as Takaran numbers. The squad leader looked at Dumar and Tug suspiciously for a moment, then pulled out a data device. Dumar repeated the numbers as the squad leader typed them into his device. A look of surprise washed over his face, and he leaned forward, scanning the back of Mister Dumar's hand with his device. The squad leader straightened up, his tone suddenly becoming respectful of Mister Dumar's identity. He barked an order at one of the other guards, who immediately ran out of the room.

"What the hell is going on here?" Jessica mumbled.

"They are fetching a DNA scanner," Tug explained.

"Why?"

"To confirm my identity," Tug told her.

Jessica's expression changed to one of confusion. "Just who the hell are you?"

Tug smiled at her. "I am Prince Casimir Takar, son of King Austyn, brother of Caius, and the rightful heir to the throne of Takara."

"Of course."

* * *

"Hull breach! Section fourteen, decks A and B!" Mister Randeem reported.

The Aurora pitched over hard to starboard as another missile struck their port side.

"Mains are down to seventy percent!" Mister Chiles called from the helm.

"Damage to her port side," Mister Navashee announced. "She's got a hull breach."

"Four more, Mister Randeem!" Nathan ordered. "Target that hull breach! Let's see if we can open her up a bit!"

"Firing four," Mister Randeem responded.

"Time to KKV impact?" Nathan asked.

"Three minutes!" Mister Navashee answered as another missile rocked the Aurora.

"We're down to four rail guns!" Mister Randeem announced.

"Keep firing those missiles!" Nathan ordered.

"Power loss, port side, sections one eleven through one twenty eight," Naralena reported. "Medical is on backup cells!"

"One missile got through," Mister Randeem announced.

"Minor damage to her hull," Mister Navashee reported. "We just missed her hull breach."

"Try again!" Nathan ordered.

"Firing four!"

"Contact!" Mister Navashee reported. "Thirty degrees off to starboard, eighty-four up, seven kilometers out."

"What?" Nathan asked.

"It's the Falcon!"

"Comms, tell them to get the hell out of here!" Nathan ordered. "There's no telling how big the explosion will be when those KKV's hit!"

Nathan watched in horror as chunks of the Aurora's hull tore away on the view screen as the Avendahl's rail guns walked across her topside.

"Hard to starboard!" Nathan ordered. "Roll us over."

"Stern tubes are down, sir. We can't fire on aft!" Mister Randeem reminded him.

"Turn anyway," Nathan ordered, "before those guns tear our topsides apart!" Nathan glanced at the tactical display

window on the bottom corner of the main view screen. "Why is the Falcon still out there?"

"She's not answering my hail, sir! She's transmitting something!" Naralena reported.

"What are they saying?"

"They're not transmitting to us, sir! They're transmitting to the Avendahl!"

"What?"

"Two more missiles inbound!" Mister Randeem reported. "We're out of rail gun slugs!"

The Avendahl's rail guns suddenly ceased firing. Two explosions went off on their port side, rocking the Aurora slightly. Then, everything went quiet.

"What just happened?" Nathan asked. He looked around. "I thought there were two more missiles headed for us."

"They self-destructed, sir," Mister Navashee reported in shock. "Don't ask me why."

"What the hell? Time to KKV impact?" Nathan asked.

"Two minutes," Mister Navashee reported.

"Captain! Incoming message from the Avendahl!" Naralena reported. "It's video."

"Put it up," Nathan answered, rising to his feet.

"This is Captain Suvan Navarro, commander of the imperial battleship Avendahl. By order of the true heir to the throne of Takara, we are to cease fire and stand down. We will no longer fire on your vessel unless fired upon. Will you promise the same?"

"This is Captain Nathan Scott of the alliance ship Aurora. We will also stand down."

"Very good, sir. Do you require any assistance?"

"We could use some medical aid. We have many wounded, and our medical facilities are somewhat overwhelmed. But first, I would ask that you take your zero point energy systems offline, as they are interfering with our propulsion systems."

"Of course."

"Second, you should change course." Nathan paused, looking at Mister Riley. "Mister Riley?"

"Hard to starboard and forty-five down should do it."

"Come hard to starboard and pitch down forty-five degrees, and do it quickly, sir."

"And why is that, Captain?"

"Because if you don't, as many as eight captured comm-drones are going to slam into you at ten times the speed of light." Nathan couldn't hold his smile back at that statement.

"I see," Captain Navarro answered. He turned and gave an order in Takaran to someone off screen before turning back. "We will rendezvous with you shortly, after the threat has passed. Avendahl out."

"Captain!" Mister Riley called from the navigator's chair. "The jump fields are coming back online."

Mister Navashee turned his attention back to his scanners. "The Avendahl is powering down her ZPED, sir. Her anti-matter reactors are increasing their output to compensate. She's changing course as well and fast."

"How about a few two kilometer jumps, Mister Riley?" Nathan ordered as he sat back down in his command chair. "Whenever you're ready."

Chapter Ten

Nathan followed the properly dressed gentleman down the hallway and out onto the deck overlooking the garden below.

“His majesty asks that you wait here,” the gentleman stated in perfect Angla. “He will be with you shortly. May I get you anything while you wait?”

“Thank you, no. I’m fine.”

“Very well,” the gentleman stated, after which he withdrew into the hallway, closing the doors behind him.

Nathan looked out across the simple, yet elegant, garden. Rolling hills in the distance covered with ornate villas filled the view, each of them with gardens of their own. The sky had a subdued amber hue even though it was midday in the countryside outside of Answari.

Nathan picked up a glass tumbler from the service tray on the small table in the middle of the deck and poured himself some water. He took a drink, finding a hint of sweetness to the water, flavored by some unknown Takaran fruit. He thought back to the first planet he had visited,

Haven. Doctor Chen had warned them not to try any of the local food for fear that it might contain pathogens for which humans from Earth had not yet developed an immunity. He had blatantly disregarded her advice and had received admonishment for it later. The idea struck him as funny, especially after he had witnessed her enjoying a meal of Takaran delicacies with some of the royal medical staff the night before. It had been a good distraction for her, as she had been consumed with patient care over the week that had passed since the battle of Answari had ended.

The door opened on one side of the deck, and Tug stepped through, closing the door behind him. "Captain," Tug greeted, extending his hand. "I apologize for the delay."

"That's quite all right," Nathan assured him. "I expect you are quite busy as of late."

"As are you, I am sure. How do you like the view?"

"Simple, yet elegant," Nathan told him. "It reminds me of my parents' place in the mountains outside of Vancouver. It looks much like this in the spring."

"I would love to see it sometime," Tug stated.

"What is this place?"

"It is my grandfather's retreat," Tug explained. "I used to come here as a child. After all that has happened, I have ordered the palace built by my brother be demolished. It is a monument to his arrogance, one that is best forgotten."

"Some would argue that it is best to remember one's history, both good and bad, to help guide one's future."

"A true statement," Tug agreed, "but much will remain to remind us of the rule of Caius. His corruption and abuses will not be allowed to fade from our history, just as your contribution shall not be forgotten."

Nathan laughed. "Perhaps that one *would* be better off forgotten."

"Nonsense, Nathan. The people of Takara, in fact, of the entire sector, owe you more than we can ever repay... as do I."

"A thousand of your technicians are repairing my ship as we speak. You are caring for my wounded, and you have dispatched aid to Corinair. You have done more than enough."

"No amount of reparations can undo what my brother has done to the people of this sector," Tug admitted painfully. "That is why I am dissolving the empire and returning sovereignty to all the worlds from which it was taken."

"And you? Will you continue to rule Takara?"

"For a time, yes. There is much to be done here, and the people of Takara long for the peace and prosperity that was provided by my father and all his fathers before him. The Takarans take much pride in their royal lineages. However, as one man should never have the power to decide the fate of billions, I shall be reinstating the parliamentary system that was in use at the time of my father's assassination. As much as the Takarans love their nobility, they love their freedom even more; trust me."

"As it should be," Nathan agreed.

"Of course." Nathan took a long drink, emptying his glass. "One thing bothers me, Tug. Why did you feel it necessary to hide your true identity, not only from me, but from everyone? As far as I can tell, Dumar was the only one who knew."

Tug leaned back in his chair. "You must understand, Nathan; the death of my father, the betrayal of my brother, the long and painful recovery from my injuries: these things left me a bitter, hollow man. On Haven, I had peace. In time, on my molo farm, I even found contentment and eventually love. The truth of my identity would have undoubtedly led to my demise. If Caius had thought me still alive, he would have left no stone unturned. My very survival depended on the fact that Prince Casimir Takar was believed dead. And once I married and had children, their safety depended on that belief as well."

"But you started the Karuzari after you started a family, did you not?" Nathan wondered.

"Yes, that is true. Watching Caius conquer other systems was too much for me to tolerate. When his forces finally came to Haven, I realized I would never be free, even if I remained hidden. Nor would my family ever be truly safe. I would always be tortured by the knowledge that I alone had the power to put an end to his reign of terror. But Caius had to believe that the Karuzari were nothing more than a band of rebellious radicals, extremist followers of the Legend of Origins, terrorists if you will. If he suspected that I was behind the Karuzari, he would have destroyed entire worlds, one by one, until he found me. I had to remain dead until I could find my way back to Takara to face him. Your ship gave me that chance."

"You still could have told me. I might still have agreed to help you," Nathan argued.

"Or you could have refused, tossed me off your ship, and jumped away. That is what Commander Taylor wanted you to do from the start."

Nathan poured himself more water. "I see your point."

Tug leaned forward, looking Nathan in the eyes. "Nathan, my biggest regret in all of this is that I had to deceive you. You of all people, have turned out to be my biggest ally and my most trusted friend... second to Max, of course," Tug said with a laugh. "After all, he did take a weapons blast for me."

"Of course." Nathan also laughed. "So how is Deliza handling it?" Nathan asked, hoping to change the subject. "I mean, suddenly being a princess and all."

Tug laughed again. "Her only concerns seem to be in our technology. She has immersed herself in the study of all that Takara has to offer in such areas."

"And your other daughter?"

"She is doing wonderfully, as she is too young to understand what has happened. I want to thank you for

dispatching a jump shuttle to bring them from Corinair. I cannot tell you how much that meant to me.”

“I only did so to protect them,” Nathan admitted. “There may be others who felt as Jalea did about your deceptions, just as there may be members of your own nobility that may oppose the steps you are taking. I felt it best that they were here with you, where you could protect them.”

“Yes, thank you again, Nathan. That was very wise of you.”

“I was wondering, Tug...” Nathan paused a moment. “Is that what I should be calling you? Tug? Or should I call you Casimir?”

“I have been Tug longer than I was Casimir,” he told him. “Tug will suffice.”

“I was wondering if you ever confirmed the recall of that battle group.”

“Yes. Two days ago, Josh and Loki took the Falcon out to confirm that the commanders of those ships were in compliance with my orders. Rest assured; they are on their way back and will arrive in two weeks time. However, just between you and I, we will be sending the Falcon out every few days to check on their progress.” Tug winked. “I do not yet trust the nobles.” Tug poured himself a glass of water as well. “But what of you and your ship, Captain? What are your plans? You will be returning to Earth, will you not?”

“Yes, as soon as your people have finished enough of the repairs for us to safely get underway.”

“There is so much more we could do for your ship, Captain. Perhaps if you could see your way to remaining another month, we could provide you with significant weapons upgrades, shields...”

“A generous offer,” Nathan interrupted, “but we have been away for far too long.”

“But you must allow me to be of greater assistance to your cause,” Tug insisted.

"You have already completely rearmed my ship, replaced all my rail guns, and given me a full complement of fighters and utility craft. Soon, the holes in my hull will be repaired as well. You have done enough, my friend."

"But I want to do so much more," Tug insisted.

"Why?"

"Because there is still something that I must ask of you, Captain Scott."

"What is it?"

"Let us join the Alliance."

"The Karuzari are already members..."

"No, not the Karuzari. They no longer exist as a nation. I'm talking about Takara, Nathan. Let us join the Alliance. In a few months, we can have several jump ships ready to come to your aid should you need us."

"It is not that easy, Tug. Earth is a great distance away, and the journey between our worlds is long."

"Ah, yes. I read Doctor Sorenson's report as well. Do you really believe that the Campaglia's ZPED is what caused you to come out of your super-jump at that particular moment?"

"It makes sense, I guess. To be honest, Tug, sometimes I'm not sure what to believe."

"You know, if Jalea were alive, she would insist that your arrival was divine intervention."

"Yes, she probably would."

"And what do you think?"

"As I said, I don't know what to believe."

Tug leaned back in his chair again, taking in a deep breath as he stared at the landscape. "How many jumps do you believe will be required to make the journey back to Earth?"

"Abby believes that by combining several of the smaller ZPEDs, the ones used in the newer comm-drones, we might be able to increase our jump range to as much as fifty light years. If it works, it could take as few as twenty jumps."

"Would the recharge time be extended?" Tug wondered.

“She does not believe so, as the majority of the energy for the longer jumps would be coming directly from the ZPEDs. Even at ten percent output, they produce more than enough energy for a significant jump. She still needs to run simulations to determine the output level at which the devices begin to interfere with the jump fields.”

“It is not a super-jump, but it will get you home more quickly.”

“If all goes well, we could make the journey in about two weeks. Given the amount of time required to complete our hull repairs, as well as the time already spent in the Pentaurus cluster, we would be arriving back in our own system in about the same amount of time as if we had left the cluster immediately after our arrival.”

“I am sorry that you could not get home more quickly, Nathan. But you and your people have done a wonderful thing here. You have liberated billions of people. More importantly, you have reconnected us to the place of our birth, the birth of all humanity. What you have done will change the course of history in this part of the galaxy. Hopefully it will change history in your part of the galaxy as well.”

A properly dressed gentleman entered from the hallway. “Lunch is ready, sire.”

“Thank you,” Tug told him. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” Nathan told him. “Besides, I believe there are still a few things about you that I do not yet know.”

“Indeed there are, Captain,” Tug laughed, “and a promise is a promise.”

* * *

“What did you call this?” Vladimir asked between bites.

“Dollag-something,” Nathan answered, not remembering the exact pronunciation. “It’s this big, hideous looking creature that lives on one of the moons orbiting one of their gas-giants. Scary looking thing with fangs and big flapping

jowls and a cry that can split your ear drums. Why anyone would try to figure out how to cook this thing is beyond me.”

“Sounds like they must have been very hungry at the time,” Vladimir decided.

“Probably. Anyway, it’s considered a delicacy on Takara.”

“I can see why. The flavor is amazing. How do they cook it?”

“Apparently, you have to roast it for several days at low temperatures to breakdown all the sinew and stuff. Not an easy task. Tug sent us a locker full of the stuff, all precooked and ready to eat. He said if we freeze it, we can enjoy it for weeks.”

Vladimir finished his serving and pushed his plate back, leaning back in his chair. “I am full,” he announced with satisfaction.

“You should be,” Nathan joked. “You ate half a Dollag.” Nathan handed him his data pad. “Here, Tug sent me a picture of what they look like.”

The hatch swung open, and Commander Taylor entered the captain’s ready room. “I’m sorry, sir. Am I interrupting?”

“No problem,” Nathan assured her, waving her in as he also pushed his plate back.

“What’s that horrible smell?” she asked as she entered.

“Dollag,” Vladimir announced as he wiped his mouth.

“That’s food? It smells awful.”

“I imagine Dollag is not your cup of tea, Commander. It’s not a plant.”

“It may not even qualify as an animal,” Vladimir stated as he turned the data pad from side to side, viewing the picture of the Dollag and trying to determine which way was up.

“What can I do for you, Commander?” Nathan asked.

“The last of the Takaran repair teams have departed, sir, and all of our wounded that were being cared for on Takara have been moved to medical for the return trip to Corinair.

Lieutenant Commander Nash reports all hands are on board and ready for departure."

"Were they able to release Captain Waddell?" Nathan wondered.

"Yes, sir. He was deemed stable enough for transport a few days ago," Cameron informed the captain. "Actually, I don't think they had much choice in the matter," she added with a smile.

"I'm not surprised," Nathan said. "How are we doing on supplies?"

"Nearly full up, sir. Ammo, ordnance, consumables, medical: everything is fully stocked. We've even got six fabricators set up in the hold and plenty of raw material to feed them. We'll be picking up additional food stores when we reach Corinair. Apparently, the Ancotans have been providing considerable aid to Corinair to assist in her recovery."

"Yeah, I had a feeling they'd jump onboard once the shooting stopped." Nathan turned to Vladimir. "How are we doing on repairs?"

"Everything that must be done in port has been completed. All that is left are the little things that we can handle while under way. Doctor Sorenson and her Takaran specialists will be experimenting with both the ZPEDs from the comm-drones as well as the upgrades to the jump drive while en route to Earth."

"How are the Corinari handling Takarans on the crew?" Nathan wondered.

"As expected, there is some tension," Cameron admitted, "but I don't foresee any serious problems. Master Chief Montrose will keep his people in line, as will Lieutenant Montgomery."

"What's your read on Montgomery?" Nathan asked.

"Professional, confident, willing to learn. I think he was a good choice."

“He came highly recommended by Tug. One of the few noble families that he trusts. I have to admit, though, it still makes me a bit uneasy to have them aboard.”

“I agree, but if we’re going to make use of all the Takaran technology Tug uploaded to our database, we’re going to need those specialists.”

“Have you seen some of the stuff in that database?” Vladimir asked. “They are at least one hundred years ahead of us in shields and energy weapons. Their fabricators alone make our component printing systems obsolete.”

Nathan nodded his agreement as he pushed himself away from the desk. “Well, I guess it’s time we got under way again.”

“Yes,” Cameron agreed. “Three weeks in port is long enough.”

“Actually, I am surprised we were able to repair as much as we did in such a short time,” Vladimir said.

“It helps to have a shipyard and a thousand specialists to help out,” Nathan reminded him as he rose. “Shall we?”

Nathan left the ready room and walked out onto the bridge, Cameron and Vladimir following behind him. “Mister Hayes, are we ready to break orbit?”

“All systems are green, Captain,” Josh answered from the helm.

“Mister Sheehan?”

Loki turned in his chair at the navigator’s station to face the captain. “Jump to Corinair plotted and locked, sir.”

“Comms?”

“All departments report ready for departure, Captain,” Naralena reported.

“Tactical?”

“All systems ready. Threat board is clear, and the flight deck is set to red,” Jessica reported.

“Very well. Comms, inform the shipyard controller that we are departing.”

“Yes, sir.”

"I can't believe we're finally headed home," Cameron mumbled.

"We still have one more stop, Commander."

"Takaran port control has transferred release control to us," Josh reported.

"Umbilicals released and retracted," Loki added.

"Take us out, Mister Hayes," Nathan ordered as he took his seat in the command chair at the center of the bridge.

"Aye, Captain. Releasing mooring clamps," Josh answered. There was a slight shift as the mooring clamps that had held the Aurora in place for three weeks during her repairs finally opened. "Free floating. Translating upward."

Nathan watched as the Takara shipyards began to fall away on the main view screen.

"Clear of all moorings," Loki reported. "We're free to maneuver, sir."

"All ahead slow, Mister Hayes."

"All ahead slow, aye," Josh answered.

The massive structure of the Takaran shipyards passed underneath them.

"There's the Avendahl," Cameron pointed out as it passed beneath them on the view screen.

Nathan watched the massive battleship pass. "Man, we did more damage than I thought. I'm surprised it isn't repaired yet."

"How could it be?" Vladimir wondered. "We had every technician in the shipyard working on us."

"Clear of port," Loki reported. "Open space ahead, sir."

"Take her up to standard jump speed."

"Increasing to standard jump speed," Josh answered.

"Jump point in five seconds," Loki announced.

"All hands stand by to jump," Naralena announced.

"You know, I have never seen this," Vladimir confessed.

"Really?" Nathan was surprised.

"I am always in engineering when we jump."

"Shouldn't you be there now, then?"

"Probably," he admitted with a grin.

"Jumping," Loki announced.

Vladimir watched the main view screen as the blue-white light from the emitters washed out over the forward section of the Aurora's hull. In a split second, the light intensified and then flashed, filling the bridge. A moment later, the light was gone and the planet Corinair filled the screen in front of them, growing closer by the moment.

"Jump complete," Loki announced.

"Entering orbit over Corinair," Josh added.

"Bozhe moi!" Vladimir exclaimed.

"Yeah, it never gets old," Nathan agreed. He stood and turned to Cameron, who was standing next to the tactical console. "Commander, assemble all Corinari on the hangar deck in one hour."

"Yes, sir," Commander Taylor answered, somewhat puzzled. She looked at Vladimir, who only shrugged as he headed out the door.

"What's going on?" Jessica asked after Nathan and Vladimir left the bridge.

"I have no idea," Cameron admitted.

* * *

Nathan walked confidently down the main corridor on his way to the hangar deck. As he walked, he reflected on all they had been through while in the Pentaurus cluster. It had been a difficult journey to say the least, and only twenty of the Aurora's original crew had survived. They had accomplished what most believed impossible, but it had been at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. For a time, Nathan had not believed he could live with the knowledge of what his actions had cost. In the end, Tug had assured him that it all would have happened eventually, even without Na-Tan or the Aurora. He even convinced Nathan that his part, and the part of his ship and crew, probably saved millions of lives in the long run. Although

Nathan could see the logic in Tug's assertions, deep in the back of his mind, he was certain he would always be asking himself that same question: 'what if...?'

Now he faced another 'what if' moment. More than half of his crew was Corinairan, and despite their Alliance, he did not feel he had the right to order them to make the journey back to Earth with the Aurora. It would take anywhere from weeks to months, and there was no guarantee that they would make it back to Earth at all, nor what they would find when they arrived. He had already asked more than was his right. These men deserved a choice.

Nathan entered the port fighter alley from the hatch just aft of the launch tubes. Two Takaran fighters sat fully armed and ready for action in the pair of launch tubes at the alley's forward end. The alley itself was lined on either side with twenty-four more identical fighters, all in perfect, combat-ready condition. Maintenance trucks were neatly parked between the fighters, and all the spacecraft were secured to the deck to prevent movement during maneuvers. Five weeks ago, this entire compartment had been opened to space when a Takaran fighter rammed into the Aurora's port side. Now, it was a picture perfect scene, one that was mirrored in the starboard fighter alley as well.

Nathan passed through the port fighter alley and the open transfer airlock that led into the main hangar deck. Lined up along either side of the main hangar were ten additional tactical shuttles and two cargo shuttles, also provided by Tug in appreciation for allowing Takara to join the Alliance.

"Attention on deck!" the chief of the boat ordered as Nathan walked out into the middle of the hangar deck. There in front of him stood nearly two hundred Corinari technicians, pilots, and specialists, each of them highly trained and combat seasoned. These were the men that had left their homes expecting never to return. These were the men that had fought for him, for their people, for the

Alliance. Here they stood, at perfect attention, waiting for words from their captain.

“As you were,” Nathan ordered as he stood facing them. “The Corinari were formed more than thirty years ago to protect their homeworld against invasion. Your motto has always been strength through superior training and dedication. In the battle of Ancot and the invasion of Takara, you and your alliance brethren have done more than protect Corinair. You have liberated the entire Pentaurus cluster from subjugation under the boot of Caius. We have changed the course of history and restored to your people the very freedoms that were born to us all. For this, you should be proud. For this, you will all be remembered, as will those who did not survive. Now, the Aurora and her crew must return to Earth to defend her world, the world from which all humanity once came, against her own aggressors. The journey will take weeks, possibly even months, and there is no guarantee that we will arrive safely. In addition, we know not what we will find when we return. We know little about the Earth’s enemies, but they are believed to be far more powerful than the Ta’Akar ever were. Yet despite these unknowns, as it was for you, it is our duty to protect the Earth and the billions of people that inhabit her. I cannot order you to make this journey with us, nor can I promise that any of you will be able to return to your homeworld should you continue to serve this ship. I only ask for volunteers.”

Nathan looked to the members of his command staff standing to his right. Cameron, Vladimir, and Jessica had become his closest friends, his family, as had several others he had met in the Pentaurus cluster. He turned back to his men. “We are currently in orbit over Corinair. Anyone wishing to return to their families and remain on their homeworld may do so without shame, for you have all fought bravely and with honor. Those who wish to depart may board the shuttles at the aft end of the hangar deck

now. I thank you all for your service and wish each and every one of you a happy and prosperous life.” Nathan cleared his throat and swallowed hard. “That is all.”

Nathan and his command staff stood silently, waiting for those that wanted to return to leave the ranks and board the shuttles as instructed. For more than a minute, they stared straight ahead, but not one Corinari broke rank. Finally, Master Chief Montrose, chief of the boat and leader of the Corinari contingent, stepped forward and yelled at the top of his lungs “Alliance!” In unison the men responded “We fight as one!”

Thank you for reading this story.
(A review would be greatly appreciated!)

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