

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 12

RISE OF THE ALLIANCE



Ryk Brown

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**THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 12**

RISE OF THE ALLIANCE

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #12: Rise of the Alliance
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CHAPTER ONE

Despite all that had happened, Maxwell Dumar had never put much faith in the idea that Nathan Scott was the *Na-Tan* described in the Legend of Origins. It was, after all, only a legend. For all they knew it was a bedtime story that had somehow morphed into a pseudo-religion, made stronger still by the maniacal reign of Caius Ta'Akar.

Commander Dumar chuckled to himself as he made his way down the corridors of the Karuzara asteroid's command center. *Na-Tan*. The idea made him smile. Still, Jalea had played the Followers of Origin masterfully, and had gotten the young captain to play the role out of expediency, if not out of utter desperation. That woman had been trouble. He knew it the moment he had met her, and he was glad that Lieutenant Commander Nash had known it as well... and had dealt with her once her usefulness had ended.

Still, one could not help but wonder how it was that so many things seemed to have fallen into place for Captain Scott, and usually at just the right moment. Today was a perfect example. The precise moment in time that was rapidly approaching, and this particular advantageous alignment would not come again for another eighty-seven years—if Casimir's calculations were correct. Without this particular stroke of luck, the prince's plan would not have been possible. One had to wonder.

Commander Dumar passed the guards at the door to the control room, feigning a return salute. The room was the largest single room in the entire command section, having been expanded to accommodate the many technicians by the removal of several walls. Rows of workstations, each

with multiple view screens for each technician to monitor, filled the room. Behind the technicians walked section supervisors and technical experts. In the back of the room were the physicists and engineers.

"Commander," the senior controller greeted as Dumar approached. He glanced up at the digital time display on the wall. "It's getting close."

Dumar also noted the time. "Five minutes until the window opens." He looked about the room once more, scanning for signs of concern from any of the technicians. "Are we going to make it?"

"If you mean, are we going to be ready, then the answer is yes," the senior controller answered. "If you're asking if it will work, I'd have to answer, 'we're about to find out.'"

Dumar smiled wryly.

"How can you speak of this so casually?" one of the physicists in the back of the room asked. "Do you realize what this will mean? Do you realize how much things will change?" the man continued.

"Yes, I do," Dumar answered, "assuming it works." He turned back to the senior controller. "Of course, if it doesn't, none of us will be the wiser."

The senior controller raised an eyebrow and nodded.

"Did you get to see your family, Mister Bryant?" Dumar asked, suddenly remembering how much his senior controller had been looking forward to the upcoming visit.

"Yes, sir, I did."

"They are well, I trust?"

"Quite well."

"How did your wife react when you told her what you were about to do?"

"She was fine."

Dumar looked at Mister Bryant. "You didn't tell her, did you?"

"Of course not," he answered, smiling. "You married a Corinairan woman, did you not?"

"I did at that."

"Then you know as well as I that had I told her the truth, she would have knocked me out, bound me tight, and dragged me back to Corinair... by what little hair I have left on my head."

Dumar had to fight back a laugh. "You are correct, Mister Bryant. I suspect she would have done just that." Dumar looked at the time display as the last minute disappeared, leaving only seconds left to tick away. "Final check," he ordered.

Throughout the control room, section supervisors tallied their technicians one by one, then called in their results to the primary controllers lined up at their consoles directly in front of Mister Bryant.

"Navigation is good," the first primary controller reported.

"Power generation is good," the next controller added.

"Power distribution is good."

"Life support is good."

Mister Bryant listened patiently, marking off each section on his data pad as the twelve primary controllers reported their readiness. He looked at the time display. Thirty seconds and counting. "All systems are online and ready. All outer doors are secure, and all sections are on alert." Another look at the time. "Fifteen seconds and counting."

Dumar looked at the physicists to his right. They looked nervous. The engineers to his left, not as much. "Remove the safeties, Mister Bryant."

Mister Bryant stepped up to the small podium located directly in the middle of the twelve primary controllers. He placed his hand on a scanner plate. A moment later, the clear panel over the arming switch slid open. He rotated the knob to the 'armed' position. "The system is armed. The array is live." He glanced at the time again. "Five seconds to the window."

Dumar watched the last few seconds change, waiting until the display showed nothing but a row of zeros. "Jump."

The Karuzara asteroid was dark, lit only by the distant light from the Darvano star. All of its usual external lighting, its approach and departure trenches, its comm arrays, and its various entrances and exits for personnel working on the surface of the massive asteroid had all been shut down. At the moment, it looked much like it had decades ago... before the Corinairan miners, before the Karuzari, and before the Alliance. It was just another dark, dead rock making its way leisurely around its parent star, just as it had for billions of years.

Pale blue dots all over the asteroid began to glow, becoming white as they quickly rose in their intensity. The hundreds of intense white dots suddenly flashed, sending a wave of blue-white light across the surface of the asteroid like a wave of shimmering water. A second later, the entire asteroid was engulfed in a brilliant blue-white flash of light that rivaled the Darvano star itself. The flash faded even more quickly than it had manifested, leaving only the blackness of space where the Karuzara asteroid had been only a moment earlier.

"Jump complete," Mister Bryant announced. He looked around out of the corners of his eyes as if he were afraid to move his head. Finally, he turned to Commander Dumar, who was smiling more broadly than ever before. "We're still alive."

"Indeed we are," Dumar agreed, "and where are we?"

Both of Mister Bryant's eyebrows raised as he remembered his next task. "Position!" he called out.

"Raising the arrays!" the navigation controller answered.

"Emitters show zero energy," the array controller reported.

"Energy banks at zero charge," the next controller announced.

"Reactors are normal."

"All stations are reporting no damage."

"All systems appear to be nominal."

"Sir!" one of the section supervisors called out. "We've changed shape and mass!"

"What?"

An image appeared on one of the big view screens on the forward wall of the control room. It was a computer-generated graphic of the Karuzara asteroid based on readings from her many sensors.

"We wondered if that might happen," one of the physicists said.

"We *told* you that would happen," an engineer insisted.

"That what would happen?" Commander Dumar answered.

"The jump fields sort of nipped off the tops of some of the surface peaks, instead of forming over their complete surface," the physicist explained.

"That's why we made all our comm and sensor arrays retractable, isn't it." Mister Bryant said.

"We expected this," Dumar added.

"We just didn't know how much mass we would lose," the engineer admitted. "If we'd had more time, we could have calibrated each emitter to prevent this from happening..."

"It was my call," Dumar interrupted. "Do not worry. All we did was smooth a few rough edges, correct?" He looked at Mister Bryant. "That *is* all we lost, correct?"

"Uh, yes, sir. That's all."

"Position is verified," the primary navigation controller announced. "We are exactly ten light years from our previous position, thirty-seven light years from Palamor."

“Our trajectory?” Dumar asked.

“Perfect,” the controller added, beaming from ear to ear. The control room erupted in cheers.

Mister Bryant reached out to Commander Dumar. “Congratulations, sir. You’ve just jumped an asteroid.”

Dumar smiled as he shook Mister Bryant’s hand. *Fate continues to smile on Captain Scott*, he thought as he shook his head in disbelief.

* * *

Josh and Loki ran down the central corridor, dodging the constant stream of damage control teams and medical rescue technicians flowing in all directions.

Loki slowed a moment as he stepped aside to make room for a stretcher as another of the Celestia’s injured crewmen was wheeled from the main hangar deck forward toward medical. The man had severe burns on one whole side of his body, and looked to be in great pain.

“Come on, Loki!” Josh yelled back from the hatch to the main hangar bay.

Loki continued forward at a quicker pace once again. “Did you see that guy?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. He’s hurt bad. They all are. They’ll pump them full of nanites and they’ll be back on their feet in a few months,” Josh said as he stepped through the hatch. “Hell, most of them are Corinairan. The nanites won’t hurt them at all.”

Loki shook his head as he followed Josh into the hangar bay. He had known Josh for years now, and still his friend’s general lack of compassion for other human beings never ceased to amaze him. He followed Josh as they weaved through the usual well-orchestrated chaos that was the main hangar bay only minutes after a battle.

Josh broke through the chaos, stopping in his tracks, his mouth agape as the eighth four zero two rolled forward and

turned to line up next to the previous seven. "Holy crap!" he exclaimed, turning back toward Loki, whose expression was similar. "I didn't believe him when he told me..."

"Neither did I," Loki admitted with nearly equal excitement.

"How many are there?"

"I heard at least a dozen," Loki answered.

"Twenty jumped in," Marcus announced as he approached. "Four of them got smoked attacking that damned battle platform."

"Where's the rest of them?" Josh asked eagerly.

"Helping the Celestia finish off them bombers," Marcus answered.

"Look at them," Loki exclaimed. "They're beautiful."

"Ours was better," Josh boasted.

"Ours was only one," Loki explained, gesturing toward the entire group of eight.

"Maybe, but we did a lot of damage with that one ship," Josh reminded his friend.

"That's my point, Josh. Imagine what the captain can do with sixteen of them."

"You're right," Josh admitted with a chuckle. "I hadn't even thought of that." Josh turned back toward Loki. "Let's go check them out." Josh took off on a brisk stride toward the line of black interceptors, slowing to appear more nonchalant as he neared the first one. Its cockpit was open and empty. Its crew, being the first to board, had already disembarked. The same was true with the next two ships in line. Each of them had obvious scarring from their recent encounter with the Jung battle platform. They also had some rather odd-looking configurations on some of their weapons ports and control surfaces.

"What the hell is this?" Marcus wondered, having followed them over. "This ain't the right gauge for a hinge. It'll never hold up down in the atmosphere."

"We weren't planning on taking them down to the surface," one of the pilots explained, "at least not if we could avoid it."

"That ain't no excuse for sloppy..."

"We had to get the first twenty up rather quickly, I'm afraid," the pilot defended. "I suspect more than a few shortcuts were taken to get them out the door."

"The *first* twenty?" Loki wondered. "There are more coming?"

"I believe so," the pilot answered. "I'm not quite sure when, or how many. At least another twenty, I'd guess." The pilot stepped closer, extending his hand. "Thain, Busby Thain. Friends call me 'Busy'."

"Josh Hayes," Josh said, shaking the pilot's hand as he continued staring at the row of interceptors.

"Loki Sheehan," Loki answered. "This is Marcus Taggart."

"Nice to meet you, Senior Chief," the pilot answered.

"Likewise, Lieutenant," Marcus answered as he also shook the lieutenant's hand. "You from Corinair?"

"Yes, sir."

"Corinari?"

"Six years now," the lieutenant answered. "Least ways, I was. Not sure what we are now, to be honest."

"I'm just glad you all showed up."

"Sorry to come so late," the lieutenant said. "We were under the impression that trouble wasn't expected for at least another month."

"Yeah, things changed," Marcus said. "Happens a lot around here."

Busy turned toward Josh, who was crawling up the boarding ladder to the nearest ship. "You like spacecraft?"

"We used to fly a Falcon just like these," Loki told him.

"Still say ours was better," Josh insisted as he came back down the ladder.

"Falcon?" The lieutenant suddenly realized who he was speaking with. "Josh and Loki. You're the guys they told us about."

"What?" Josh said, his interest suddenly peaked.

"You heard of them?" Marcus asked, more surprised than anyone. "Oh, crap."

"No, you guys are famous back home. At least to other flight crews. Hell, they even had us studying some of your maneuvers. The waterfall? That was amazing! Did you really do that?"

"We really did that," Loki answered, wishing the memory of the event could stay buried deep within his subconscious.

"Unbelievable. Most pilots would have ejected."

"Can't eject when you're carrying a jump drive in Jung territory," Josh said with obvious swagger.

"I guess not," the lieutenant admitted. "Still, it would be a hard instinct for a Corinari pilot to overcome, especially after they drilled it into your head during training."

"Yeah, well, ain't nothing ever been drilled into that boy's head," Marcus told the lieutenant.

"*Senior Chief!*" a deckhand called out from the distance.

"Chaos calls," Marcus said as he turned to leave.

"So, we're famous back in the PC?" Josh asked, feeling more cocky and arrogant than usual.

"I don't know about the entire Pentaurus cluster, but everyone on Corinair who flies has heard about you two. I've got to say, it's an honor to meet you both. I'd love to hear about some of your flights some time."

Loki closed his eyes and shook his head. "No, you wouldn't."

"Sure!" Josh said. "What would you like to hear about?"

"Oh, man," Loki mumbled, shaking his head.

* * *

“Congratulations, Captain,” Lieutenant Telles said from the entrance to the captain’s ready room. “Your victory, although surprising, was well earned through the use of sound tactics.”

“We were victorious because twenty Falcons arrived just in time to save our butts,” Nathan said.

The lieutenant moved deeper into the ready room as he spoke. “Only because of your actions in the Darvano system, and your subsequent defeat of the Ta’Akar Empire. Without those victories, this one most certainly would not have been possible.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan admitted, not completely believing the lieutenant.

“A great leader always makes his decisions based on the greater goal, not the individual battle. You were prepared to let your world die in order to continue fighting for people you might never meet, but who need you to stand and protect them nonetheless.”

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. “Are you sure I wasn’t just afraid that we would lose, that we would all die and the Earth would die with us?”

“There is nothing wrong with fear, Captain,” Lieutenant Telles explained as he took a seat across from Nathan. “Fear increases adrenaline levels, sharpens our wit, energizes our muscles, quickens our heart and respiratory rates. Fear prepares us; keeps us alive, *if* we control it. *That* is what you did this day. Not only when you were willing to walk away from the battle, but when you destroyed that battle platform with perhaps thousands of Jung still on board.”

Nathan stared at Lieutenant Telles in disbelief.

The lieutenant squinted his eyes, unsure of the cause of the captain’s confusion. “Is something wrong?”

“This is the first time you sat down in this room,” Nathan explained, an eyebrow raised and a grin forming on his face. “I stopped inviting you to sit long ago, and now...”

“I can stand, if you prefer?”

"No, no, no, it's quite all right. I actually prefer that you sit. I'm just a little stunned, that's all."

"Perhaps I am becoming accustomed to the less than formal command style that exists aboard this vessel."

"That's good."

"Still, it is a shame that we were not able to utilize the resources of that platform. They were surely significant."

"The risk was too great," Nathan said. "It is far less complicated this way."

"Then you do not feel any remorse for taking their lives."

"They attacked us, Lieutenant... without provocation and in the end without mercy. They have killed millions of my people, and decimated my world. They got what they deserved."

Lieutenant Telles cocked his head to one side. "Vengeance, Captain?"

"Perhaps."

"A dangerous emotion, to be sure."

"Perhaps," Nathan admitted. "Perhaps it is much like fear," he added, "a tool... effective when used properly."

"Perhaps," the lieutenant agreed.

"Captain?" Major Prechitt called from the entrance.

"Major," Nathan answered as both he and Lieutenant Telles stood.

"Captain, Lieutenant, I'd like to present Major Galen McCullum of the Corinari, leader of the flight of four zero twos. Major, Captain Nathan Scott of the Earth Defense Force, and Lieutenant Lucius Telles of the Ghatazhak."

"A pleasure to meet you sir," Major McCullum said as he shook the captain's hand. He turned to Lieutenant Telles to greet him as well. "Lieutenant, I must say, I never expected to be shaking the hand of a Ghatazhak. From what I have heard, I am honored to meet you as well."

"The honor is mine, sir," Lieutenant Telles answered.

"I cannot tell you how happy we all are to see you, Major," Nathan exclaimed as he sat down again. "Please, gentlemen, sit."

"I'm not sure you want us to, Captain," Major McCullum said. "I've been in that cockpit for nearly three days."

Nathan gestured for him to sit. "Please, get comfortable. I want to hear all about it. What is going on back in the Pentaurus cluster, on Corinair and Takara? What assistance is the Alliance able to send? I assume that the Data Ark cores arrived safely?"

"I'm afraid that I don't have such answers for you, Captain. My men and I were only recently hired by Commander Dumar to pilot the first batch of four zero twos back to Earth. To be honest, we hadn't expected to arrive in the middle of a fight, especially against a ship of such enormity."

"Yes, the Jung seem to like extremely large vessels," Nathan said.

"We were under the assumption that the Jung reinforcements were still a month or two away," the major explained.

"Yes," Nathan said, "that's what we thought when we sent word back to Takara. A lot has happened since then, and we have realized that much of our intelligence about the Jung was incorrect."

"Perhaps we can be of help. Our ships are quite well equipped for reconnaissance work."

"Rest assured, Major, we will utilize them." Nathan cocked his head in thought. "You said the first group. Are there more Falcons coming?"

"Ah yes, Falcons. I have heard of this Earth creature. An appropriate name for the four zero two. Indeed, Captain. Commander Dumar has acquired nearly one hundred of them, in various stages of disrepair. He believes he can get at least another twenty of them working in short order. The rest will require more extensive repairs that require the

fabrication of, in some cases, entire sections of the fuselage. Rest assured, however, that he and his crews are working on them with all due haste.”

“What else might we expect in the way of assistance?” Nathan asked.

“I’m afraid that I don’t know all the details to that, either,” the major confessed. “However, I was instructed to give you this,” he added as he pulled a small, metallic case out of his flight suit pocket. “Each of us was given one of them and instructed to turn it over to you upon our arrival. I am told to instruct you to view the file in private so that you can decide for yourself what information should be shared with your subordinates.”

“Have any of you seen what is on the file?” Nathan wondered.

“No, sir,” the major assured him. “For security reasons, Prince Casimir had the containers keyed to your bio-signature. If anyone else tries to open any of the containers, the contents will disintegrate in seconds.”

“I can’t wait,” Nathan said as he took the container from the major.

“Captain,” Major Prechitt began, “might I suggest that we create a second air wing, one for the Falcons, and put Major McCullum in charge of that wing.”

“Are you comfortable with that?” Nathan asked Major Prechitt.

“I’ve known the major for many years, Captain. We have served together on several occasions, and I have the utmost confidence in his abilities.”

“And you, Major?” Nathan asked, this time looking at Major McCullum.

“That would be fine, sir. However, there is the matter of what entity myself and my men are to be attached. We all gave up our commissions in the Corinari in order to join Commander Dumar’s expedition. Technically, I have no rank over the other pilots in my flight.”

"Yet they still followed your command in battle," Nathan commented.

"Which is why I chose him to lead the new air wing, assuming you approve of its formation," Major Prechitt added.

"Of course, of course," Nathan agreed. "I'd be happy to have you command the Falcon air wing, Major McCullum."

"Thank you, Captain."

"As to your rank, for now, you and your men will be attached to the Aurora, as members of my crew. We're still working on what military entity we are going to be from this point forward. A few technicalities in Earth law to straighten out yet. However, for expediency's sake, I suggest that you and your men retain whatever ranks you had as members of the Corinari, at least until we decide what to do."

"That would suit us fine, sir," Major McCullum agreed. "We can start the reconnaissance flights as soon as you like."

"It might be best if you and your men took a day off, Major," Nathan suggested. "You did just finish a three-day flight. Better you get some rest, get acclimated to your new surroundings, get settled into your new quarters. Besides, I'd like to start with a thorough sweep of our own system before I send your ships out on interstellar recon."

"As you wish, sir."

"Come," Major Prechitt said to Major McCullum. "I'll show you around."

"It was a pleasure meeting you both," Major McCullum said as they turned to exit.

"The pleasure was mine," Nathan answered.

"Hey, what was it that your flight instructor used to call you?" Major Prechitt asked Major McCullum as they headed for the exit.

"Why?"

"You need a call sign."

"What's a call sign?" Major McCullum wondered.

“Old Earth pilot tradition,” Major Prechitt explained as they disappeared through the hatch.

“I expect you will want to view that file without delay,” Lieutenant Telles said as he turned to exit as well. “I’ll let the good sergeant know that you do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Nathan sat down as the lieutenant pulled the hatch closed behind him. He looked at the container in his hand. It was slightly scuffed, and had body oils and fingerprints on the shiny silver case. The case was rectangular, a little less in length than his palm and fingers. He pressed the release, and the case opened. Inside was another device about the size and shape of his thumb. At one end it had what looked like a holo-emitter similar to the ones in the conference table in the Aurora’s command briefing room. He looked inside the case again. There was a small note that read, ‘place on floor and activate.’ Nathan followed the instructions, coming out from behind his desk and placing the device on the floor in the middle of his ready room. He pressed the one and only button on the device and stepped back. Seconds later, the image of Prince Casimir of Takara appeared before him, full size and looking every bit as real as the men who had just stood in that same spot moments ago. However, he was not moving.

Nathan examined the image for several seconds, fighting the urge to pass his hand through it. He waited for several seconds, looking right and left, wondering when the image was going to speak. “Are you going to say something?”

“Ah, Nathan, it is good to see you, so to speak,” Prince Casimir began.

Nathan’s head jerked back in surprise, not expecting the image to react to his voice. “Tug?”

“I wish I could be there in person,” the image of Prince Casimir continued, paying no attention to Nathan, *“to fight side by side once again. I still believe that my people, the*

people of the Pentaurus sector, and I, all owe you and your crew more than we can ever repay. Unfortunately, times are difficult in the cluster. We are under great pressure to protect the worlds that the empire had stripped of their own defenses against raiders and pirates from outside the region. With only a few warships left, and even fewer of them equipped with jump drives, the task is difficult. The Avendahl is forced to jump regularly from system to system in order to maintain enough of a presence to discourage such attacks. Furthermore, the nobles that make up the new Takaran Parliament are less than pleased with the challenging new economic environment in which their own profits are no longer guaranteed. They are uncomfortable with the idea of funneling precious resources away from Takara toward Earth, for fear of being left with too little to fill their own coffers.” Prince Casimir looked down at the floor and sighed, then looked up again. “It is of my own doing, I suppose. Had I not moved so hastily and broken up the empire, the nobles might have been more cooperative. I am quite sure that their reluctance is driven more by their desire to punish me than to protect themselves. If they truly wished to protect themselves, they would pick up a weapon and join the fight. I truly regret that in my haste to prove to the families of all the fallen Karuzari that their sacrifices were not in vain, that I have now put the welfare of those that gave us our freedom at risk. Unfortunately, freedom for all worlds was the only end game that made sense, and to accomplish that goal, I had to step down as the sole leader of the Takar system. For the difficulties that this decision has caused you, I offer my sincerest apologies. Furthermore, I swear to you that I will do everything within my power to support you and your efforts to not only free your world, but also to rid the galaxy of the Jung threat.”

Casimir’s image appeared to turn and walk several steps to the left, although his image remained in the same position within the captain’s ready room. He stopped beside

a large view screen that came to life as he came beside it. *"Despite the restrictions placed upon me by the Takaran Parliament, I have devised a way to provide support for you and your cause. My old friend, Maxwell Dumar, has resigned his commission in the Takaran military. As per Takaran custom, he has been given a substantial retirement in the form of a lump sum payment. In addition, I have liquidated the majority of my family's holdings in order to provide him with additional funding. I have also convinced the Corinairan government to return the Karuzara asteroid base to the Karuzari Nation, which, according to the Alliance treaty, still existed. Maxwell Dumar is now the president of the Karuzari Nation, and is the commander of the Karuzara asteroid base. He has purchased many four zero two deep space interceptors from the Palee spacecraft scrap yards, as well as a few dozen of the old interplanetary utility freighters commonly known as 'boxcars'. If you are watching this recording, then you already know of the first group of twenty four zero twos. I promise, many more are soon to follow. The plan is this..."* Prince Casimir pointed to the image on the view screen next to him. *"This is the Darvano system. I have determined that in just over two months, a window of opportunity will appear that will not come about again for quite some time."* The image of the Darvano system began to shrink as Casimir continued to speak. *"At that point in time, the Karuzara asteroid's orbit around the Darvano star will put it on the perfect trajectory for the Palamor system, just over forty-seven light years away. The plan is to install a massive emitter array around the Karuzara asteroid and jump her, in ten light year increments, to the Palamor system. There, she will intercept the orbit of one of Palamor's super massive gas giants and use it to alter the Karuzara asteroid's trajectory onto a course for its next gravity assist maneuver in the Jenalaya system, one hundred and twenty-six light years away."* Casimir turned to face the camera again. *"You see, Captain,*

I intend, through a series of carefully plotted jumps and gravity assist maneuvers, to bring the asteroid base, with all of its considerable resources, directly to you. It should provide you with a substantial base of operations. Furthermore, Commander Dumar has acquired additional resources in the form of consumables, medical supplies, and personnel of all disciplines—the majority of which are from Corinair, I might add—to both staff the asteroid base and supplement your own crews as well. Assuming that our rather ambitious plan to jump the Karuzara asteroid base all the way to Sol succeeds, it should provide all the resources needed to survive until such time as I can send more substantial aid, hopefully in the form of jump-equipped warships."

The view screen went dark and Prince Casimir moved back to his right, as if returning to the point in the room at which he had started his message. *"Stored on the data bank of this device are detailed reports, personnel rosters, resource inventories, fabrication capabilities, and time frames. This should help you to understand exactly what the Karuzara facility is capable of so that you can plan how best to utilize it. I urge you to include Commander Dumar in your planning, as he is most skilled in matters of combat strategy and intelligence. More importantly, besides yourself, he is the one person in this universe that I trust completely. He is, for all intents and purposes, an extension of myself, speaking and acting on my behalf, with full authority."*

Casimir took in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. *"I do so wish I was there with you now, Nathan. Soon, using the technology used in the enhanced jump shuttle that brought the data cores to Takara, we shall create a network of jump-equipped comm drones that will give us near real-time communications capabilities. Until then, I wish you the best of luck. Just hold on a little longer, Captain. Help is on the way."*

The hologram faded away, and the device shut off. Nathan, who had been leaning against the front of his desk during Casimir's speech, stepped forward and picked up the device and looked at it. He smiled, then moved back behind his desk and activated the intercom. "Comms, get me President Scott at NAU Command."

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Bryant reported.

Commander Dumar looked up at the massive view screen that covered the front bulkhead of the Karuzara's main control room. The screen had gone black as it waited for new sensor input from which to redraw its map representing the asteroid's current position.

"Position report!" Mister Bryant ordered.

"Arrays are coming up now!" the navigation controller answered.

"Emitters at zero energy," the array controller reported.

"Energy banks also show zero," the next controller added.

"Reactors are normal," the power systems controller followed.

"All stations appear normal, sir," Mister Bryant reported. "Sensors are coming online now."

Dumar watched as the main view screen began to display computer-generated images as data from the asteroid's many sensor arrays began to pour into the navigational computers. First, an icon representing the star Palamor, then the super massive gas giant they were rapidly approaching. One by one, symbols for the rest of the planets in the system began to appear.

"Position verified," the navigation controller announced. "On course for counter orbit around Palomar Three. Expect gravity assist maneuver to begin in three hours and forty-seven minutes."

"We're right on course," Mister Bryant said with obvious satisfaction.

"That was only our fifth jump, Mister Bryant," Commander Dumar said. "We still have one hundred and eight jumps to go."

"Yes, sir."

"How long until the scout ship is ready to launch?"

"Two more days, I believe."

"We'll be well beyond Takaran charted space by then," Dumar said. "I'd feel a lot more comfortable if we had someone clearing our arrival points before we jump into them. I don't want to discover another budding singularity like the Aurora did."

"No sir," Mister Bryant agreed. "That would definitely ruin our day. Still, you have to admit, it's starting to look like this crazy plan might actually work."

"Perhaps," Dumar said, "but I'll be more confident after we get the maneuvering systems installed and working."

"Mister Delaney assures me that his crews will complete the task on schedule," Mister Bryant told the commander, "and his opinion is certainly a well-qualified one."

"His experience is in fitting asteroids with single-use deceleration thrusters for the purpose of transferring them to orbits around Corinair. This is quite a different task altogether."

"I have faith in the old man," Mister Bryant stated with confidence.

"Let's hope your faith is not misplaced," Commander Dumar said as he turned to exit the control center.

* * *

Loki peered in through the doorway to the starboard pilot's briefing room prior to entering. The room was like a small auditorium, with progressively elevated rows of comfortable high-backed seats that formed an arc around

the room so that all the seats pointed directly at the podium. Behind the primary seating there was another level known as the gallery. It had four rows with ten seats in each row. Normally, it was covered by a retractable wall. Today, the wall was gone and half the gallery was filled with the additional flight crews from the sixteen four zero twos that had arrived the day before.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Josh called from behind.

"We don't usually attend these briefings," Loki said under his breath.

"What are you talking about? We've been to several of them."

"Not with this many people," Loki said.

Josh peered into the room from behind Loki. "Damn, there are a lot of people in here, aren't there." Josh pushed Loki forward. "Come on, let's find a seat."

Josh stepped around Loki and started heading for a pair of seats in the back row of the main section of the briefing room.

"Where are you going?" Loki asked, seeming slightly panicked.

"There's two seats over there, Loki."

"In the middle of everyone? Maybe we should sit in the back?"

"Why?"

"Humor me."

"Okay." Josh turned and followed his friend up the steps on the side of the room and up to the second to the last row in the gallery, taking two of the empty seats near a cluster of Corinari pilots who had been on board the Aurora since they had first left the Pentaurus cluster. "Kind of far back, isn't it?" he asked as they sat.

Loki looked across the rows of seats below. "Most of the four zero two crews are down front."

“You know, it is better back here,” Josh realized. “We can make smart comments and the CAG can’t hear us.”

“Just be quiet, Josh,” Loki warned. “There’s got to be a reason that Major Prechitt asked us to come to this briefing.”

“Yeah, it did seem kind of strange,” Josh agreed, “seeing as how we don’t have a ship, and all.”

Loki continued to scan the room. His brow furrowed slightly. He leaned toward Josh. “Why is everyone looking at us?”

“Because we’re famous, remember?” Josh waved at the some of the four zero two crews that were looking back toward them. “How’s it going, guys?”

“Oh, jeez, Josh,” Loki exclaimed. “You don’t even know them.”

“Hey, they’re looking at us, remember.”

“Remain seated!” Major Prechitt ordered as he entered the room with Major McCullum following close behind. Major Prechitt stepped up to the podium and immediately began to speak. “To those of you who have recently joined us, first I’d like to welcome you aboard. Second, I’d like to warn you that you might as well forget most of the combat tactics that you learned in the Corinari, as ninety percent of it won’t work in the Sol sector. The Jung are a completely different type of pilot. They fight to the death, they don’t believe in surrender, and they don’t believe in mercy. Luckily, the Jung seem to believe in quantity over quality, as most of the pilots that we’ve faced thus far were not that skilled. In addition, their ships, while fairly effective in space, are poorly designed for atmospheric flight. If you do run into a good pilot, get him to chase you down into the atmosphere and you’ll be able to fly circles around him. Of course, none of that really matters to those of you flying the four zero twos, as you’re better off using the jump and shoot approach rather than straightforward dogfighting. Do not let your instincts to engage the enemy in the traditional sense

take over. You've been blessed with jump drives. In combat, I strongly suggest you use them. I urge you four zero two crews to review the flight data from all of the Falcon's engagements. You'll learn quite a bit."

"Oh, don't let your head start swelling up," Loki said under his breath. He looked at Josh next to him, noticing the change in his posture and expression. "Too late."

"Incidentally," Major Prechitt continued, "the four zero twos will now be referred to as 'J-F-Four-Zero-Two Falcon', or 'Falcon' for short. We will be forming a second air wing specifically for the Falcons. This wing will be under the command of Major McCullum."

"That sucks," Josh mumbled as the major continued his briefing. "There can only be one 'Falcon'."

"I don't know," Loki disagreed, "I think it's pretty cool. Sort of an homage."

Josh looked at him. "A what?"

"A sign of respect."

"Yeah, right. None of those four zero twos will ever be *the* Falcon."

"I know, but I still think it's cool."

"What do you know? You think *math* is cool."

"That concludes my portion of this briefing," Major Prechitt said. "The Falcon crews will remain for their flight assignments from Major McCullum. The rest of you are dismissed."

"Well, that was certainly a waste of our time," Josh said as he rose from his seat.

"Yeah, it kind of was," Loki agreed, seeming surprised.

"Mister Hayes, Mister Sheehan," Major Prechitt called out, "you two should remain as well."

"Uh, oh," Loki said. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Josh objected as he took his seat again.

"Then why is the CAG coming over here?" Loki wondered. "Did you make a face at him or something?"

"I swear, I didn't do anything."

Major Prechitt came up and took a seat in the row directly in front of them, pulling the release lever at the base of the seat and rotating it around so he could face them as Major McCullum continued to brief the four zero two crews below.

"Major, why are we here?" Josh asked with some skepticism.

"You're here for two reasons. First, I want to give you a ship."

"What, like a shuttle or something?" Josh asked with disdain.

"We'll take it." Loki interrupted without hesitation. "Hey, at least we'd be flying."

"Actually, I was going to give you Major McCullum's ship."

"You're giving us another Falcon?" Josh asked in disbelief.

"I thought you said there was only one Falcon?" Loki mumbled.

"Shut up."

"Are you two finished?" the major asked.

"Sorry, sir," Loki said.

"What's the major going to fly?" Josh wondered.

"He's going to be too busy setting up a new air wing for now. He can fly one of the ships from the next batch. So, do you want it?"

"Hell, yes," Josh insisted.

"What about you, Loki?" Major Prechitt asked.

"A shuttle would be safer," Loki admitted, remembering all the times Josh had put them at extreme risk.

"Shut up!" Josh scolded. "He's in," he told the major.

"Yeah, I'm in."

"Great. There is a catch, however," the major warned.

"Let me guess, we're doing nothing but cold-coasts from now on," Josh surmised.

“Actually, we’re not even going to let you do that. You’ll be running support missions for now, until you finish basic flight training.”

“Uh, we already know how to fly, Major,” Josh pointed out.

“Actually, only Loki knows how to fly, Josh,” Major Prechitt explained. “You know how to pilot a ship. If you’re going to fly under Major McCullum’s wing, you’re going to need some additional training.”

Josh looked the major square in the eyes. “No disrespect intended, Major, but we all know that I can pilot just about anything better than anyone in this room, yourself included.”

Major Prechitt laughed. “You’ve never lacked in confidence, have you, Josh. Look, I’m not arguing that you’ve got amazing skills, but you need a better knowledge base to go with them. Think about it, Josh. Think about how much more amazing you’d be with the right training. Understanding the how and why of flight makes you a better pilot. It makes you able to think your way out of a dangerous situation instead of just relying on your instincts.”

Josh smirked slightly, then reluctantly nodded his agreement. “I guess I can understand what you’re saying.” Josh sighed. “It’s just that, well, you see, I’ve never really had much education, Major. Hell, I was flying ground hoppers when I was ten. Then shuttles, and then the harvester. To be honest, I don’t understand how half the shit in that cockpit works. I just know how to use it.”

“That’s my point,” Major Prechitt said, “and don’t worry about the holes in your education. Loki has already been through formal flight school, so he already knows everything except for the tactical stuff. He can help you through the science and math.”

“Math,” Josh moaned.

“Don’t worry, Josh,” Loki said, “they let you use calculators.”

“Here’s the thing,” Major Prechitt continued, “Once you pass, we’re prepared to offer you both commissions.”

“In the Corinari?” Josh exclaimed. “Uh, neither of us are from Corinair, remember?”

“The Corinari have disbanded,” Major Prechitt explained. “The nations of Corinair have joined together and formed a unified planetary government. The ways of the Corinari no longer serve the needs of the military that will be replacing them. That’s why so many of them are volunteering to join the Alliance.”

“So you’re offering us commissions in the Alliance?” Loki asked.

“Once you complete your training, yes.”

“So, we’re going to be officers?” Josh wondered, again appearing skeptical.

“Correct.”

“Commander Hayes,” Josh said. “I like the sound of that.”

“How about you start off as ensigns and work your way up like everyone else.”

“Will I outrank Marcus?” Josh wondered.

“Master Chief Taggart? Yes, you would.”

“I’m in,” Josh answered without delay.

“When did Marcus become a master chief?” Loki wondered.

“That’s right,” Josh realized.

“Technically, he hasn’t, yet. The captain is going to promote him and offer him the job as chief of the boat.”

“What about Master Chief Montrose?” Loki asked.

“He’s going to be reassigned to the Celestia.”

“The Celestia barely has a crew,” Loki said.

“She’ll be getting a bigger crew soon enough,” Major Prechitt explained. “She’s going to need a COB she can trust.”

"Yeah, Marcus would drive her nuts," Josh agreed.

"So you both agree to go through training?" Major Prechitt asked.

"Sounds good to me," Loki said.

"If it means I can give orders to Marcus, then hell yes," Josh agreed. "Are we going to fly at all in the meantime?"

"That's why you're here, to get your next assignment," the major explained. "You'll start your training in a week or two, as soon as we get the Falcon wing all settled in."

"Who's going to be our instructor?" Loki wondered.

"You're looking at him."

"Great," Josh moaned. "No offense, sir, but you can be kind of a dick sometimes."

"It might be best if you didn't start your military career off by insulting your instructor, Cadet Hayes," Major Prechitt said as he rose to leave. "Gentlemen."

"Real nice, Josh," Loki said as the major left the room. "Real nice."

"Hey, that's Cadet Hayes to you," Josh mumbled.

* * *

"Captain on deck!" the officer of the watch announced as Nathan entered the Aurora's flight operations center.

Nathan moved through the center of the space to the plotting table at the center of the room, where Major Prechitt and one of his aides were studying sensor readings displayed on one of the many view screens clustered around the overhead. "Something to show me, Major?"

"Yes, sir," Major Prechitt responded. "Right here," he added, pointing at the view screen.

"What is that? A debris field?"

"Mostly, yes," the major answered. "As you know, my people routinely perform after-action reviews of all combat data, comm traffic, and sensor records after every flight. These were from sensor downloads taken from the new

Falcons during their engagement with the battle platform. This is a debris field from one of the plasma torpedo impacts, either ours or the Celestia's—we haven't determined which as of yet. This sensor image here is from one of the Falcons, just after it micro-jumped clear of the platform and swung back around to jump in again. It's this object right here that is the problem," he said as he tapped on the screen to zoom in on the object in question.

"That doesn't look like debris," Nathan said with concern in his tone. "Its shape is too clean. How big is it?"

"About thirty-two meters, sir. We also see it in these sensor sweeps as well, all of them consecutive, right up to the point where the ship jumps back to reengage the platform." Major Prechitt showed each frame in rapid succession. "That particular object is not following the same path as the rest of the debris being blown away from the platform. It's steering a different course. Another Falcon caught glimpses of it as well, right up to the point it disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Or went to FTL," Major Prechitt said. "It's about the size and shape you'd expect for a comm-drone."

"So you think the platform got a final message out before it came apart." Nathan did not look happy. "And you're telling me this two days later?"

"My apologies, Captain. We're making things up as we go in regards to the four zero twos. It may take a few more days to get them fully integrated into our operational procedures. That's why I doubled-up the eyes on these sensor readings."

Nathan sighed. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. We couldn't have done anything about it anyway."

"We could try and track it, maybe knock it out of FTL and destroy it," Major Prechitt suggested.

"For all we know, it's one of many that were sent out," Nathan told him.

“When they receive that comm-drone, it will undoubtedly include battle data. Assuming that its target was the platform in the Alpha Centauri system—which is the general direction it was headed when it went into FTL—they’ll be able to analyze how we defeated the first platform and prepare a defense against that tactic.”

“Which means we have two choices,” Nathan said. “Either we come up with another way to take down a Jung battle platform, or go to Alpha Centauri and destroy the other one before that comm-drone reaches them.”

“Captain, so far, the Jung FTL technology appears to work in similar fashion to that used by the Takarans. The most prudent assumption would be that the Jung comm-drones are at least as fast as the Takaran comm-drones were before they began using ZPEDs as their power source. If that is the case, then...”

“I know,” Nathan interrupted, “that means we’ve got about two weeks.” Nathan sighed again, then looked at the major. “Got any other good news?”

* * *

“Tanna Control, Falcon Three One Eight,” Loki called over the radio.

“It’s a good thing that you usually do the talking,” Josh said as he prepared their ship for entry into the upper atmosphere of the planet. “I’d still be referring to us as ‘Falcon’.”

“*This is Tanna Control,*” the voice answered over the comms. “*Who is calling?*”

“Tanna Control, this is Falcon Three One Eight. We are about to enter your atmosphere, en route for the Terran settlement spaceport.”

“*There is only one Falcon,*” the controller argued.

“That’s what I said!” Josh exclaimed.

“Well, now there are more,” Loki replied over the comms, “a lot more.”

“What the hell is with the ‘three one eight’ bit anyway?” Josh wondered. “I mean, I understand ‘one eight’, but what’s with the ‘three’?”

“It was Lieutenant Telles’s idea,” Loki said. “If there are any Jung spies monitoring transmissions, it will appear as if there are hundreds of us.”

“Seriously?”

“Maybe it has something to do with translating from English to Jung or something, I don’t know.”

“Falcon Three One Eight, state the nature of your visit,” the Tannan controller demanded.

“Tanna, Falcon Three One Eight is here to speak with members of the Terran settlement leadership, and to deliver a request from Captain Scott to the leaders of Tanna.”

“Like they could do anything to stop us if we decided to buzz downtown or something,” Josh mumbled from the front of the cockpit.

“Don’t even think about it, Josh.”

“I was just making an observation, Loki.”

“Falcon Three One Eight. You are authorized to land at Terran settlement spaceport. Do not attempt flight to any other location until Tannan security forces have verified your identity. Do you understand?”

“Tanna Control, Falcon Three One Eight, understood. Proceeding directly to Terran settlement spaceport to await Tannan security forces.”

Josh smiled. “New SOPs dictate that we jump from orbit to the surface to save fuel and wear on the airframe.”

“I don’t know, Josh,” Loki disagreed. “We might spook them.”

“They’ve had shuttles jumping down for weeks now,” Josh insisted.

“You’ve got a point.”

“Besides, what are they going to do, shoot at us with guns?” Josh waited for several seconds for a response, then turned his head slightly as if to look back at his friend sitting behind him. “It’s protocol, remember?”

Loki sighed. “Plotting the jump,” he finally said. “Nose down three and reduce speed to land. Come right twenty.”

“Down three, right twenty, and decelerating hard,” Josh answered.

“This isn’t a combat jump, remember,” Loki warned. “We’ll jump in at five hundred meters on a twenty-kilometer final to the primary pad and sweep the area before we land.”

“No problem,” Josh agreed. “On course and speed.”

“Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump.”

* * *

Abby sat behind her makeshift desk inside one of the few solid structures in the Terran settlement on Tanna. She had been reviewing the proposed fabrication schedule for going on three Tannan hours. It was boring, mind-numbing work, but she had volunteered to work on the planning committee in the hope of not only helping the fledgling settlement, but also to be in a position to hear news of Earth as soon as it arrived. The settlement’s ‘town hall’ as it were, was located next to the spaceport that the Tannans had constructed before the first Terran refugees had even set foot on their world.

The Tannans had done a lot to help them. They were a technologically advanced society, but lacked the population necessary to support a large industrial base. Because of this, the Terrans were forced to fend for themselves with the resources eagerly provided by their hosts. It was a hard life, but it was safe.

“How does it look,” the young woman asked from the doorway to Abby’s office.

“Honestly, I don’t think we can do much better than what has already been proposed,” Abby said, offering the data pad to the woman. “Making more fabricators is not going to help unless the amount of processed material needed to keep them running is there, which it is not. I’m afraid we will have to make do with this schedule for now.”

“Then I should tell the director that the schedule is approved?”

“Might as well,” Abby answered.

A thunderous clap was heard in the distance. The young woman’s eyes grew wide with fear, remembering the sounds of Jung bombs falling on the Earth in previous attacks. “What was that?” she exclaimed.

“It was a jump flash!” Abby said as she jumped to her feet.

“Are you sure?” the young woman asked.

“Trust me!” Abby exclaimed as she ran out of the room.

Abby dashed through the outer office and into the corridor, dodging other workers as she headed for the main entrance. Bursting through the doors, she ran several meters before stopping to turn around and look skyward. In the distance, she could see a familiar black object heading rapidly toward the spaceport on the other side of the building.

A Terran patrol cart pulled up behind Abby. “Everything all right, ma’am?” the security officer inquired.

Abby spun around. “Can you take me to the pad? I need to speak to that flight crew.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the officer answered, recognizing the ID badge hanging from her blouse.

Abby ran around the cart and took a seat next to the officer, who immediately put the vehicle in motion. She kept her eyes on the approaching spacecraft. “It looks like the Falcon,” she exclaimed, more to herself than to the man driving the cart.

“I thought the Falcon was destroyed,” the officer said.

“It was,” Abby agreed as they passed through the outer gates of the spaceport, “but that sure looks like her.”

A minute later their cart came to a stop, barely far enough away from the main landing pad to avoid the jet wash of the approaching ship. Abby continued to watch in fascination and disbelief as the black shape rapidly grew larger. It was the Falcon, or at least it looked like it. There was, however, something different about it. “That’s not the Falcon,” she said.

“Are you sure?” the officer wondered. “It sure looks like the pictures I saw of her.”

“I’m sure, I think.”

Two large Tannan security vehicles pulled up on either side of them, their wheels locking up as they slid to a stop in the dirt. Ten armed men quickly jumped out of the back of the vehicles, moving into position to surround the landing pad.

Abby watched in dismay as an officer climbed down from the front cab of the vehicle and headed toward her.

“What’s going on?” the officer asked Abby.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know who is flying that spacecraft?” the Tannan officer inquired with suspicion.

“Not really, no,” Abby admitted.

“Did the Aurora have more than one Falcon?” he demanded.

“How would I know?” Abby answered, pretending to be ignorant. No one other than her immediate family knew of her involvement with the Aurora and its jump drive.

The Tannan officer looked at Abby with distrust. “Then why are you here?”

“I work for the settlement leadership,” Abby explained, holding her ID badge. “That is obviously a ship from the Aurora. I am here to see what news they bring of Earth!” she yelled over the scream of the approaching spacecraft’s descent turbines.

The Tannan officer grabbed hold of his hat to prevent it being blown away by the spacecraft's turbines as it settled down onto the landing pad. Its landing gear touched the pad and its descent turbines instantly went to idle, their jet wash diminishing in accordance.

Abby's eyes were on the cockpit as it began to open. The pilot removed his helmet and set it on the forward console glare screen, revealing a head covered with thick, untidy, blond hair. The pilot saw her and a grin came across his face as he waved excitedly.

"Oh, my God!" Abby exclaimed as she headed toward them.

"Stop!" the Tannan officer ordered.

Abby turned back toward the officer. "I know them!"

The Tannan officer looked confused, as did his subordinate next to him.

Josh quickly climbed down from the cockpit, jumping down the last step onto the landing pad. Loki was not far behind him.

"Josh!" Abby yelled as she ran to them.

Loki dropped from the last step built into the side of the spacecraft down to the pavement as Abby arrived and flung her arms around Josh.

"I'm so happy to see you!" Abby exclaimed.

"I didn't realize you'd missed us," Josh said, a surprised look on his face.

Abby immediately released Josh and proceeded to hug Loki as well. "I missed you both," she exclaimed.

"We hardly ever hung out," Josh said, still in shock at the doctor's greeting.

"Don't you understand," Abby said. "If you're here, and in another Falcon, that means the Earth survived."

Josh and Loki both looked at each other.

Abby noticed their exchange of glances. "The Earth did survive, right?"

"Oh, yeah, it survived," Loki assured her.

"It got the crap bombed out of it again, but it's still there," Josh added.

"What is this?" Abby asked, pointing at their Falcon.

"That is exactly what I would like to know," the Tannan officer said as he approached.

Loki pulled an ID card out of a pocket on his flight suit and handed it to the officer. "We're from the Aurora," Loki told the officer.

"But the Falcon was destroyed," the officer said.

"The first wave of reinforcements arrived from the Pentaurus cluster," Loki explained.

"The first wave?" Abby exclaimed, barely containing her excitement.

"Yes, ma'am," Josh added as he opened the control panel on the side of their interceptor and activated the security systems.

"We're here to deliver a message to the leaders of Tanna," Loki explained. "The message is from Captain Scott of the Aurora. Can you take us there?"

"I'm afraid not," the officer said as he handed the ID card back to Loki. "We are assigned to this sector. However, I can arrange transportation for you. It may take an hour or more, however."

"That's okay, we can wait," Loki assured him.

"You can wait with me," Abby told them. "My office is nearby, and I want to hear everything that has happened."

"Yes, ma'am," Loki answered. He turned to Josh. "Is it set?"

"Locked and armed," Josh answered.

Josh and Loki began to follow Abby to the security cart.

"I'd tell your men not to touch anything," Josh told the Tannan officer, "not if they want to make it home for dinner."

CHAPTER TWO

"As you were," Nathan said as he moved toward his seat at the head of the conference table in the Aurora's command briefing room. "As you might expect, we have several things to discuss this morning," he continued as he sat. "First off is the state of Earth. The bad news is that it's considerably worse off than it was before. The good news is that it could have been much worse."

"How?" Doctor Chen wondered.

"Only about fifty percent of the weapons used against the surface in the last attack were nuclear, so the amount of radioactive particulate matter in the atmosphere is not as heavy as we expected."

Doctor Chen looked bewildered. "Beg your pardon, Captain, but according to the reports that I'm getting from medical facilities on the surface, it's still pretty bad."

"Yes, it is," Nathan agreed. "But it could have been much worse. At this point, at least there *are* areas that are not yet affected by the fallout."

"Not yet," Cameron emphasized.

"The result of so many nuclear detonations in a short period of time has played havoc with the planet's normal weather patterns. Winds, temperatures, humidity, solar energy levels at the surface, all of it in a state of flux at the moment," Lieutenant Yosef explained. "This makes it very difficult to predict where the fallout will eventually spread with any degree of accuracy."

"Still, you have *some* idea, right?" Cameron wondered.

"An idea, yes," Lieutenant Yosef agreed, "and the people of Earth *are* basing their survival strategy on those forecasts, at least for the time being. Everyone just needs to remember that things are likely to change in the future."

"Understood," Nathan said, interrupting to take the conversation in another direction.

"Captain," Cameron interrupted, "shouldn't this require a bit more scrutiny on our part?"

"Actually, no," Nathan said in matter of fact tone. "The fact of the matter is that the Earth's recovery is not our mission, at least not at the moment."

"Captain..."

"Our mission is to prevent another attack, and if possible take away the Jung's ability to ever attack us again," Nathan said with conviction. "Is that understood?" he added, looking directly at Commander Taylor.

"Yes, sir."

Nathan looked at the faces of his command staff gathered around the table. "I want everyone to be absolutely clear about this. We have neither the capability nor the time to spend helping the Earth to recover. We have a war to fight. Granted, a war requires infrastructure and a working industrial base, but no matter what we do, that support is not going to come from the Earth within the next few months, perhaps years." He scanned their faces again, noting the impact of his words. "That being said, if there *is* something that we can do to assist the Earth, *and* it does not interfere with our primary mission, then of course we shall do so. Now, I have already spoken with President Scott about this and he is in agreement. The Jung are our number one priority at the moment."

Another glance about the table told Nathan that his command staff understood the situation. None of them liked it, he could see that in their faces. However, there was nothing he could do about it.

"I believe the commander is correct," Lieutenant Telles said. "The matter does require greater scrutiny. At least the question of *why* the Jung did not simply lay waste to your world. They obviously had, and still have the ordnance to do so. A few dozen well placed nukes could have rendered your world uninhabitable."

"An uninhabitable world would be of no use to the Jung," Cameron stated.

"Actually, it would," the lieutenant disagreed. "The Jung appear to be nearly as advanced as the Takarans in most areas. The Ta'Akar destroyed entire planetary civilizations in four separate instances. Each time, they used their technology to clean up those worlds and make them usable once more. In fact, the world of my birth is one reborn by a Ta'Akar cleansing."

"A cleansing?" Doctor Chen wondered. "Is that really what you call it?"

"I did not invent the term," Lieutenant Telles pointed out, "I am simply reporting the facts as accurately as possible." He turned back to the captain without waiting for further response from the doctor. "The Tannans also experienced an attack of such magnitude. Millions, if not billions, were killed by the original Jung invasion of their world. Yet millions were allowed to live, in order to provide the labor needed to clean and rebuild their world into one better suited to serve the needs of the Jung Empire."

"Then why didn't they do the same thing to Earth?" Vladimir asked.

Nathan sat motionless, his eyes shifting from speaker to speaker as he listened to each of their comments.

"I am convinced that the Jung wish to take your world, the birthplace of humanity, wholly intact," the lieutenant continued. "Look at the list of targets that were struck. Infrastructure, such as transportation and communications, power and water, sanitation, health care, agriculture, manufacturing..."

“Everything needed to maintain civilization,” Nathan said.

“Precisely,” Lieutenant Telles agreed. “And what was missing from the list?”

“Historical landmarks,” Jessica realized as she examined the list more closely.

“Indeed,” the lieutenant agreed, “as well as natural resources. The Jung wish to preserve that which makes the Earth a strategic asset. Its location—which obviously cannot be changed—its vast resources, and its historical and cultural significance to humanity.”

“Why would they care about the Earth’s significance to humanity?” Lieutenant Yosef wondered.

“Icons,” Doctor Chen explained. “They represent what we are, where we came from, the journey that we’ve all shared.”

“Something that is very important if your goal is to rule over all humans in the galaxy,” Lieutenant Telles added. “It was Caius’s biggest mistake. He tried to not only erase the past, but to change history altogether, in order to portray himself in a more favorable light. One cannot change the past. You see, Captain, it’s not just the Earth’s central location that drives the Jung’s obsession with capturing your world. I expect they believe that making the Earth their seat of power will help to unify all the worlds they fold into their empire. If they wipe it clean and start over, they will lose most of the psychological impact it would have on those they conquer.”

“Why now?” Doctor Chen asked, “why not ten years earlier, or twenty, or one hundred?”

“The Tannans said that most of the worlds in this sector believed that the Earth was still infected. The Jung may have been avoiding your world out of fear of re-exposure,” Lieutenant Telles explained.

“We didn’t start broadcasting radio signals again until a little over two hundred years ago,” Nathan added. “Once

the Jung began to pick up our broadcasts, they knew.”

“Fleet intel believed that Jung spies had been on Earth since before the discovery of the Data Ark,” Jessica said. “However, they only have evidence of their presence as far back as forty years ago.”

“Jung interest in your world no doubt grew after the discovery of your Data Ark,” Lieutenant Telles said.

“So they are after the Ark as well,” Cameron said.

“We’ve barely scratched the surface of what is stored in those data cores,” Nathan reminded them. “Remember, the foundation was deciding what technologies to release, and in what order.”

“All in the name of protecting us from ourselves,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic mumbled.

“Let’s not go there,” Nathan warned. “We’re already wandering from the primary purpose of this meeting, which is to decide what to do next.”

“The point I was trying to build to, was that the goal of the Jung works to our advantage,” Lieutenant Telles said. “The Jung warrior culture seems to follow orders, even if it means dying. They have a very strong sense of honor and service. If, in fact, they were ordered not to destroy the Earth, then they will do everything they can to capture it.”

“But we have already witnessed the contrary,” Nathan argued. “In fact, three separate commanders have ordered the all-out bombardment of the planet.”

“Have they?” the lieutenant asked. “Or do we just perceive it as such?”

“Frankly, I don’t really care,” Nathan answered. “Our job is to see that they don’t get another chance, one way or the other.” Nathan looked around the room briefly. “To that end, I have decided that we must attack the battle platform currently in the Alpha Centauri system.”

“Captain,” Vladimir objected, “we are in no shape to go on the attack...”

“We have damage, yes,” Nathan agreed, “but we’re still eighty percent battle effective, and the Celestia is seventy percent battle effective. And now we have the additional Falcons as well.”

“But why so quickly?” Cameron wondered.

“Major,” Nathan said, signaling Major Prechitt.

Major Prechitt picked up the remote from the conference table and activated one of the large view screens on the wall of the compartment. “While reviewing the sensor logs from the four zero twos during their engagement with the battle platform over Earth, we discovered these images.” He pressed another button on the remote, causing computer-enhanced sensor images of the Jung comm-drone to appear. “We’re pretty sure that it’s a Jung comm-drone. It went to FTL shortly after these images were captured. Its course indicated a destination of the Alpha Centauri system.”

“How fast was it going when it went to FTL?” Cameron asked.

“At least half light,” the major answered.

“The fastest we’ve seen the Jung FTL drives travel is twenty times light,” Nathan said.

“Since the Jung linear FTL systems appear to be comparable to those of the Ta’Akar, it might be best to assume a similar capability,” Lieutenant Telles suggested.

“My thoughts as well,” Nathan agreed. “That’s why we need to attack within sixteen days.”

Vladimir groaned and lowered his head. “I see very little sleep in my immediate future.”

“You’re assuming their comm-drones can travel one hundred times light, just like the Takaran comm-drones,” Cameron said.

“Precisely,” Nathan agreed, “and when that drone reaches the Centauri battle platform, they’ll know how we defeated the first battle platform.”

“And they’ll develop a defense against our tactics,” Cameron finished for him.

“Which is why we need to destroy that battle platform before the drone arrives.”

“What will the comm-drone do if there is no one in the Centauri system to receive the message?” Jessica wondered.

“Under such circumstances, a Takaran comm-drone would either continue on toward the closest appropriate destination, or to military command in the Takar system,” Lieutenant Telles said. “It would be reasonable to assume that the Jung comm-drones would be programmed in similar fashion.”

“Which is why I propose that after we destroy the Centauri battle platform, we systematically seek out and destroy all Jung military assets within twenty light years of Earth,” Nathan added.

“You’re declaring war?” Doctor Chen asked, somewhat surprised.

“The Jung already declared war,” Nathan said, “that much is obvious. I am simply responding in kind.”

“Why twenty light years?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

“For now, we’re operating under the assumption that twenty light is their maximum FTL speed,” Nathan explained. “If we clear out a twenty light year sphere of space around Sol, that will buy the Earth at least one year to recover before the next attack.”

“The more likely result will be several years,” Lieutenant Telles corrected, “when you consider the additional time it will take for word of the destruction of those assets to reach Jung command, and for the responding ships to be dispatched and finally reach your world.”

“That could take decades,” Cameron realized.

“Doubtful,” Nathan disagreed.

“Agreed,” Lieutenant Telles said. “For the Jung to effectively rule over an area as large as the Sol sector, they would have to empower local commanders to make

decisions without consulting Jung command. In addition, we may find far more Jung assets within that twenty light year sphere than one might imagine. If what Lieutenant Commander Nash said about spies on Earth is correct, the Jung have been planning the takeover of Earth since long before any of us were born. Possibly before any of our parents were born."

"Then you agree that we must clear all Jung assets from the immediate area of Earth," Nathan said, looking directly at the lieutenant.

"At the very least," Lieutenant Telles agreed, "however, I would not stop at twenty light years, Captain."

"Do not worry, Lieutenant," Nathan answered. "I don't intend to."

* * *

"Captain?" Josh called from the entrance to the captain's ready room.

"Josh," Nathan called, looking up from his desktop view screen, "Loki, or should I say, Ensigns Hayes and Sheehan?"

"Not yet, sir," Loki answered, "and thank you for that, by the way."

"No thanks required, gentlemen. You two have certainly earned the positions. How was your trip to Tanna?"

"No problems," Josh insisted.

"It went well, sir," Loki added, knowing that the captain wanted more information than his friend had offered. "In fact, we were met by Doctor Sorenson."

"Yeah, was she ever happy to see us. Hugged us and all."

"I think it was more that seeing us meant that we, I mean, the Aurora, and probably the Earth as well, had not been destroyed," Loki elaborated. "We spent a couple of hours filling her in on all that's happened in the last four

days. Apparently, ever since the evacuations stopped, no one knew whether or not the Earth had been destroyed.”

“She said it was the worst four days of her life,” Josh added.

“I’ll bet,” Nathan agreed. “What about the evacuees? Are they doing all right?”

“As far as I could tell,” Loki answered. “I mean, they’re mostly living in tents and such, using public showers, latrines, mess halls... it’s like a military encampment there. It is in a nice area, though. Next to a river and a small lake, about fifty kilometers outside of the city.”

“Did you meet with the Tannan leaders?” Nathan asked.

“Eventually, yes,” Loki continued. “We had to wait for a security detail to come out and escort us into the city.”

“We even had to go through a medical screening,” Josh said with obvious distaste. “Loads of fun, that was.”

“They’ve been keeping the Terran population separate from the Tannans,” Loki explained, “at least for the time being. Even the Tannan security forces assigned to keep an eye on the Terran camps are being kept from the main Tannan population. They’re awfully nervous about it.”

“Understandably,” Nathan commented, “but you were able to speak with them? The leaders?”

“Yes, sir. Right after we cleared medical. Even then, they made us wear masks,” Loki explained. “We delivered your request, as well as the briefing about what happened during the engagement with the Jung battle platform, according to the outline you gave us.”

“They were amazed that we weren’t all wiped out,” Josh added.

“He’s not exaggerating, Captain,” Loki agreed. “At first, I thought they didn’t believe us.”

“I’m still not sure they do,” Josh added.

“They got excited when we told them about the help arriving from the Pentaurus cluster,” Loki said.

“That’s exactly what I had hoped,” Nathan said. “I don’t suppose they gave you any idea of how much they might be able to help us out?”

“No, sir,” Loki answered. “They said they needed to hold some meetings to discuss the situation. They asked us to return tomorrow.”

Nathan rubbed his chin. “I guess that’s to be expected.”

“Why wouldn’t they help us?” Josh wondered. “I mean, it’s either us or the Jung, and I’m pretty sure the Jung would just erase them all.”

“It’s not always that simple,” Nathan told him. “People, especially political leaders, have to balance long-term goals against the immediate needs of their people. The two don’t always agree.”

“In this case, I’m pretty sure it’s either fight with us now or die an ugly death later,” Josh insisted.

“You left out the third possibility, Josh,” Nathan said. “Both of the above.”

* * *

Deckhands, technicians, and general staffers alike all crowded into the Karuzara’s number four hangar bay. Word of the return of one of their four zero twos had spread throughout the asteroid base with alarming speed. The arriving interceptor could barely make it out of the transfer airlock without running over someone.

The spacecraft rolled to a stop, its canopy opening. The pilot waved a single time at the crowd of people packed into the bay. The ground crew rolled the boarding ladder up to the side of the ship and climbed up to assist the flight crew as the ship’s systems powered down to rest.

“Welcome home, sir!” an eager flight technician greeted as he took the pilot’s helmet from him. “Did you make it? Did you make it back to Earth? Did you find the Aurora?”

"Hold on," the pilot exclaimed as he climbed out of the cockpit.

"I don't think they can wait, sir."

The pilot stood at the top of the ladder, looking out at the crowd of people. "We made contact with the Aurora! She is alive and well, as is the Earth!"

The crowd erupted in cheer.

"More or less," the copilot said to the flight technician as he climbed out of the back seat.

"We need to speak with Commander Dumar immediately," the pilot told the flight technician.

"Yes, sir."

"Get this ship ready to depart," the copilot added. "We takeoff as soon as we finish with the commander."

* * *

"They agreed to provide whatever assistance they could," Loki said as he, Josh, and Abby walked across the hard-packed ground toward their Falcon jump-fighter.

"That's not surprising," Abby said. "The Tannans may be keeping us separate from the main population, but they have been providing us with whatever we need. They are good people."

"I think they just want to be sure the Alliance will be here to protect them when the Jung return," Josh said.

"Can you blame them?" Loki asked.

"You know, many of the refugees are already talking about returning to Earth," Abby told them.

"If they saw the videos streaming up from the surface, they wouldn't be," Josh commented. "The place is messed up right now. Makes Haven look like paradise."

"Surely it's not that bad *everywhere*," Abby commented.

"It's not," Loki insisted. "He's exaggerating, as usual."

"The hell I am."

"A lot of it has been turned into wasteland," Loki admitted, "but many large cities remain untouched by the fallout."

"Until the winds shift," Josh added.

"*If* the winds shift," Loki corrected. "Still, though, the unaffected cities are rapidly turning into chaos themselves as refugees from the devastated areas migrate to them."

"Seriously, Doc, you should tell anyone who says they want to go home to wait awhile," Josh said.

"That much he *is* right about," Loki agreed.

"It won't be easy," Abby told them. "People want to go home. They want to help rebuild their world."

"Then tell them to stay here and help the Tannans gather resources to send back to Earth. No need to put more people on a world that can't even support the ones already there."

"We're only talking about a few thousand people at the most," Abby said.

"I'll let the captain know," Loki told her, "but I wouldn't count on anything soon. He has enough to think about these days... Like how to get Tannan aid back to Earth. Besides, he still has to deal with the battle platform in the Centauri system."

"Of course." Abby stopped. "Well, I guess I'll see you guys sometime."

"We'll be back," Josh told her.

"The Tannan leaders asked us to bring them a list of resources the Earth needs most."

"And we seem to be the captain's favorite messengers," Josh added as he climbed up the steps in the side of their Falcon's nose.

Loki rolled his eyes and smiled, then he too turned to climb up into the back seat of the jump ship's cockpit.

"Be safe."

"You're forgetting who my pilot is," Loki said as he took his seat.

“Hey, I’m Mister Safety, I am.” Josh waved at Abby. “See you later, Doc.”

Abby turned and walked away as the Falcon’s turbines began to spin up. Once she had reached a safe distance, she turned back around to watch the ship lift off. The Falcon’s canopy closed, sealing her flight crew inside the nose of the jump ship, just as its engines began to increase in intensity and pitch. Dust swirled about, forcing Abby to look away as the Falcon began to rise off the packed dirt landing pad. It ascended slowly, rotating to starboard and drifting away from her until it finally pitched its nose upward and began to accelerate into the sky. Within seconds, the ship was nearly too small for Abby to see. Finally, it disappeared in a flash of white light barely visible against the pale lavender evening skies of Tanna. Her eyes fell back down to the ground as she remembered the words of her father just before their first jump test. If only he knew just how much his invention had already changed everything... even the lives of his own family.

* * *

Prince Casimir sat back as the attendant refilled his glass. He looked across the table at his daughters, both impeccably dressed with their hair perfectly coiffed. It had been more than half a Takaran year since he had brought them both to their true home. His oldest, Deliza, had made the transition with ease, taking advantage of the technical and educational opportunities her new home had offered. His youngest, however, Nalaya, was having a more difficult time. She had grown quite attached to the Montrose family back on Corinair, despite the relatively brief time she had spent with them. She had grown somewhat more introverted than before. The loss of her mother, and all that she had known on Haven, had been much for a child of such a young age to endure. She said little these days, speaking

only when spoken to, and even then saying only what was required of her. Casimir knew it would take time. He missed the carefree little girl she had once been, covered with dust, playing in the molo patches on their farm on Haven.

"Did you hear me, father?" Deliza inquired from the other end of the dining table.

Casimir snapped out of his thoughts. "Apologies, Deliza. My mind drifted for a moment."

"I was saying that the data copy is ahead of schedule," she repeated for him.

"That is good news," Casimir commended.

"Your daughter has been of great assistance," Yanni added. "She has a unique ability to understand ancient Earth algorithms. Most of the senior computer programmers of Takara seem unable to understand them."

"It's because they are too stuck in their ways," Deliza explained. "They look at code from a static perspective, one formed by years of rigid thinking and processes."

"Yes," Casimir agreed, "my oldest daughter has never been accused of 'rigid' thinking."

"There is a wealth of technological information within those cores, Father," Deliza said. "Things that we have only dreamed of in theory. Once we have completed the translations, we could literally feed specifications into our fabricators and begin producing much of what is described."

"I thought we were more advanced than the Terrans?" Casimir wondered.

"More so than the Terrans of today, yes," Deliza explained, "but not those from before the great plague."

"Our people left the core worlds during the initial onset of the great plague, Deliza. How is it that we did not already have this information in our own data banks?"

"As I understand it, much of the technology was either classified by various governments, or was under patents at the time of the plague," Yanni explained. "Even the Terrans

of today do not have access to those files, as they are all encrypted.”

“Luckily, our security and encryption systems are far more advanced,” Deliza added. “It has been easy to bypass the security algorithms and access the protected files.”

“So, all the technologies are more advanced than ours?”

“Not all, but many,” Deliza stated. “Anything that was open knowledge at the time of the plague our founders brought with them and have further developed over the centuries. Even some of the classified technologies of old Earth are now obsolete to us, as they have already been developed by Takaran scientists.”

“What about military technologies?” Casimir asked. “Weapons, space propulsion systems, shields... Surely if they were able to develop the jump drive...”

“The jump drive was an accident,” Deliza interrupted. “They didn’t even know they had discovered it at the time. They were trying to develop multi-layered shielding to reduce the wear imposed on the hulls of ships traveling faster than light in the hopes of prolonging their time between overhauls. A reactor accident occurred during a prototype test flight. It caused the outer shield to collapse, and at the same moment that the outer shield made contact with the inner shield, the reactor dumped a tremendous amount of energy into the emitter arrays. The micro-jump that it caused was considered to be a sensor anomaly at the time. It wasn’t until Abby’s father, Doctor Karlsen, discovered the inconsistency in the telemetry data from the test a thousand years earlier that the jump drive was even theorized. Even then, it took another twenty years to develop. Had it not been for the Jung threat, he probably would never have received funding. It was that far beyond anything the current people of Earth had ever dreamed possible.”

“You did not learn of this from the Ark,” Casimir said.

"I asked Abby many questions during my time on the Aurora," Deliza admitted sheepishly.

"Of that I have no doubt."

A tall man in military uniform entered the dining room from behind Deliza. Casimir immediately noticed the officer and gestured for him to approach.

"Forgive the intrusion, sir," the officer begged as he approached. "I thought this of sufficient urgency," he added as he handed the small tablet to the prince.

Casimir looked over the tablet, his brow furrowing, obvious concern on his face. "They have landed?" he asked the officer.

"Yes, sir. They will clear medical shortly."

"Bring them to my office once they do," Casimir ordered as he handed the tablet back to the officer. "I wish to speak with them directly."

"Yes, sir," the officer answered as he took the tablet and stepped back to depart.

Deliza and Yanni both watched the officer depart, then looked at one another.

"Something wrong?" Deliza asked.

"It seems we have received an update from the Aurora."

Deliza became concerned. "How are they? Is everything alright? Did they manage to escape with the Celestia?"

"It seems that things have become more complicated than expected," Casimir said as he patted his lips with his napkin. "I'm afraid I must cut our dinner short," he added as he rose. "I trust you will see to Nalaya?"

"Of course, Father."

"Thank you for joining us, Yanni," Casimir said.

"It was my pleasure, sir. Thank you for inviting me."

"I trust you will keep me informed of your progress?"

"Of course," Yanni promised.

"Please, all of you, take your time and finish your meal," Casimir insisted as he headed for the exit. "We shall do this again soon."

* * *

"I have the president on comms now, sir," Naralena said over the intercom.

"Put him on my viewer, please," Nathan instructed. The view screen on the wall of his ready room came to life, revealing President Scott of the North American Union. Nathan felt his heart sink. It had been only a few days since he had last spoken with his father, but he appeared to have aged a decade within that time. His eyes were sunken with dark bags, his hair disheveled, his shirt stained with more than a single day of wear. He swallowed hard. "Sir?"

"Nathan," his father said, turning toward the camera to look directly at him. He turned away again, speaking to someone off camera. *"Tell them I will speak to them shortly."* He turned his attention back to the camera. *"How are you?"*

"I should be asking you that question," Nathan answered. "Have you gotten any sleep lately?"

"Not enough, I'm sure. Your sister nags me incessantly on the very same subject."

"I was wondering if you had found the time to prepare a list of the resources the Earth needs to help with its recovery?"

"List?" His father laughed. *"A list would be a waste of time. It would be easier to just say 'everything'."*

"That bad?"

"No." His father hung his head down for a moment. *"I suppose if your mother were still alive, she would tell me it could have been worse, although at this point it is difficult to imagine how."* He looked back up at the camera as he continued to speak. *"We have the means to rebuild, we even have the resources. What we lack is unity. There is so much chaos... even more so than before, if you can imagine that. The Jung have crippled most of our major infrastructure. People are flocking to those cities whose*

infrastructures still operate, but in doing so they will only cause them to overload and collapse. Some cities have begun turning away refugees, even shooting them down in the streets in order to continue to provide for their own. Panic is the only common denominator at the moment. It is everywhere. I have given up on trying to convince the masses otherwise. Food, water, shelter... we can only worry about the absolute basics right now. Medical care only exists in pockets... mostly in the major cities that were lucky enough to escape both direct attack and the effects of the fallout. Sewage? Sanitation? They no longer exists in most places, certainly not in Winnipeg. We are lucky enough to have power, but that is being taxed to its limits as well." The president's head hung down again. *"The worst thing is the smell. The smell of death lingers everywhere."* He raised his head once more as he continued. *"Every major population center has set up massive pits outside of the cities in which to burn the dead, but the smell always finds its way back into the city itself."*

"Do we have any idea how many died?" Nathan wondered.

"Does it matter?" his father said. *"Certainly in the millions. We'll probably never know for sure."*

Nathan felt he could hear a million tears in his father's sigh. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Yes. Just don't let them hit us again."

"That was my plan."

"You asked what we needed most, Nathan? We need order. I would declare martial law in a heartbeat, but I have no forces with which to do so. No one does. Those with guns are taking the streets... mostly to take what they need from those who cannot defend what they have. The killing did not stop when you defeated those ships in orbit. It just changed hands."

"I have asked for more Ghatazhak," Nathan told him. "However, I'm not sure how the people of Earth will feel

about having them roaming the streets of Earth after the evacuation facility massacre.”

“Better than the armed thugs that are killing them now.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan answered. He looked at his father’s weary face. “Please, father, do as Miri asks. Get some rest. You are no good to the people of Earth without a clear head.”

“Perhaps,” his father answered with a wry smile. *“Perhaps.”*

* * *

“In light of the recent news from Earth, I beg you all to reconsider your timeline,” Casimir pleaded. He scanned the faces of the members of the Takaran Security Council, none of which showed the slightest hint of emotion. Decades of anti-aging serum and the protection of Caius had lulled them all into a sense of invulnerability that he was finding impossible to overcome.

“Much of Answare itself still lies in ruins,” Lord Dahra said, “and yet you still ask your people to send their resources across the galaxy.”

“I ask them to honor those who put themselves, and the well-being of their own world, behind that of Takara and the rest of the Pentaurus cluster,” Casimir explained. “I ask them to honor those who gave their very lives in the defeat of Caius...”

“You have already sent an entire asteroid and a fleet of ancient interceptors toward Sol, my prince,” Lord Dahra interrupted. The nobleman’s eyebrow shot up. “Did you honestly think we were not aware?”

“I have committed no infraction,” Casimir proclaimed with confidence. “Those efforts were funded by my family’s personal assets, and not those of the people of Takara.”

“And those assets are rapidly dwindling in size, my prince,” Lord Dahra warned. “Is it worth putting your own

house at risk?"

"Unlike many of you, the claim to my house is by blood, not wealth," Casimir reminded them.

"True," Lord Dahra agreed, "but such claims are defended and maintained by wealth... wealth of which you have precious little remaining."

"And power as well," Prince Casimir corrected.

"Pardon?"

"My house is not only protected by the wealth of which I have spent, but it is also protected by power."

"And what is this power of which you speak?" Lord Dahra challenged.

"The Ghatazhak," Prince Casimir stated coldly.

Lord Dahra laughed, albeit uncomfortably, a condition which did not go unnoticed by Prince Casimir. "The Ghatazhak belong to the people of Takara, my good prince."

"Incorrect. The Ghatazhak were the personal army of my deceased brother, derived from the personal guard of our father before us. They were funded by accounts belonging to the house of Takar."

"Whose funds came from taxes collected from the citizens of Takara," Lord Dahra countered.

"It matters not where such payment came from," Casimir insisted, "it matters only whose name they are under, and that name is Takar. Casimir Takar, to be exact."

"You risk walking a very fine line, my prince," Lord Dahra snarled, leaning forward to emphasize his point. "A very fine line, indeed." The leader of the Parliamentary Security Council leaned back in his chair again to show he was unmoved by Prince Casimir's threats. "Do you believe that the people of Takara will sit still while you confiscate their greatest defense?"

"Defense against what?" Casimir wondered aloud. "You have the Avendahl. There is not a ship within one hundred light years that can stand up to her."

"The Ghatazhak are sworn to protect the people of Takara!" Lord Dahra demanded.

For the first time, Lord Dahra let his emotions show. Prince Casimir smiled. "Again, you are incorrect, Lord Dahra. The programming of the Ghatazhak begins with the protection of the house of Takar, not the people of Takara."

"Their programming can be changed."

"Not without consent of the leader of the house of Takar, and that is me," Casimir said with a smile.

Lord Dahra leaned over to his aide to exchange information. After a few moments, he straightened back up to speak. "You have spent the majority of your holdings, and now you intend to commit your personal security forces to a war a thousand light years away. It seems a curiously unsafe position in which to place oneself," Lord Dahra warned.

Casimir stood slowly, straightening his tunic before speaking. "Careful who you threaten, Lord Dahra, or the first target assigned the Ghatazhak upon awakening may be your rather pompous backside." Casimir smiled, looking at the other noblemen gathered around the chamber. "Good day, gentlemen."

* * *

"Twenty seconds to completion of gravity assist maneuver," Mister Bryant reported. "All systems show ready to jump."

"Very well, Mister Bryant," Commander Dumar answered. "You are clear to jump on schedule."

"Sensor contact!" one of the operators announced. "It's a four zero two."

"Comm contact with the four zero two," the comm officer reported. "Flash traffic from Prince Casimir."

"Give him our arrival coordinates and tell him to meet us on the other side," Mister Bryant ordered as he glanced at the clock. "Ten seconds to jump." He turned to

Commander Dumar. "Can't very well delay our jump, now can we."

Commander Dumar nodded agreement as Mister Bryant verbally counted down the last few seconds.

"Two.....one.....jump!"

There was no jump flash on Karuzara, at least not in the control room. All external cameras were shut down during the jump, as there was no need to visually witness the blinding, blue-white flash of light, especially one large enough to jump the entire Karuzara asteroid. Their only indication that the jump had taken place as scheduled was the momentary spike in the power levels to the jump emitter arrays that encircled the massive hunk of rock that drifted through space.

"Jump complete," Mister Bryant announced. "Verify position."

"Raising the arrays," the navigation controller responded.

"Emitters at zero energy," the array controller reported.

"Energy banks also at zero," the next controller added.

"Reactors normal."

"All systems appear to be nominal," Mister Bryant stated as he turned toward the commander.

"Position verified. Less than four hundred kilometer variance."

"In what direction?" Commander Dumar demanded.

"Range only," the controller responded. "We came out of the jump three hundred ninety-eight kilometers short. We are still on course and speed."

"How will that affect our route?"

"We have buffers built into our route in the form of pauses between jumps," Mister Bryant assured the commander. "At the speed we are traveling, three hundred ninety-eight kilometers passes in the blink of an eye."

"Triple-check our timings," Commander Dumar ordered, "and find out why we came out short to begin with."

“Better short than long, sir,” Mister Bryant said under his breath so that only he and the commander could hear.

“We still have many jumps ahead of us, Mister Bryant. If we continue to come up short, we will consume those buffer pauses more quickly than you might imagine.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Contact!” the sensor operator announced. “It’s the four zero two. They’ve caught up with us.”

“Message coming in,” the comm officer reported. “Command eyes only.”

“Send it to my pad,” Commander Dumar ordered.

“Yes sir.”

Commander Dumar looked at his data pad as the encrypted message appeared on his screen. He placed his thumb on the screen. A moment later the message decrypted before his eyes, the meaningless jumble of letters, numbers, and symbols morphing into a coherent message. He smiled.

“Good news?” Mister Bryant inquired.

“It seems Prince Casimir is finally putting the nobles in their place.”

“If by *their place* you mean a prison cell, then that *is* good news,” Mister Bryant agreed.

“I said *good news*, Mister Bryant,” Commander Dumar said as he turned to head to his office, “not *wonderful*.”

* * *

General Bacca’s head still ached from the effects of the sleep chamber. It had taken more than four months for his personal FTL ship to reach the Alpha Centauri system. It was not the longest amount of time he had spent in cryo-sleep, but it left him feeling not himself nonetheless.

He marched down the corridor toward the battle platform’s command center, escorted by four of the platform’s security guards as well as his own personal aide.

They entered the observation mezzanine that ran along the back side of the massive control room. Rows of consoles filled the room below as hundreds of technicians and their supervisory officers monitored every facet of the platform's operations. It was truly a fortress in space, one that could be moved wherever it was needed. They were the most powerful weapons system that the Jung Empire had ever built, each of them taking decades to construct. It was all part of the empire's thousand-year plan of galactic dominance, of which they were only a few centuries into.

"General Bacca," the admiral greeted as he entered the observation deck to join the general. "I see you escaped the liberation of Earth unharmed?"

General Bacca looked sternly at the admiral. "Some of us are burdened with greater responsibility than simply fighting to our death in the name of the empire."

"Of course," the admiral acquiesced. "I take it you bear important information?"

"Your clearance level?"

"I am the commander of a battle platform, my dear General. What do you think my clearance level should be?"

"Your clearance level," the general repeated sternly.

The admiral held up his hand to summon his aide, who stepped forth with the admiral's clearance card.

General Bacca took the admiral's card and inserted it into his data pad. His eyebrow raised, and he handed the card back to the admiral's aide, all without showing the slightest hint of emotion. "As we feared, the Superluminal Transition System is no longer in development. In fact, it has been in use for nearly a Terran year."

"How many ships are equipped with this system?" the admiral wondered.

"As far as we know, only one... The Aurora."

"I thought the Aurora was destroyed, by your own trap, was it not?"

"Her destruction was never verified," General Bacca admitted. "There was even evidence that she escaped the trap at the very moment it was sprung."

"Why is it we are only hearing of this now?" the admiral challenged.

"The evidence was inconclusive at best."

"You are saying that one ship was able to liberate the Earth? That one ship destroyed your entire fleet?"

"One ship equipped with the STS," Bacca reminded him.

"But still, one ship. General, I find it difficult to believe that a single ship, no matter how quickly it may be able to jump about space, could defeat so many Jung ships all by herself."

"Her captain was most clever in his tactics, and most bold."

"I have read the dossier on Captain Roberts. He appeared a good and able captain, but by no means a brilliant tactician."

"Captain Roberts no longer commands the Aurora. She is commanded by Captain Nathan Scott."

"The son of the politician?" the admiral laughed. "He was nothing more than an ensign less than a year ago."

"Rank does not create aptitude, Admiral. One either has it, or they do not. Believe me, this young captain has it."

"Wasn't his older brother your spy?"

"Your clearance is indeed high, Admiral," General Bacca stated. "I'm afraid you are correct. His brother Eli was the one who provided us with the timing and location of the Aurora's first test of the STS, as well as other critical intelligence. In fact, without him, we could not have captured the Earth to begin with." General Bacca sighed. "I suspect, however, that he may have been somewhat duplicitous."

"As spies often are."

The admiral appeared unconcerned, which worried General Bacca.

“No matter, General,” the admiral boasted. “The Ton-Tori will deal with the Aurora, and will take back the Earth as well.”

“The Ton-Tori? She has gone to Earth?” General Bacca was genuinely surprised by the admiral’s statement. “But what of the reinforcement fleet?”

“It is too early for us to have received word,” the admiral admitted. “However, if this ship is as formidable as you claim, they have likely fallen to her guns as well. Again, it is of no matter. There is no way that a single ship can destroy a battle platform.”

General Bacca looked at the admiral. The elderly man seemed quite confident, as he should. The battle platforms were more than twenty kilometers in diameter and nearly as tall at their central sections. They boasted more than one hundred guns, each of them more massive than those carried by the largest Jung battleships. They were heavily armed and shielded, combat-ready space stations, complete with enclosed ship docks that could hold half a dozen frigates and even a few cruisers if need be. Yet the achievements of Captain Scott defied belief as well, which was what worried the general. “Admiral, every ship has its weakness, even one as powerful as this battle platform. One must only find it.”

“Then I wish your good captain luck,” the admiral laughed. “General, our shields are capable of protecting us against impact by the most massive of projectiles. Our own rail guns could not penetrate our multi-layered shields. You have nothing to worry about. If the Aurora and her captain are foolish enough to attack one of our battle platforms, they will quickly realize the folly of their efforts and run away—or better yet, stay and be destroyed.”

General Bacca sighed. “You say the Ton-Tori is already on her way to Earth?”

“In fact, she may have already arrived. There is really no way for us to know if she made the entire journey at top

speed. I imagine we shall hear of her victory soon enough, however.”

General Bacca looked out across the control room below. It was indeed the largest such room he had ever seen, as was the platform itself. It was his first time aboard such a platform, and it was indeed as impressive as he had heard. They had flown past two frigates parked within one of the platform’s three massive docks during their arrival. The very size of the platform alone could scare away a single ship, even the Aurora.

General Bacca sighed. “I hope you are correct, Admiral.”

“I promise you, my dear General, you have nothing to fear.”

* * *

“Report,” Nathan requested as he stepped out of his ready room and onto the Aurora’s bridge.

“It’s a Takaran comm-drone, Captain,” Mister Navashee said. “A jump-enabled comm-drone. It jumped into high orbit twenty seconds ago.”

“Orbit? You mean, a stable orbit?”

“No, sir. It’s a rapidly deteriorating orbit. It will require a burn to stabilize.”

“Incoming message,” Naralena reported. “It’s from the comm-drone, sir. It’s video.”

“Classification?”

“None.”

“Put it up,” Nathan ordered.

A video window appeared on the main view screen, revealing Commander Dumar standing on the observation deck of the Karuzara asteroid’s control center. *“Greetings, Captain Scott. I am happy to report that with the safe arrival of this comm-drone, we now have daily communications between the Karuzara asteroid and the Sol system. This is thanks largely in part to the navigational data collected by*

Lieutenant Montgomery's advanced jump shuttle's journey back to Takara, as well as the data collected by the four zero two on its way both to and from Sol."

Nathan struggled to maintain his composure as he listened to the commander's message, a smile threatening to form at the edges of his mouth.

"As you know, Prince Casimir, in a surprising bit of astro-navigation expertise, devised a route by which we are able to jump the Karuzara all the way to Sol. I am pleased to report that the journey thus far has gone without incident. Should it continue to do so, we should arrive in the Sol system in approximately eighty Terran days. While en route, we shall continue to fabricate anything that you feel would most benefit your efforts to rebuild and defend the birthplace of all humankind. You should also know that despite the objections of the Takaran Security Council, Prince Casimir has secured an additional one thousand Ghatazhak operatives for your use. To this end, we have modified our production schedule to concentrate on the production of jump-enabled, medium-sized cargo ships called boxcars that are capable of landing on the surface of your world."

"Call Lieutenant Telles to my ready room," Nathan told his comm officer as the commander continued to speak.

"As we continue to produce jump-enabled comm-drones, and as we grow closer to the Sol system, the frequency of our communications shall increase. We are establishing similar communication links with both Takara and Corinair as well. Hopefully, this will make it easier for us to respond to your needs as we make our way across the stars. I look forward to hearing from you, Captain. Commander Dumar of the Karuzara... out."

Nathan could no longer control his smile. "Damn!" he exclaimed as he turned aft to face Naralena. "Play that for Lieutenant Telles when he gets here," he ordered as he

headed aft. "Meanwhile, get me President Scott and put him through to my ready room."

* * *

Maxwell Dumar sat in his office, looking out over the cavernous interior of the Karuzara asteroid. It had come a long way since Redmond Tugwell had first returned with the lost Aurora and her naive young captain so many months ago. Now the cavern was sealed and pressurized, allowing workers to float about in normal attire. Transport rails lined the walls, allowing motorized carts with long articulated arms to reach nearly every square meter within the bay. Fabrication bays that opened directly into the cavern sat waiting for ships for which to produce parts. Machinery, electronic, and casting shops lined the deeper corridors. The Karuzara asteroid was a veritable shipyard jumping its way across the galaxy. In a mere seventy-seven days, that cavern on the other side of his window would be filled with two Terran, Explorer-class starships, both equipped with jump drives. His people would rebuild them. His people would upgrade them. His people would turn them into the mighty warships they so desperately needed to be.

"Excuse me, Commander," Mister Bryant called from the office door.

"Yes?"

"Fabrication reports they have completed the production run of the next twenty mini-jump drives. Shall we begin installing them into the remaining four zero twos?"

Dumar stared out the window once more. This time, his eyes drifted to one of the many hangar bays that had been carved into the sides of the cavern. In one of them, he could see the aft ends of a dozen personnel shuttles that had been graciously donated by the Corinairans. "I think not."

"Sir?"

"Prince Casimir is sending one thousand Ghatazhak to Earth to help restore order. They will need the ability to rapidly move about the planet. We shall give them that capability by installing the first twelve mini-jump drives in the Corinairan personnel shuttles in bay eight."

"Commander, those are civilian grade shuttles. They were not designed for combat."

"Look at this," Commander Dumar said as he called up a file on his data pad. He handed it to Mister Bryant.

"Who designed this?"

"Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak. Apparently they had converted several of the Aurora's personnel shuttles, which of course were also Corinairan, into that which you see. Unfortunately, they were destroyed in recent battles. We shall replace them, posthaste."

"They will take longer to complete than the four zero twos, which are already repaired and ready to fly. The shuttles will need to go through extensive refits, let alone the installation of the jump drives themselves."

"Then we had better get started," Commander Dumar insisted.

"Of course. Perhaps we should have started with the combat shuttles instead of the boxcars," Mister Bryant said.

"The boxcars must travel back to Takara to pick up Ghatazhak deployment pods, then jump all the way back to Earth. While they are doing so, we shall create and deliver the combat jumpers."

"I understand. I shall get them started immediately." Mister Bryant looked at the combat jumper designs once more before handing the data pad back to Commander Dumar.

Dumar noticed the look on his assistant's face. "Something wrong?"

"No, sir. I just shudder to think of what a platoon of Ghatazhak could do with the abilities that those twelve combat jumpers will give them."

"Open the next file," Commander Dumar instructed.

"Are those cargo shuttles?" Mister Bryant asked, his eyes wide.

"They'll be troop jumpers when we finish with them. They'll be able to jump at least two hundred Ghatazhak into a hot zone in the blink of an eye."

Mister Bryant groaned. "Not exactly the type of security forces I'd want on my planet."

"You would if your planet was a post-apocalyptic wasteland."

* * *

"Aahh!" Josh exclaimed as he entered Loki's stateroom and plopped down on his bed. "I can't take this!"

"Come in," Loki said, one eyebrow raised.

"I hate this crap!" Josh continued, ignoring Loki's sarcasm.

"You hate what crap?"

Josh sat up on the bed and looked at Loki, noticing that he too was studying the material given to them by Major Prechitt. "That crap!" he exclaimed, pointing at the documents on Loki's view screen. "Seriously, why do I need to know all this stuff? Lift-to-drag ratios, angle of attack, coefficients of lift, delta V. What the hell is delta V?"

"It refers to the amount of thrust..."

"I know what it is," Josh interrupted, "I mean why the hell is it called delta V? Why can't they just call it thrust?"

"Because it isn't thrust."

"Yes, it is," Josh argued.

"Yeah, it is, but it's thrust applied for a certain purpose."

"Who cares? I thought they were going to teach us useful stuff, like some fancy maneuvers, or multi-element attack strategies or something."

"That probably will come later," Loki told him.

"It's all useless dribble," Josh protested.

"No, it's not," Loki argued.

"Really? And how is knowing Corinairan weather patterns going to make me a better pilot? We're a thousand light years from Corinair, Loki."

"Okay, that might be useless now, but someday..."

"Bullshit, someday. I'm flying spaceships, Loki, not airplanes. When there's bad weather we just add power and blast through it. A few more bumps along the way, but two minutes later we're through it and climbing to orbit."

"I think it's more about everyone having a similar base of core knowledge, Josh. My instructors at the flight academy told us that understanding the science behind how our ships flew would make us better able to think our way out of situations that were not covered by standard operating procedures."

"You and I both know that I don't think when I fly," Josh said. "I just fly."

"Yeah, I know," Loki answered. "And so does Major Prechitt. That's why he wants you to learn all of this stuff... to try and get you to start thinking."

"Hell, that's going to take all the fun out of it."

"Just suffer through it, Josh. You might learn a few things that will be useful. In the end, you'll still probably fly circles around every other pilot here."

"You're right about that, at least." Josh looked down at the deck beneath his feet.

"It's the math, isn't it?"

"Of course it's the math," Josh admitted. "You know how confused I get by all those formulas."

"I'll help you with them, Josh."

"It would be easier if you just let me peek at your test tablet when we take our exams."

"Major Prechitt knows you, Josh. I'm pretty sure he'll be watching for something like that."

* * *

Nathan looked at each of the recon images displayed on the multiple view screens located on the walls of the command briefing room.

"It's only eight ships," Jessica said.

"Eight ships and one battle platform," Cameron reminded her.

"I was kidding."

"She's half right," Nathan defended. "It's not the ships we need to be worried about. It's that platform."

"We were successful against the last one," Major Prechitt reminded them.

"True, but we have no way of knowing if we won that engagement because the platform's defenses were flawed by design, by poor readiness, or if we were just plain lucky."

"Data gathered during our attack runs indicated that their point-defense weapons were incapable of tracking us during close-in, high-speed runs," Major McCullum said.

"True, but if used correctly, they don't have to be," Cameron responded. "They have enough of them that all they have to do is fan them out at set trajectories and keep laying down fire. You'd fly right through their flak walls, which would probably tear your ships to shreds."

"Which is why we must attack sooner rather than later," Nathan insisted. "The Jung commander of that battle platform has never faced jump ships. For all we know, he doesn't even know they exist. If that's the case, we can't afford to wait. Once they learn of our tactics, those guns will be lined up exactly as you described, Commander, and we won't have a chance in hell of taking that platform down, at least not without KKV's."

"The platform is too close to Kent. A single KKV would crack that little moon in half, killing millions of Kentarans," Cameron reminded them.

"We don't have any KKV's anyway," Vladimir said. He looked at Nathan. "Do we?"

"No, we don't. Not anymore," Nathan answered. "We dismantled the ones we had to get at their ZPEDs, remember? I have asked Commander Dumar to put a few in the fabrication queue, however. They've got enough of the old Takaran comm-drones on board that asteroid that they can afford to turn a few of them into weapons, just in case."

"I would advise caution in the use of KKV's, Captain," Cameron warned. "I'm sure the Jung can, or possibly have already, created such weapons. Escalation is a real concern."

"I've considered that possibility," Nathan assured her. "Yet another reason to strike now, while we might still have the element of surprise on our side." Nathan paused to look at the hologram of the area of the Kent moon orbiting the gas giant Rigel in the Alpha Centauri B system. Red icons with varying coded ID tags floated around the small moon. "We will take out the three cruisers first. Jump in close and fire full spreads before jumping out. I want them down in single passes. We'll take Charlies one and three, the Celestia takes Charlie two and then goes for the nearest frigate."

"As soon as we attack, those frigates are going to pull in closer to protect the larger ships," Cameron warned.

"If we execute the attacks quickly enough, they won't have time," Nathan told her. "Use the lowest possible combat speeds so that we can come about more quickly. Once we finish off the frigates, we attack the battleship and the battle platform simultaneously."

"Why not have the Aurora *and* the Celestia attack them together?" Jessica wondered.

"Because we're using the same tactics to get inside the shields of each of them," Nathan explained. "If we attack them one at a time, the second one will know what to expect."

"Still, two ships have a much better chance of taking down either of those ships than one," Jessica argued.

“Perhaps, but I cannot take the chance that one of them will escape and bring the fight back here again. The Earth cannot withstand another attack. Not yet. Not that soon.”

“Even if one of them does escape and head for Sol, it will still take them three or four months to get here,” Jessica reminded him.

“Three months or three days, both are too soon,” Nathan told her. He turned to Major McCullum. “Your Falcons will remain outside the engagement area, well beyond the Jung’s immediate sensor range. I want them to believe they are only facing two ships. When the time is right, we’ll send Josh and Loki out to signal you to start your attacks. Your forces will break into two groups. Alpha group will attack the battle platform with the Aurora, and Beta group will attack the battleship with the Celestia.”

“Yes, sir,” Major McCullum answered.

“Target their shield emitters first, big guns second. Once a single section of shielding is down, they’re ours for the picking,” Nathan said.

“Understood, Captain.”

“I want this to be quick and clean, everyone,” Nathan said. “In and out as quickly as possible.”

“What about the Kentarans?” Jessica wondered. “There have got to be Jung troops on the surface. Are they going to take retribution on the locals?”

“Why would they,” Nathan said. “We have no alliance with the Kentarans. As far as I know, we never even established contact with them.”

“Rumor is that we’ve had spec-ops on the surface of Kent for decades,” Jessica said. “Possibly Cygni and Ceti as well.”

“It seems doubtful that the Jung would vent their frustrations on the locals,” Lieutenant Telles interjected. “If anything, they will attempt to maintain tighter control than normal. Should we be successful in eliminating all Jung warships from the system, the Jung on the surface will be

isolated and without support. While I have no idea what their numbers are on the surface of Kent, I would expect that they are not sizable as the world itself is not that big.”

“From what I heard, it’s all underground and inside surface domes,” Jessica added.

“Intelligence gathered by the latest cold-coasts confirms that,” the lieutenant agreed.

“Are you suggesting that the Ghatazhak attempt to take the surface of Kent?” Nathan wondered.

“No, sir,” the lieutenant admitted reluctantly, “not with only twenty-four combat-ready men and a single combat jump shuttle. Our chances of success would be slight at best. Perhaps later, after more Ghatazhak arrive.”

“We’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it,” Nathan said.

CHAPTER THREE

Nathan sat in his command chair at the center of the Aurora's bridge as his crew went about their preparations for the upcoming battle. Despite their diminished ranks, reduced even further by the need to staff two Explorer-class ships, they were ready. They had the training and the experience, as well as the confidence that came with it. They even had a battle plan, one that had been rehearsed at least a dozen times in just as many hours. However, this time, unlike those of late, the battle would occur at the time and place of their choosing. This time, luck prevailing, it would be the Jung fighting for their survival.

Nathan's mind wandered as he thought about this very scene, now being played out on the Celestia's bridge. No doubt, Cameron was fighting the urge to micromanage every position on her bridge. He wondered how his friend, Luis—the Celestia's tactical officer—was dealing with his new captain. Nathan's old roommate had always been blessed with far more patience than Nathan himself. In fact, Nathan's own impatience and wry wit had earned him more than his fair share of reprimands during their days together at the academy.

"Falcons One Three and One Four are away," the Aurora's own tactical officer announced.

Nathan glanced up at the spherical main view screen that surrounded the entire forward end of the bridge. The next group of Falcons to depart disappeared in flashes of blue-white light, as they began a short series of jumps that would take them to their rally point four light years distant.

"Two more Falcons to launch, sir," Lieutenant Eckert added.

Nathan glanced over at the time display to his right. In ten minutes Josh and Loki would return. "Very well."

* * *

"Are you kidding me?" Jessica exclaimed. "Even our spec-ops are not as hard-core as the Ghatazhak."

"With proper training, that could be somewhat compensated for," Lieutenant Telles argued.

"There is no way in hell you can teach a Terran to act like a Ghatazhak," she insisted, "at least not before the war is over."

"They don't need to act like a Ghatazhak," he pointed out. "They only need to perform as one."

"I understand that," Jessica said. "It's still a stretch, though. I've seen the battle footage from your helmet cams. Nothing fazes you guys. Nothing."

"You are correct," the lieutenant said, "if I am understanding your use of the word. The ethics and morality of what we do does not enter into the decision-making process. Only the potential outcome."

"Therein lies the problem. Terrans are raised to follow their ethics. Society teaches us right and wrong. For most of us, when we do something wrong, we feel guilty. You guys don't."

"In this you are incorrect. A Ghatazhak feels the guilt of his actions. He also understands the need for those actions to be taken."

"So, you're saying that when you gave the order to waste all those civilians back at the evac base, you felt guilt?"

The lieutenant cocked his head to one side as he leaned forward in his chair. "Guilt may not be the correct word. I felt regret that the action had to be taken. However, I knew that

had I not taken immediate and decisive control of the situation, the camp would have been overrun, and the evacuations would have ended then and there. Because of my actions, another thirty-eight thousand Terrans were successfully evacuated prior to the attack. All at a cost of only two thousand innocent lives."

"Only two thousand. So, it's just math, then," Jessica said.

"Precisely."

"And it doesn't bother you that the next attack was thwarted, and that those extra thirty-eight thousand didn't matter?"

"I could not have foreseen that outcome at the time," the lieutenant explained, "therefore, my decision was sound."

"Yeah, well, I guess the odds were not in our favor on that one, were they?"

"No, they were not." Lieutenant Telles leaned back in his chair again. "Then you agree that we should examine the idea further?"

Jessica took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she took her feet down off her desk in the Aurora's security office. "Examine it?" She hesitated a moment. "Okay, sure. We can examine it, but I'm not ready to commit to anything just yet. We'd have to run it past the captain first, anyway."

"Consideration of the idea is all that I am asking for the moment."

"Why are you so hell bent on this?" Jessica asked.

"With our current numbers, we are fairly ineffective as a fighting force," the lieutenant admitted.

"I don't know about that," Jessica disagreed. "Twenty-four of you can still do a lot of damage."

"Perhaps, but trained to even a fraction of our potential, and similarly equipped, your Terran forces would be far more effective against the Jung."

“Why not just wait for reinforcements from Takara?” Jessica wondered.

“That will take time. In addition, those Ghatazhak will be imprinted in the same manner as myself and my men. Their primary directive will be to protect Captain Scott. This directive may not always be compatible with the needs of your world. Besides, the Ghatazhak will not always be available to protect the Earth.”

“Yeah, and after that massacre, the people of Earth probably aren’t going to like having you guys patrolling the streets.”

“They don’t have to like it,” Lieutenant Telles said. “However, I do understand your point.” He glanced at the time display on the wall over the exit. “It is nearly time. Will you be heading for the bridge?”

“Nothing for me to do there,” Jessica admitted. “I’m still on limited duty, remember? I might take a corner over in combat, though. Just to watch the show.”

“Then you expect a favorable outcome,” the lieutenant stated.

“Hope for the best, expect the worst,” Jessica answered with a grin. “That’s what my daddy always told us.”

* * *

“Two minutes,” Loki announced from the back of their new Falcon’s cockpit.

“Twelve hours of cold-coasting,” Josh moaned. “I didn’t think it was ever going to end. Man, I sure don’t miss all those recon missions, you know? Thank God there’s more Falcons now.”

“Hey, be thankful Coralis was in the right place to hide our jump flash,” Loki said. “Otherwise, we’d be looking at another eight hours, minimum. One minute.”

“Thank you, Coralis,” Josh declared. “Not that the next mission is going to be much better. You know, they could’ve

scheduled a break for us instead of back-to-back missions. There's such a thing as fatigue, you know."

"You were asleep for half the mission, Josh."

"Maybe, but my butt is still tired. So is my back. For a deep space interceptor, you'd think they would've made the seats more comfortable."

"I can turn down the gravity a bit more if you'd like?"

"No thanks," Josh objected. "Any lower and I'll lose my meal bars, and they weren't that good going down, either."

"Twenty seconds to jump."

Josh straightened up in his seat as he scanned his systems one last time. "Everything is green up here. Standing by to power up maneuvering thrusters and main drive."

"After the jump."

"Of course," Josh answered.

"In three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Josh's visor turned opaque for a brief moment as their interceptor's jump drive flashed. "When are they going to make the entire canopy go opaque, anyway?"

"Marcus said they're working on it," Loki answered. "Jump complete. Apparently they have to manufacture an entirely new canopy. Something about this one not being thick enough."

"We could have told them that."

"Contacts," Loki announced. "Dead ahead, at the rally point. Fourteen Falcons."

"*Falcon One, Falcon Three,*" Lieutenant Thain called over the helmet comms.

"Go for One," Loki answered.

"*How's it look?*" the lieutenant asked.

"Not much change that we could see," Loki assured him. "Same count, same positions on most of them. Transmitting last positions and tracks now."

"*Got them,*" Lieutenant Thain answered. "*We'll be waiting here for your go signal, gents.*"

"Copy that. One out," Loki answered.

"What's with the 'gents' stuff?" Josh wondered. "I never understood why Corinairans always call us gents? What the hell is a *gent*, anyway?"

Loki ignored his friend as he dialed up the preprogrammed series of four single light year jumps that would take them back to Sol. "Ten seconds to jump series."

* * *

"WEPS is reporting problems with the heat exchanger on the number two plasma cannon," Luis reported from the tactical station.

"I thought that had been fixed?" Cameron said from her command chair on the Celestia's bridge.

"I guess it's acting up again, sir," Luis answered. "They suggest we avoid firing both cannons at the same time, until the problem is resolved."

"Change your automated sequencing safeties on the plasma cannons," Cameron ordered. "Restrict fire to single shots only. We'll alternate between cannons two and four."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered. "It might also be a good idea to limit our shots to two cycles," Luis added.

"The plan is to not be in close long enough to fire more than two cycles, Ensign."

"Yes, sir."

"Contact," Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia's sensor station. "Falcon One is back from recon."

"They're transmitting their recon data to the Aurora now," Ensign Souza announced from the comms station at the back of the Celestia's bridge.

"Falcon One is headed toward the Aurora's flight apron," Luis added.

"They'll have her recycled and launched five minutes after she clears the transfer airlock," Cameron stated.

“How long do you think it will take to get the go, no-go?” Luis wondered.

“It depends on how different things look since the last recon,” Cameron said.

* * *

Doctor Chen looked over the data pad that had just been handed to her by her assistant.

“Everything is ready, Doctor,” Cassandra assured Doctor Chen.

“Did they manage to finish the extra batch of nanites?” Doctor Chen asked.

“Yes, ma’am, two hours ago,” Cassandra answered. “We’re up to about four hundred doses now.”

“I wish it were four hundred thousand doses,” Doctor Chen mumbled.

“It would have been had we not transferred so much of our reserves to Earth,” Cassandra reminded her.

“Not like we had much choice, really.”

Cassandra nodded her agreement.

“Well,” Doctor Chen continued, “with any luck, this will go as the captain planned, and our casualties will be light. I just hope that the Celestia doesn’t have any serious casualties. Without a jump shuttle, moving patients back to us for treatment will take time.”

“I’m sure Doctor Galloway and her staff will be able to handle it,” Cassandra insisted.

Doctor Chen looked at Cassandra. The young woman had come a long way since she first showed up as a patient so many months ago. Her optimism, although sometimes an irritant, often came along at just the right moment. Doctor Chen had come to depend on Cassandra’s exceptional organizational skills over the last few months, and she often wondered how she would possibly manage the department

without her. "I'm sure you're right, Cassandra," the doctor answered. "I'm sure you're right."

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Nash, Commander Willard, and Lieutenant Telles all huddled around the plotting table in the middle of the Aurora's combat control center, staring at the holographic display of the Alpha Centauri B system and the Jung ships within it. There were two sets of icons that represented the positions of Jung ships. One set was orange, the other red.

"The only ones that have moved much are the frigates," Jessica observed. "This one changed orbits, and this one came in from patrol. That still leaves one more out on patrol."

"At least the cruisers are all still in relatively the same positions," Commander Willard said.

"It would be nice to know what, if anything, still resides within the battle platform's three main bays," Lieutenant Telles added.

"I'm betting nothing," Jessica said.

Both men looked at her.

"Why would you have anything parked inside?" Jessica said in defense, noticing their quizzical looks.

"Resupply, refueling, repairs," Lieutenant Telles said. "Shall I go on?"

"They've got to have that kind of stuff down to a science. In and out quick, you know? I mean, a ship can't defend itself when it's inside one of those bays."

"It does not need to," Lieutenant Telles pointed out. "The platform is more than capable..."

"No captain would want to be cooped up inside a hangar bay for any longer than they had to be," Jessica insisted, interrupting Telles. "Besides, the more firepower you have out in the open, the more you have to defend yourself with."

"Perhaps," Lieutenant Telles admitted. "But those bays are large enough to hold at least one cruiser each. A sudden addition of three cruisers to the Jung fleet could turn the tide."

"As could another twelve frigates," Commander Willard added.

This time it was Telles and Jessica who looked at Commander Willard.

"A tight fit, I grant you, but there is enough room in there for four frigates each." Commander Willard looked at them both, noticing their expressions. "Hey, I'm just trying to think of all possible scenarios."

"Well, we won't know for sure until we poke them with a stick," Jessica said.

Lieutenant Telles raised an eyebrow. "Interesting expression... and quite accurate."

Commander Willard looked at his colleagues. "Then we're agreed?"

"Agreed," Lieutenant Telles said with a nod.

"Let's do it," Jessica added.

Commander Willard tapped his comm-set to open the mic. "Captain, XO."

"*Go ahead, Lieutenant,*" Captain Scott answered over Commander Willard's comm-set.

"Changes to the positions of all targets are minimal. Only minor adjustments to the battle plan are required. It shouldn't be any problem, sir."

"*Then we're go?*"

"Yes, sir. Combat recommends we go."

"*Very well,*" Nathan answered.

Commander Willard looked at Jessica and Telles again. "Here we go."

* * *

“Sir,” the general’s aide called from the doorway to the general’s office.

General Bacca continued to stare at the barren-looking moon and the gas giant behind it, both of them hovering just outside the massive porthole behind his desk. He knew that they were merely images of what was outside the massive battle platform, conveyed by one of the hundreds of external cameras. After all, despite the fact that his office was located along the most outboard section of the platform, there were still at least ten meters of hull layers and mechanical spaces between the air in his office and the cold, dark void of space that lay outside.

“General?” the aide called again.

“What is it?” the general finally answered.

“A patrol on the far side of Coralix reported a jump flash. The size of the flash and energy signature are nearly identical to the one that was detected jumping around Earth during the Aurora’s attack.”

“Interesting,” the general said. “Then they are aware that this station is here.”

“As well as the rest of the task group,” the aide added.

The general’s eyes darted back and forth as he thought. “They plan to attack, and soon.”

“Surely they would not be so foolish.”

“The presence of this scout confirms my suspicions that the Aurora has defeated the Ton-Tori.”

“Impossible!” the aide exclaimed. “Even with jump drives, it would take a fleet of ships, maybe even an entire armada, to defeat a battle platform.”

“We said the same of our fleet back in Sol,” General Bacca pointed out. “Yet the Aurora took it apart, ship by ship.” He looked at his aide as he took his seat again. “I assume Admiral Toliva is aware of this scout?”

“Of course,” the aide answered. “He is quite confident in the Ton-Conoc’s ability to withstand any attack.”

“Let us hope his confidence is not misplaced, like so many other commanders that have faced the Aurora before him.”

The general’s aide nodded, then turned to exit.

“Have my ship made ready,” the admiral added, “just in case.”

The general’s aide turned back and looked at him, a combination of surprise and confusion on his face. “Of course, General.”

* * *

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported as the Aurora’s jump flash subsided.

“Multiple contacts,” Mister Navashee called from the sensor station, “two groups of seven Falcons, sir. Jump flash. The Celestia just jumped in, fifty kilometers to starboard.”

“How are those revisions coming, Lieutenant?” Nathan asked.

“Updates to the battle plan will be completed in thirty seconds, Captain,” Lieutenant responded.

Nathan glanced at the tactical display window located along the bottom center of the main view screen. The assortment of blue icons told him that his attack group was in position at the rally point. “Very well.” Nathan took in a deep breath, “pass the word to all ships, set general quarters.”

“General quarters, all ships, aye,” Naralena answered.

“Calculations complete,” the lieutenant reported. “The battle plan has been updated to account for changes in target positions, Captain.”

“Combat jump one, plotted and locked, sir,” Mister Riley reported.

“Very well,” Nathan replied, his tone smooth and relaxed. He cleared his throat. “Remember, by the numbers.”

We jump in, fire, jump out. As little time as possible in each kill zone.”

“All stations report manned and ready,” Naralena reported. “The XO is in combat, and the chief of the boat is in damage control.” Naralena glanced forward toward her captain. “The ship is at general quarters, sir.”

“All ships report general quarters, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station. “All weapons, charged and ready.”

“Alert all ships to start their battle clocks on our jump flash,” Nathan ordered. “Mister Riley, let’s go do some business. You may execute combat jump one when ready.”

“Aye sir,” Mister Riley acknowledged, fighting back a smile as he checked the countdown timer on his jump status display. “Executing combat jump one in twelve seconds.”

“The Aurora has jumped,” Ensign Kono reported.

“Battle clock has started,” Luis reported from the Celestia’s tactical station.

“Ten seconds to combat jump one,” Mister Jakoby added.

Cameron glance at the time display on the center console between her navigator and helmsman directly in front of her. Beneath the green time display the red battle clock display was counting upward from zero. Below that, a third time display that indicated the time remaining before their next jump also counted down.

“Five seconds.”

Cameron placed her hands on the arms of her command chair, appearing as relaxed as possible. From her first day in the Academy, all she had ever wanted to do was to command a ship. Now, she was not only the first woman to command an EDF ship, but she was also the youngest person to ever command one. She should have been happy,

but the only thing she felt was concentration... Intense and focused.

The Celestia's jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump one complete," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Contact!" Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. "Frigate two, ten kilometers out and one above, slightly to starboard. Transferring track to tactical."

"Mains are at zero," Ensign Hunt reported, "bringing our nose onto the target."

"Five seconds to firing solution," Ensign Delaveaga said.

"Triplets on all forward tubes," Cameron reminded him. "Be ready for singles from our port plasma cannons."

"Forward tubes locked on target," Luis announced, ignoring his captain's not-so-subtle reminders. "Firing triplets, one away... Two away..."

"Combat jump two, ready," Mister Jakoby announced.

"Three away..."

"Impacts!" Ensign Kono reported with excitement.

"Four away..."

"We caught them by surprise, sir," Ensign Kono exclaimed.

"Execute jump two," Cameron ordered, paying little attention to her sensor operator's exclamation.

"Jumping in three....."

"All of them! Direct hits!" Ensign Kono continued.

"Two....."

"Target is breaking up!"

"One....."

"Well done, Ensign," Cameron congratulated.

"Jumping."

Nathan watched the main view screen as his first target broke into several large pieces. Explosions from deep within broke those pieces up even further, sending debris out in all directions along the frigate's original path of travel. Nathan

felt a rush of adrenaline as the Aurora made its first kill of the day.

"Frigate one is destroyed," Mister Navashee announced.

"Jump two in five seconds," Mister Riley followed without missing a beat.

"Very well," Nathan said calmly. The first kill had gone according to plan. He imagined the Celestia on the other side of the Alpha Centauri B system, executing the same maneuver and tearing apart their target with similar ease. The jump drive had always given them a significant advantage over the Jung, but now, with the addition of their new weapons, their advantage was even greater. Frigates and gunboats were no match for the Aurora or the Celestia. Neither were cruisers if they were caught by surprise, as they fully intended to do this day.

The jump flash washed over the Aurora's bridge, dissipating as quickly as it had come.

"Jump two complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Contact, cruiser one, seven kilometers to starboard and one point five down." Mister Navashee's voice was calm and professional. "Transferring track to tactical."

"Firing solution in three seconds," Lieutenant Eckert reported, "locking all forward torpedo tubes and plasma cannons on the contact."

"Second contact, cruiser two, one hundred and fifty-eight kilometers ahead, it's on the same orbit as cruiser one," Mister Navashee added.

"I have a firing solution," Lieutenant Eckert reported, "firing all forward tubes."

Red-orange flashes of light illuminated the Aurora's bridge as twelve plasma torpedoes, in four groups of three, streaked over their heads on the main view screen.

"Firing all plasma cannons," the lieutenant added.

Nathan glanced slightly to his left as larger balls of red-orange plasma left what were once the forward openings of the Aurora's port-side fighter launch tubes. "Execute jump

three," Nathan ordered. It was a waste of breath, as his crew knew the battle plan inside and out, having rehearsed it repeatedly over the last twelve hours.

"Jump three, in three....."

"Arming aft tubes for triples," Lieutenant Eckert announced.

"Two....."

"Pitching up," Mister Chiles added.

"One....."

"Torpedo impacts," Mister Navashee reported.

"Jumping."

"Locking aft torpedoes on target," the lieutenant said as the jump flash dissipated.

"Jump three complete," Mister Riley added.

"Maintain visual on the aft track." Nathan watched the main view screen as the image suddenly shifted to the feeds from their rear cameras and instantly zoomed in on the first Jung cruiser that now lay behind them as the shots from their forward plasma cannons broke the ship apart.

"Cruiser one destroyed," Mister Navashee announced.

"Stand down aft torpedoes," Nathan ordered, "execute jump four as soon as possible, Mister Riley."

"Jump four, aye. Three seconds."

"We're off to a good start, people," Nathan said. "Let's keep it up."

"Turn complete," Ensign Hunt reported from the Celestia's helm.

"Jump three, Mister Jakoby," Cameron ordered. "Helm, start your yaw maneuver and bring our nose down slightly."

"Aye, sir, yawing to port and pitching down," Ensign Hunt acknowledged.

"All forward tubes ready to fire," Ensign Delaveaga added.

“Jumping,” Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia’s jump field emitters sent the blue-white light of the jump across their hull. “Jump three, complete.”

“Frigate three,” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. “Three kilometers out, five hundred meters to port, coming up fast.”

“Primary yaw maneuver complete,” Ensign Hunt reported. “Our nose is on the target, continuing yaw to track the target as we pass.”

“Fire at will,” Cameron ordered.

“Firing triplets,” Luis answered as he pressed the preprogrammed firing button for torpedo tube one. “One away.”

A group of three red-orange plasma charges streaked overhead along the left side of the Celestia’s main view screen as they raced toward the Jung frigate which was now growing larger on the left side of the view screen. They were quickly followed by three more groups of charges, each announced by the Celestia’s tactical officer as they left their tubes. The Celestia continued yawing to port as she slid by the enemy frigates starboard side, continuing their plasma torpedo barrage as they passed.

Cameron watched with fascination as the bright yellow flashes reported the impacts of their torpedoes against the target’s hull. The Jung ship had also been caught by surprise, just like her sister-ship before her, and each plasma torpedo ripped through the target’s hull with ease, igniting secondary explosions from within. By the time their second round of torpedoes had left their tubes, the Jung ship was already coming apart.

“Frigate three, destroyed,” Ensign Kono announced.

“Cease fire,” Cameron ordered. “Helm, bring our nose back onto her course. Prepare for jump four.” Cameron almost felt pity for the crews of the two frigates they had just annihilated, for they had stood little chance.

Nathan watched as his crew went about the task of destroying the next enemy target. Each station called out their actions as they were performed, not so much for their captain but rather for one another. Occasional glances at the battle clock on the helm and the tactical display just above it on the bottom of the main view screen told Nathan that everything was going according to plan. He had no idea how the Celestia was doing, as her engagement areas thus far were too distant for them to pick up on their sensors during the brief intervals between jumps. He would know soon enough, however, as their respective courses were about to cross.

"Jump six complete," Mister Riley reported calmly as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

"Cruiser two's shields are experiencing a cascade failure," Mister Navashee reported, slight satisfaction in his tone.

"Very well," Nathan answered.

"Pretty sure we took out their main power on that last volley," Lieutenant Eckert commented as he queued up the Aurora's stern torpedo tubes to fire. "Firing triplets from the stern tubes. Five, away. Six, away."

Without Nathan even having to ask, the lieutenant switched the main view screen to the aft cameras once more, increasing their magnification to maximum just in time to see their torpedoes strike the unshielded cruiser's hull. Bright yellow flashes marked the impacts, followed by internal secondary explosions. The massive cruiser began to break apart, splitting into two massive pieces. The pieces each spun in varying directions as a result of their own internal explosions, forcing gases, debris, and bodies out into space. Two seconds later, the slowly spinning aft section exploded, sending more debris slamming into the forward section of the Jung cruiser.

"Scratch cruiser two," Lieutenant Eckert said with pride.

“Starting our turn to port,” Mister Chiles announced as he pressed a button on his helm console to execute the preprogrammed turn that would put the Aurora on course for her next jump.

“Shall we launch Falcon One?” Lieutenant Eckert inquired.

It was the first actual decision Nathan had been required to make since he had given the order to start the attack when they were still at the rally point a mere ten minutes ago. “Affirmative,” he answered. “You may start phase two, Lieutenant.”

“Phase two, aye,” Lieutenant Eckert answered. “Green deck. Launching Falcon One.”

Josh glanced out the left side of Falcon One’s canopy as the outer layers of the Aurora’s hull slid past them from top to bottom.

“Ten seconds to launch position,” the flight controller reported over his helmet comms.

Josh scanned his flight instruments one last time to ensure they were ready for takeoff.

“Jump to rally point, plotted and locked,” Loki announced from the backseat of the interceptor. “Time to jump, twenty seconds.”

Josh looked up as the massive outer doors over them retracted into the sides of the vertical elevator shaft, revealing the star-filled blackness outside the Aurora. A few seconds later, the elevator slowed noticeably, then shuddered to a stop level with the Aurora’s topside. He turned his head as far left as possible, then turned it quickly to the right, scanning the area both around and above them before takeoff.

“Falcon One, Control. You are cleared for takeoff.”

“Falcon One, lifting off,” Loki announced over the comms.

"Here we go," Josh mumbled as he fired their ascent thrusters for a brief moment. "Off on another incredibly exciting mission," he added, his voice dripping with sarcasm. The Falcon ascended with ease as the elevator pad's artificial gravity faded away, releasing its hold on their spacecraft. Josh added forward thrust, abruptly as usual, sending them rocketing forward.

"Five seconds to jump," Loki reported as the Aurora fell away and slid behind them.

"Still feels weird to be calling ourselves *Falcon One* instead of just *Falcon*."

"We're not the only Falcon any more, remember?" Loki answered.

"Yeah, I know. Still feels weird, though." Josh checked his instruments, making a final adjustment to their course and speed. "On the marks, ready for jump."

"Three.....two.....one.....jump."

Loki's faceplate went opaque for a split second to protect his eyes from the jump flash. When it cleared, his sensors showed all fourteen Falcons waiting patiently at the rally point just beyond the outer edges of the Alpha Centauri B system. "Falcon One to all Falcons," Loki called over the comms. "Phase two is go. Good hunting."

"*Alpha Leader copies*," the first voice answered.

"*Bravo Leader copies*," the second one followed.

Josh watched as fourteen flashes appeared in rapid succession, less than two hundred meters off their starboard side. "Okay, I admit it. *That* was pretty damn cool!"

"All torpedoes away!" Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station. "Firing plasma cannons one and three!"

"Jump five, Mister Jakoby," Cameron ordered.

"Jump five, aye... In three seconds," her navigator answered.

“Torpedo impacts!” Ensign Kono announced. “Target’s outboard main propulsion is offline. She’s venting fuel from her starboard side!”

“Jumping,” Mister Jakoby announced as the blue-white jump flash began to build on the main view screen.

“Helm, flip us around,” Cameron ordered as the jump flash washed over the Celestia’s bridge. She knew it was more of a reminder than an order, as her helmsman already knew what maneuver came next. However, she just couldn’t help herself. Perhaps, given time, she would develop the ability to sit back and monitor her crew’s actions, and allow them to do their jobs, but for now, reminding them what came next made her feel like she was in control. She hoped they would understand.

“Pitching our nose up and over,” Ensign Hunt replied.

“Jump five complete,” Mister Jakoby reported.

“Target is raising shields!” Ensign Kono reported. “They’ll have full power in thirty seconds!”

“I’ll have our nose over in twenty,” Ensign Hunt assured his captain.

“Be ready with those firing solutions,” Cameron urged her tactical officer.

“Plotting them now, sir,” Luis answered as he quickly tapped commands into his console. “All forward tubes and cannons will be ready to fire in five seconds!”

Cameron watched as the Jung cruiser passed over her head from behind, sliding down the center of the main view screen, finally coming to a stop, upside down, in the center of the screen.

“All forward weapons locked on target!” Luis reported.

“Fire at will!”

“Firing all forward tubes! Firing cannons!”

“Target is firing!” Ensign Kono announced. “Forward rail guns and both forward missile batteries! Twelve missiles inbound! Ten seconds to missile impacts!”

“Jump six, Mister Jakoby! Get us out of here!” It was the first time Cameron’s voice had shown the slightest hint of excitement since the attack had begun.

“Jump six, in three.....” Her navigator responded.

“Torpedo impacts!” Ensign Kono added.

“Two.....”

Cameron glanced at the main view screen as bright yellow flashes appeared, obscuring their view of the shrinking image of the enemy cruiser as the distance between the Celestia and her prey rapidly increased.

“Contact!” Ensign Kono reported with excitement. “Jump flash! It’s the Aurora, sir!”

“One.....”

“Target’s shields are down fifty percent!” the ensign added.

“Jumping!” Mister Jakoby announced.

“She’s the Aurora’s problem now,” Cameron mumbled as their jump flash washed over them.

Seven jump flashes appeared against the black, starry backdrop of space, revealing seven Falcons speeding toward the Jung battleship less than one hundred kilometers directly ahead of them.

“Get that jump plotted,” the pilot urged his weapons officer. “They’ll know we’re here in twenty seconds.”

“I’ve got it!” his weapons officer answered from the rear of the Falcon’s cockpit, “sending now!”

“Alpha Flight, Alpha Leader,” the pilot called over his helmet comms. “Transmitting jump fix. Execute in five.”

“Weapons free,” the weapons officer announced. “Attack jump in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

The pilot instinctively closed his eyes momentarily, despite the fact that the brief opacity of his helmet’s faceplate provided all the protection his eyes needed from his ship’s jump flash. He opened his eyes as his visor

cleared, and the massive Jung battleship, that only moments ago was nearly one hundred kilometers distant, appeared before him, frighteningly close by.

“Jump complete! Scanning for emitters!”

“Translating down!” The pilot announced as he fired the translation thrusters along the topside of his ship. The Falcon immediately responded, sliding to the hull of the battleship as it passed quickly beneath them. Bright flashes of blue-white appeared all along the surface of the enemy ship in the distance ahead of them. “They’re firing!” the pilot announced. “Alpha Flight! Incoming rail gun fire! Evasive action! Launch weapons and get the hell out!”

“Emitter positions verified!” the weapons officer reported. “Locking all weapons on targets! Firing missiles! Firing nose turret!”

The doors covering the lead Falcon’s port and starboard weapons bays along her underside slid open. Four small missiles popped out from each bay, ignited, and sped off, arching downward toward their targets on the hull of the battleship below. A split second later the missiles found their targets, slamming into eight of the mighty battleship’s shield emitters.

The lead pilot pulled the nose of his ship slightly upward as his nose turret continued spraying the hull of the battleship with deadly charges of plasma energy, angling for the invisible gap between the enemy battleship’s shield layers in preparation to jump to safety. “I’m on the jump line!” he reported.

“Three seconds to jump!” his weapons officer answered.

“We’re taking fire!” one of the pilots cried out over comms. His cries of anguish were cut short.

“Two.....”

“Leader! Six! Five is down! Five is...”

“One.....”

“Six is down! Both Five and Six are down!” another pilot reported.

“Everyone! Jump, jump, jump!” the lead pilot ordered as the blue-white light poured out from his own emitters, engulfing his ship in a jump field. His visor turned opaque for a second, and when it cleared a moment later, the massive enemy ship was no longer beneath him, and only the black void of space lay outside his canopy. “Alpha Flight! Alpha Leader! Check-in!”

“Alpha Two!”

“Alpha Three!”

“Alpha Four!”

There was a brief pause.

“Alpha Seven,” the last pilot reported with a sigh. *“Five and Six went down hard, sir.”*

“Damn it!” the lead pilot exclaimed. “On our first pass!”

“Contact, three kilometers off our starboard side, two kilometers ahead and closing fast,” Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora’s sensor station.

Nathan watched the main view screen as Mister Chiles maintained their starboard yaw in order to keep their forward torpedo tubes pointed at the enemy cruiser as they flew past its port side.

“Cruiser three, Captain. Her shields are down to half strength,” Mister Navashee added.

“All forward weapons are locked on target,” Lieutenant Eckert announced. “Firing triplets on all tubes! Firing doubles on all cannons!”

Again the Aurora’s bridge illuminated with numerous flashes of red-orange light as twelve plasma torpedoes, followed by eight larger, more powerful plasma cannon shots, quickly crossed the icy void between the two ships. As Nathan watched the destruction of the last Jung cruiser in the Alpha Centauri B system, he felt strangely disconnected from the entire sequence of events. There was no remorse for the thousands of Jung lives he had just taken. It was as if

he were watching one of the many science fiction videos stored in the Aurora's entertainment database.

"Target's shields are down," Mister Navashee advised. "She's lost all main propulsion and maneuvering, and she's running on one reactor only."

"Another round, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered dispassionately. "We don't want to have to come back later to finish her off." Nathan wondered if his lack of emotion was normal, as he coldly ordered the execution of the cruiser and her entire crew. These ships, these men... None have them had directly threatened his ships, or his world. However, others of their ilk had, and given a chance, so would they. This was war, after all... And in war, people died.

"Another round, aye," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"Stand by to execute jump seven, Mister Riley."

"Jump seven complete," Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia's jump flash faded.

"Contact!" Ensign Kono reported. "Jung battleship! Ten kilometers, two to starboard, one down! I've got multiple jump flashes as well, but no more contacts. Alpha flight must have just jumped out, sir."

"Keep our nose to bear on the target as we pass, Mister Hunt," Cameron reminded.

"Commander!" Ensign Kono exclaimed, "I'm not detecting any significant shield failures!"

Cameron's head snapped to her left. "What?"

"I'm detecting at least two dozen missing emitters, but sensors are only showing a ten percent drop in three of the affected shields!" the ensign explained.

"Tactical! All weapons! Target the weakest shields and fire at will!" Cameron ordered. "Keep firing until we jump!"

"Targeting the weakest shields with all weapons!" Luis acknowledged. "Continuous fire mode!"

“Target is firing!” Ensign Kono reported. “Forward rail guns! No missiles yet.”

“Initiating continuous sequential fire mode on all forward tubes!” Luis announced.

Cameron glanced at the main view screen as plasma torpedoes streaked away from the Celestia on their way toward the distant battleship. “Ship-wide! All hands, brace for incoming fire!”

“Firing plasma cannon one!” Luis announced.

“Mister Jacoby,” Cameron said, “if they fire missiles, don’t wait for my command, just jump.”

“Yes, sir,” the navigator answered.

“Firing plasma cannon two!”

The bridge shuddered as rail gun rounds slammed into the Celestia’s outer hull.

“Damage control reports multiple rail gun impacts across our bow,” Ensign Souza reported from the comm station.

“Firing plasma cannon one!” Several red lights suddenly illuminated on Luis his weapons display. “Two of our forward point-defense lasers are offline!”

“How many torpedoes have we fired?” Cameron asked.

“Firing plasma cannon two!” Luis glanced at his torpedo control board. “Just finished our third round, sir! That’s thirty-six torpedoes! Two more cycles and our torpedo cannons will be too hot to fire!”

The bridge suddenly jerked to the left, nearly knocking Cameron out of her command chair.

“Hull breach! C deck! Section four!” Ensign Souza reported.

“Damn it!” Cameron exclaimed. She turned to her left. “Kono! Have we made any dent in their shields?”

“Two of their four previously weakened shields are now down to twenty percent!” Ensign Kono answered.

“Comms! Warn the Aurora that the battleships shields are still combat effective!”

“Contacts! Target is launching missiles!” Ensign Kono exclaimed. “Eighteen missiles inbound! Impact in ten seconds!”

“Jump us out of here!” Cameron ordered as the Celestia’s jump flash already began to wash over them.

“Son of a bitch!” the leader of Alpha flight declared in frustration as rail gun rounds from the battleship’s fast-tracking point-defense weapons ricocheted off the leading edge of his starboard wing. Blue-white flashes from hundreds of muzzles were visible all across the battleship’s hull.

“There are too many of...”

“Leader! Two! Three is gone!”

“Everyone! Go to full power! They won’t be able to track us if we go fast enough!” the lead pilot declared.

“The ones in front of us will!” his weapons officer reminded him.

“We won’t be able to pitch up in time!” one of the other pilots exclaimed. *“We’ll miss our marks! We’ll be jumping directly through their shields!”*

“It’s going to fuck with our systems,” his weapons officer warned.

“So will those goddamned rail guns!” the pilot argued as he pushed his throttles all the way to the stops. The ship lurched forward as its main engines went to full power. The battleship below them immediately began to pass under them at a faster rate. Although there was a noticeable drop in the number of rail gun rounds striking their underside, they were still taking quite a few impacts in their forward sections.

“We can’t take much more of this!” the weapons officer warned. “Those rounds may be small, but there’s a fucking lot of them!”

“Just keep firing at that goddamned turret!” the pilot insisted. Another group of rail gun rounds slammed into the underside of their port wing, ripping through its skin and blasting out the top, rupturing one of their propellant tanks in the process. The impact caused the Falcon to suddenly roll to its right, forcing the pilot to counter the motion by yanking his control stick hard to the left. “Damn it!” he exclaimed. “Pitching up! Jump us the hell out of here!”

“My pleasure!” The weapons officer responded.

Moments later their jump flash washed over them. The ship rocked violently for a brief instant just as their jump flash subsided. Warning alarms sounded in their helmet comms as lights flashed on their systems status displays.

“Port fusion reactor just shut down on us!” the weapons officer exclaimed.

“Can you restart it?” the pilot asked.

“I have no idea,” the weapons officer answered. “I’ve got all kinds of tripped breakers and crap showing up back here. Give me a minute.”

The pilot sighed.

“I told you this was going to happen if you tried to jump through their shields,” the weapons officer mumbled.

“Hey, we’re still alive aren’t we?”

“For now.”

“Alpha Flight, check-in,” the pilot ordered over his helmet comms.

“Jump seven, complete,” Mister Riley reported.

“Contact, Jung battleship,” Mister Navashee reported. “Twenty kilometers, four to starboard, two down.”

“Incoming flash traffic!” Naralena announced. “It’s from the Celestia, Captain. Message reads: Falcon attack on battleship ineffective. Battleship’s shields remain combat effective. End of message.”

“Multiple contacts!” Mister Navashee exclaimed. “Missile launch! Thirty-six missiles inbound! Impact in twenty seconds!”

Nathan felt himself tensing up. Things were no longer going according to plan. “New jump,” he began, “put us a few hundred meters aft of the target,” he ordered. “Helm, flip us over fast. Tactical stand by all forward weapons, especially the plasma cannons.”

“Plotting jump,” Mister Riley answered.

“Pitching over hard,” Mister Chiles acknowledged.

“Fifteen seconds to impact!” Mister Navashee updated.

“Triple shots on all weapons, including the cannons,” Nathan added.

“We can only fire triple shots on the cannons two, maybe three times before they overheat, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert warned.

“With any luck, we won’t have to,” Nathan told him.

“Ten seconds,” Mister Navashee updated.

“Jump plotted and locked,” Mister Riley announced.

“Our nose will be over in ten seconds,” Mister Chiles added.

“Five seconds to impact.”

“Snap jump, Mister Riley!” Nathan ordered.

“Jumping!”

The Aurora’s jump flash washed over the bridge. As the flash subsided the stern of the battleship passed across the main view screen from the left side and slightly below, moving slowly up and center. Although the distance between them was at least three hundred meters and expanding rapidly, Nathan felt as if he could reach out and touch the battleship’s main propulsion nozzles.

“Jump complete!”

“I have a firing solution!” the lieutenant announced.

“Fire at will! And don’t stop!” Nathan ordered.

“Firing triplets on all weapons,” the lieutenant acknowledged. “Torpedoes and cannons.”

The Aurora's bridge was awash with both the red-orange light of the plasma shots as well as the yellow flashes marking their impacts. The plasma shots continued to pound the aft shields of the massive battleship, causing them to flash an opaque white with each impact.

"Her shields are down fifty percent!" Mister Navashee exclaimed.

"Continue firing!" Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"Range to target, five hundred meters and increasing!" Mister Navashee reported. "Target's shields at twenty-five percent and falling!"

"Plasma cannons are overheating," Lieutenant Eckert warned.

"Her aft shields are failing!" Mister Navashee exclaimed.

"Torpedoes only!" Nathan ordered. "Continue firing triplets!"

"Torpedoes only, triplets, aye!"

Nathan watched as their next four torpedoes slammed into the stern of the battleship, destroying her main propulsion nozzles.

"Target has lost main propulsion!" Mister Navashee announced.

"She's yawing to starboard!" Lieutenant Eckert pointed out.

"She's trying to bring her shielded side to us," Nathan said. He watched as the next few torpedoes impacted the aft-most portion of the battleship's starboard shields.

"I'm losing the angle on her unshielded side," the lieutenant announced.

"Cease fire," Nathan ordered. He turned toward Mister Navashee. "Where are our Falcons?"

"I show four of them standing off just outside of the target's defensive perimeter," Mister Navashee answered.

"They're probably waiting for us to jump clear before they start their next attack run," the lieutenant surmised.

“Comms, order those Falcons to join up with Bravo flight to help press the attack on the battle platform,” Nathan ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Naralena acknowledged.

“Mister Riley, execute jump eight,” Nathan added.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Eckert began, “if we come about to starboard we can move in behind her and...”

“She’s yawing not only to keep her shields on us, but to bring her big guns into play as well,” Nathan told him. “Besides, we’ve got a timetable to keep, Lieutenant,” Nathan reminded him, “and with her mains destroyed, she’s not going anywhere. Comms, attempt to make contact with the Celestia. Let her know about the target’s unshielded stern.”

“Firing triplets, all forward tubes!” Luis announced from the Celestia’s tactical station. “Firing port plasma cannons!”

Cameron stared at the image of the Jung battle platform that nearly filled their main view screen. “Damn, that thing is big,” she mumbled. “What magnification are we at?”

“Zero,” Ensign Hunt responded from the helm, glancing back at his captain over his left shoulder.

Cameron could see by the look in her helmsman’s eyes that he found the target equally impressive in size. “Damn.”

“Target is firing!” Ensign Kono warned from the sensor station. “Big guns!”

“Brace for fire!” Cameron ordered.

“She’s firing missiles as well!” Ensign Kono added. “Missile impact in ten seconds!”

The entire ship suddenly rolled hard to port as something struck their starboard side.

“Hull breach!” Ensign Souza called from the comm station. “Starboard underside! Inner hull is still intact! Damage control is reporting loss of all propellant in the forward tank on the starboard side!”

"Are we having any effect on their shields?" Cameron wondered.

"Not much, sir!" Ensign Kono answered. "Less than ten percent in three of her shields on her forward arm!"

"Did the Falcons even touch her?"

"I've only counted eight damaged emitters, and a few damaged defensive batteries, sir!"

The bridge shook again as another massive rail gun round tore into the side of the Celestia.

"Damn it!" Cameron swore, slightly losing her composure as she was nearly tossed from her command chair. "Jump us out of here!"

"Celestia has jumped!" the weapons officer reported from the back of Alpha Leader's cockpit.

"Bravo Leader to all units," the voice called across their helmet comms. "We start our next attack run in thirty seconds. Keep your speed up as much as possible and maintain your evasive maneuvers. We'll attack her forward arm again. Target her emitters only! If we don't get at least one of her shields down, we don't stand a chance of destroying her!"

"Attack jump plotted and locked," the weapons officer reported.

"Here we go again," the pilot mumbled.

"Just don't try to jump us through her shields again."

"No promises."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

Their helmet visors turned opaque as their jump flashed washed over them once more. When their visors cleared a second later, the hull of the battle platform loomed large outside their canopy. The pilot pulled back hard on his control stick to level off only one hundred meters above the top of the platform's forward arm.

“Close enough?” the weapons officer asked as he opened fire with their nose turret.

“Nope,” the pilot answered as he squeezed the trigger on his flight control stick to fire the plasma cannons in his wings. Short bolts of plasma energy from their wing cannons flashed yellow against the hull of the battle platform, tearing apart items on the surface of its thick hull. He jerked his Falcon from side to side in wide sweeps, changing the rate and direction, as well as the distance between them and the surface of the massive platform at random intervals.

Streams of rail gun fire poured from the surface of the platform directly ahead of them. “They’re laying down a point-defense wall!” the weapons officer warned. “Directly ahead of us!”

“Can we fly through it?” the pilot asked.

“Part of us can!”

The pilot glanced at his threat display screen, noticing something. “I’ve got an idea!” he announced as he eased his stick forward and moved their ship closer to the platform’s hull.

“What are you going to do, land?” the weapons officer quipped.

“See that inverted V between their streams of fire?” the pilot called out. “I’m going to duck us down through there and out the other side!”

“The other side is the forward wall of the port arm!” the weapons officer reminded him. “We’ll slam right into it!”

“Not if I decelerate!”

“Slow us down? Are you nuts?”

“We’ll dive straight down between the arms!” the pilot insisted. “They can’t fire on us there, not without hitting their own ship.”

“They can fire on us when we come out the other side!”

“I never said my plan was perfect,” the pilot admitted.

The Falcon skimmed the surface of the battle platform, a mere twenty meters above it, ducking between two banks of defensive batteries that were sweeping their barrels across the space above them. As it passed between them, the ship passed between the weapons, it pitched over, nose-to-tail, to fly tail first. The Falcon fired its main engines at full power for a full second, reducing its speed considerably before it pitched over another forty-five degrees and fired its main engines again, blasting downward between the massive arms of the battle platform.

“We’re still drifting toward the port arm!” the weapons officer warned, the tension in his voice building.

“I know! I know!” the pilot answered as he adjusted their pitch to attempt to correct the drift. He glanced upward at the shadowy hull of the platform’s port arm as they slid past on their way out the other side. A few seconds later, just as the hull appeared close enough to reach out and touch, it disappeared completely. “Yes!” the pilot declared triumphantly. A moment later, several small rail gun rounds danced across their starboard wing, reminding him that they were far from being out of danger. “Crap! Give me an escape vector!”

“Two four seven!” the weapons officer answered. “Any speed!”

The pilot pitched their nose a bit more and yawed slightly to port. “Two four seven!”

“Jumping!” the weapons officer announced as their visors turned opaque once more and the jump flash washed over them.

A second later their visors cleared, and they were out of danger once again.

The pilot took in a deep breath and exhaled. “God, I hope we don’t have to do that too many more times!” He

turned his head, looking over his right shoulder at his weapons officer behind him. "You okay back there?"

"Other than my urine-soaked suit, I'm fine."

The pilot looked forward again, checking his flight systems for any signs of damage. "Did we even hit anything on that pass?"

"Doubtful," the weapons officer answered. "Not with the way you were jerking us around and all."

"Jump eight, complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Platform is five kilometers out, five hundred meters below and starboard of our course," Mister Navashee reported. "I'm picking up minor fluctuations in several of their forward shields, including a single shield failure on the starboard side of their forward arm."

"Target the area of the failed shield, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant acknowledged from the Aurora's tactical station.

"I'm only showing eight Falcons at the standoff point," Mister Navashee added. "Target is firing! Rail guns and missiles! Impact in ten seconds!"

"Firing all forward tubes!" Lieutenant Eckert announced. "Firing all plasma cannons!"

"Stand by to jump us out," Nathan ordered.

"Jump nine, plotted and ready," Mister Riley assured him.

"Five seconds!" Mister Navashee warned.

"All weapons away!"

"Snap jump!" Nathan ordered.

"Jumping!" the navigator answered.

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge as Nathan turned to face port. "Scan the platform for damage. I want to know if any of our weapons made it to their hull."

“From this position, there’s a twenty second delay due to distance, sir.”

“Understood.”

“Coming about for next jump,” Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

“Very well.” He rotated his chair further to his left to face his tactical officer directly behind him. “Eight Falcons, after only three total passes.”

“At that rate, they’ll be wiped out in three more,” the lieutenant pointed out.

“More like two,” Nathan commented. “That platform’s weapons systems probably get more dialed in with each wave, and there’s only so much evasive action those pilots can make at those speeds.” Nathan sighed. “Comms, broadcast an order to those Falcons. They are to disengage and await further orders when they get down to four ships remaining.”

“Yes, sir,” Naralena answered.

“I’m getting sensor data from our last attack,” Mister Navashee reported. “Two of our torpedoes made it through and impacted the hull, but the damage was minimal. Surface only, no breaches to their hull.”

“Any chance we made the hole bigger?” Nathan hoped.

“No, sir.”

“Comms, add to the message. Tell the Falcons to concentrate on opening up that hole.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s going to make their flight paths easier to predict,” Lieutenant Eckert warned.

“I know, Lieutenant,” Nathan admitted solemnly, “I know.”

“Turn completion in two minutes,” Ensign Hunt reported from the Celestia’s helm.

“That is one agonizingly slow turn,” Luis commented from the tactical station.

“You’ve got that right,” Ensign Hunt grumbled.

“Can’t be helped,” Cameron reminded them. “We’ve got to give the Aurora time to get into position. We can’t all be jumping into the same target at the same time.” Cameron turned to look back over her shoulder at Luis. “How are our cannons holding out?”

“They’re getting pretty hot, sir,” Luis warned, “but at least this slow turning is giving them time to cool down a bit more. They should hold.”

“How is our propellant holding up, Ensign?” Cameron asked her helmsman.

“Lost more than half of the starboard tank,” Ensign Hunt reported. “They were able to transfer about a third of it into another tank before it vented completely. We’ve still got more than enough propellant to continue, though.”

“Very well. How are we doing on casualties?” Cameron called over her shoulder to her comms officer.

“Five dead, eleven wounded. Four of them need to be transferred to the Aurora for surgery as soon as possible,” Ensign Souza reported.

“Very well,” Cameron responded without reaction. She wondered how long it would take to become accustomed to people dying under her command.

“Jesus! They’re getting slaughtered down there!” Josh exclaimed as he watched the sensor data being displayed on-screen from the Falcon’s latest attack run on the Jung battle platform.

“Don’t even think about it,” Loki warned as he too monitored the sensor readings.

“Think about what?” Josh defended.

“About jumping us in there to pull off some super-Josh-pilot-maneuver to save the day... That’s what.”

“But...”

“There’s nothing you can do that they aren’t already doing, Josh, and you know it.”

“But it worked before!”

“Just because it worked on one platform doesn’t mean it will work on every platform. Maybe this one has faster gun turrets? Or maybe this one has better tracking systems, or a better commander, or a...”

“All right, all right!” Josh interrupted. “You’ve made your point.” Josh sighed. “It’s just hard to sit here and watch them die, you know?”

“I know,” Loki agreed, “but it’s not our call. Unless ordered otherwise, we sit here and wait... and watch.”

“I can handle the waiting,” Josh said. “It’s the watching that’s hard.” One of the icons on his display screen representing the attacking Falcons suddenly flashed red, then faded away. “Jesus, there goes another one. They’re down to five, Loki.”

“Jump ten, complete,” Mister Riley announced as the Aurora’s jump flash faded, returning the bridge to its usual red-tinged battle lighting.

“Five and a half kilometers from her starboard arm, seven hundred meters above and three hundred to her starboard side.”

“Are the Falcons clear?”

“They’re jumping out now,” Mister Navashee added. “Five jump flashes.”

“Five? That means they lost three in that pass,” Nathan exclaimed. “Comms, order the Falcons to hold at the staging point and await further orders.”

“Yes, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Full spread into the aft side of her starboard arm, Lieutenant,” Nathan ordered. “Fire when ready.”

“Targeting aft aspect, starboard arm. Full spread, aye,” the lieutenant answered.

“Mister Riley, as soon as he fires, jump us forward, even with her forward arm,” Nathan ordered.

“Firing all forward tubes,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“Helm, yaw hard to port as we jump,” Nathan added as the red-orange light of the departing plasma torpedoes flashed over the bridge in rapid succession.

“Firing plasma cannons,” the lieutenant added.

“As soon as our nose comes around and onto their bow, target that hole in her shields and fire everything you’ve got, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Jump plotted and locked,” Mister Riley reported.

“Swing our nose hard to port! Snap jump!”

“Yawing to port!” Mister Chiles responded.

“Jumping!” Mister Riley followed.

“Weapons charged and ready!” Lieutenant Eckert reported as the jump flash washed over the bridge.

“Jump complete!” Mister Riley announced as the jump flash subsided.

“Nose is coming around!” Mister Chiles reported from the helm. “Firing angle in five seconds!”

“Is the hole in her shields still there?” Nathan asked with obvious urgency.

“Yes, sir!” Mister Navashee answered, “and it’s slightly larger than before!”

“Targeting!” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“She’s firing!” Mister Navashee warned from the sensor station. “Incoming rail gun fire! The big stuff!”

The bridge shook violently as rounds from the battle platform’s massive rail guns slammed into the side of their hull.

“Firing all torpedoes!” Lieutenant Eckert announced. “Firing all plasma cannons!”

The bridge flashed with red-orange light as their weapons departed. The bridge shook again and again as more rail gun rounds plowed into them.

"Hull breaches! Port side! Forward sect..."

Nathan was suddenly pushed upward out of his seat momentarily as the entire ship seemed to lunge upward as it shook even more violently than before.

"Fire! Fire in the port forward propellant tank!"

"What?" Nathan exclaimed. "Propellant can't burn without oxygen!"

"They've got to be using some sort of incendiary rounds!" Lieutenant Eckert surmised. "Maybe something with an oxidizing element or somethi..."

The bridge shook again, this time causing them to roll to starboard.

"Jesus!" Nathan exclaimed. "Escape jump! Now, now, now!"

"Jumping!" Mister Riley announced as the bridge again became awash in brilliant, blue-white light.

"Five," the lead pilot of Alpha squadron mumbled in exasperation. "Of fourteen of us, there are only five of us left... And in only five passes. Are we even making a dent in that thing's shields?"

"We hit a few more emitters on that last run, sir," his weapons officer answered from the back of the cockpit. "That's about all I can tell you."

"Can we even survive another run?"

"Doubtful," the weapons officer answered. A light flashed on his console, and he pressed the corresponding button to display an incoming message. "Looks like we won't have to, sir. Message from the Aurora. We're ordered to move to the local staging point and await further orders."

The pilot closed his eyes for a moment, as he accepted that not only had ten of his friends died, but that they had

failed at their mission. Both targets were still alive and fighting back quite vigorously. "The last one had been so easy," he sighed.

"Sometimes you get lucky," the weapons officer said.

"And sometimes you don't," the pilot finished. "Changing course for staging point Bravo Papa."

"Incoming message from the Aurora," Ensign Souza announced from the comm station at the back of the Celestia's bridge. "They're suggesting that we target the hole in the battle platform's starboard shields on her forward arm. They also are warning us to keep some distance to avoid incendiary rail gun fire from the platform's big guns."

"Did they report their battle damage to you?" Cameron wondered.

"No, sir, that was it," Ensign Souza assured her.

"Jump nine plotted and locked," Mister Jakoby reported. "Shall I alter it to put us even with the target's bow?"

"Affirmative," Cameron answered, "and put us another five kilometers out as well."

"Yes, sir."

"Be ready to target that hole in their shields," Cameron added, calling over her right shoulder to her tactical officer behind her.

"Yes, sir," Luis answered from the tactical station.

"Ensign Hunt, bring our nose around so that we're ready to fire."

"Aye, sir."

"I'd like to try and pull this off without taking any of those incendiary rounds, if possible," Cameron added. "So don't any of you wait for my orders. Jump in, fire, jump out."

"Jump nine, recalculated and locked in," Mister Jakoby reported.

Cameron glanced at the helm console directly in front of her, noting the ship's current attitude in relation to their course, as well as the current rate at which the ship was yawing to port. "Snap jump on my mark," she said as she continued to watch the helm's attitude and turn rate displays. "And.....mark."

"Jumping," Mister Jakoby announced as the Celestia's jump flash quickly built, washed over them, and then subsided. "Jump complete."

"I've got the target!" Luis reported. "Locking all weapons."

"Target is firing main rail guns!" Ensign Kono exclaimed.

"Stand by to jump!" Cameron warned.

"Firing all forward torpedoes!" Luis announced as red-orange light flashed repeatedly across the bridge. "Firing plasma cannons!"

"Incoming fire! Five seconds!" Ensign Kono reported.

"All weapons away!" Luis announced as the last plasma cannon fired.

"Jump!" Cameron ordered.

"Jumping!" Mister Jakoby acknowledged.

"Lock onto the battleship's aft end and fire as quickly as possible," Cameron ordered as their jump flash subsided.

"Jump complete!" Mister Jakoby announced.

"Commander!" Ensign Kono called out in alert. "The battleship has changed its attitude!"

"We're looking at her starboard side!" Luis realized, "not her stern!"

"Their shields?"

"Her aft shields are back up, but only at forty percent!" Ensign Kono replied. "Her starboard shields are at full strength!"

"No choice!" Cameron realized. "Fire at will!"

"Firing all forward tubes!" Luis answered as the bridge again filled with red-orange flashes of light.

"I'm picking up a message buoy!" Ensign Souza reported from the comm station. "From the Aurora! They're new jump coordinates!"

"Feed them to navigation!" Cameron ordered.

"Firing plasma cannons!" Luis announced.

"Stand by to jump," Cameron ordered.

"All weapons away!"

"Jump!"

The words had barely past her lips when the blue-white jump flash washed over them again.

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby reported.

"See if we did any damage to either target, Ensign," Cameron ordered her sensor operator.

"Scanning now," Ensign Kono answered.

"It looks like the Aurora has us changing our jump angle to account for the battleship's change in attitude," Mister Jakoby said as he examined the new jump plots transferred to him from the comm station.

"Very well."

"Uh, sir?" Mister Jakoby said. "You might want to look at these."

Cameron leaned forward in her command chair, peering at the jump plotting display. "That's different," she said. "Better triple-check your plot on that last jump, Mister Jakoby, or this battle will be over real quick."

"Yes, sir."

"Comms, send a message to the Aurora and let them know we received the change in plans."

The Jung battleship drifted in high orbit above the Alpha Centauri B system's only inhabited body, the barren moon known as Kent. Bathed in the pale blue light from Kent's parent body, the gas giant Rigel, she looked almost lifeless. However, though her main propulsion systems were seriously damaged, she was far from dead.

Two flashes of blue-white light appeared to either side of the battleship's aft end. They were no more than half a kilometer astern of the battleship, one to her left and one to her right. The two Terran ships, the Aurora and the Celestia, slid toward one another, and toward the center of the battleship's stern, one of them high and the other low. With their bows yawing as they passed to keep their weapons trained on the stern end of the mighty Jung warship, the two ships opened up with all of their energy weapons, firing repeatedly as they slid past one another, crossing along the back end of the target. A dozen balls of red-orange plasma overwhelmed the enemy ship's already weakened aft shields, causing them to fail completely. The rest of the incoming fire plowed into the battleship's damaged main propulsion systems, opening up her aft end. The shock wave of the explosion reverberated off the inside of the enemy ship's shields before the rest of them collapsed, redirecting the blast energy back onto the hull of the battleship, causing a cascade failure of her remaining shield emitters as the two Terran ships disappeared in simultaneous flashes of blue-white light. The great battleship was now helpless, her shields down and her weapons silent, appearing all but dead as she drifted in the pale blue light of the nearby gas giant.

"She's got nearly zero energy emissions!" Mister Navashee reported excitedly. "All of her shields are down. Weapons, main power, life support." The sensor operator turned to look at his captain. "She's adrift, sir!"

Nathan tried, albeit unsuccessfully, not to smile. "We'll let her be for now," he announced. "If we're lucky, that battle platform will try to protect her."

"First turn completed," Mister Chiles announced.

"Jump sixteen, plotted and locked," Mister Riley added.

"Execute jump sixteen," Nathan ordered.

"Jump sixteen, in three....."

"It's a hell of an asset to leave behind," Lieutenant Eckert commented. He was not trying to control his smile.

"Two....."

"At the very least, we've decreased the number of guns shooting at us," Nathan said as his navigator counted down to the next jump.

"One.....jumping."

The Aurora's bridge again became bathed in blue-white light.

"Jump sixteen complete," Mister Riley announced as the jump subsided.

"Executing next turn," Mister Chiles reported from the helm.

"Keep an eye out for the Celestia at her turn point," Nathan reminded his sensor operator. "We should see them coming out of the jump as we finish our turn, even with the delay."

"Yes, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"Damage Control, Captain," Nathan called into his comm-set. "How are we doing, Chief?"

"Well, we're full of holes," Marcus answered over the comms, *"including one in the left side of our bow that's big enough to use as a second hangar bay. But, at least we got the fires out on those decks, so there's that. However, anytime you wanna stop putting us in front of incoming fire, feel free. You'll hear no complaints from me, Captain."*

"Not exactly the concise report I was looking for, Chief."

"Well excuse me, uh, sir. I'm still gettin' the hang of this 'Chief of the Boat' crap!" he retorted, more out of frustration than anything else.

"How are we doing on casualties?"

"Plenty," the chief answered. *"Oh, you're looking for a number, huh."*

Nathan could hear someone talking to the chief in the background.

"Uh, fifteen dead, thirty-seven wounded, I'm told, but there's still about a dozen unaccounted for on D and E decks, forward of that big-ass hole I was tellin' ya about, sir. I've got rescue crews in pressure suits with evac gear searchin' for 'em now."

"Hang in there, Chief. We've still got one more ship to kill," Nathan said. "And it's a big one."

"Great."

"Cheng, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set after switching channels.

"Go ahead, sir!" Vladimir answered of the comms.

"How are we doing?"

"Weapons, power, propulsion, and maneuvering are all good," his chief engineer reported, "as well as the jump drive. But we've lost a lot of emitters. If it wasn't for the redundant array, we'd be in very big trouble right now. But our hull has taken a lot of damage, as usual. And a lot of our monitoring systems are not functioning, so there are probably plenty of things not working that we just don't know about yet."

"Keep things together for a bit longer, Lieutenant Commander. It will be over soon."

"So much for getting in and out without taking any significant damage," Vladimir remarked.

Nathan ignored his friend's comment, killing his comm-set with a tap on the ear piece.

"Second turn complete," Mister Chiles reported. "We're on course for the next attack jump. Bringing our nose around for the attack angle."

Nathan turned toward his sensor operator to his left. "Any sign of the Celestia?" he asked as he glanced at the battle clock. "We've only got thirty seconds until the next jump."

"She just jumped in for her second turn, Captain," Mister Navashee replied. "Add in the time delay, and she's right on time."

“Very well,” Nathan said, looking at the battle clock again. “Mister Riley, execute jump seventeen in fifteen seconds.”

“Jump seventeen, now in twelve seconds,” Mister Riley acknowledged.

“All weapons charged and ready,” Lieutenant Eckert announced.

“Try to put them all in that hole in her shields, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Five seconds,” Mister Riley updated.

“Yaw, complete,” Mister Chiles added. “Attack angle is set.”

“Three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

The blue-white jump flash lit up the inside of the Aurora’s bridge once more. As the flash subsided, the bridge shook violently as explosions reverberated against their hull.

“Mines!” Mister Navashee exclaimed as the explosions continued to rock the Aurora. “Hundreds of them! From all three arms!”

“Fire at will, Lieutenant!” Nathan ordered.

“Firing all forward tubes!”

“They’re spreading out from the big hangar bays at the end of each arm!” Mister Navashee added as the explosions continued.

“Can you maneuver between them?” Nathan demanded to know.

“Maybe,” Mister Chiles replied, “but not without bringing our tubes off the target.”

“Jump flash!” Mister Navashee announced. “The Celestia!”

“Firing all cannons!” the lieutenant reported.

“The mines are changing course!” Mister Navashee warned. “At least the ones nearest us are. They must be guided somehow, either by onboard sensors or by the

platform itself," Mister Navashee continued staring at his sensor displays as he spoke. "Jesus, there are thousands of them!"

"Comms. Warn the Celestia. Tell her to jump out, now!"

"It's too late," Mister Navashee told him. "The closest ones are already swarming toward the Celestia. Multiple impacts. She's taking heavy damage, but she's still firing all her forward tubes!"

The bridge continued to rock as the Jung mines exploded against their hull.

"I've lost forward maneuvering!" Mister Chiles reported. "Port-side laterals as well! Attempting to compensate!"

"Firing a second round of torpedoes!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

The bridge was ablaze with flashes of red, orange, and yellow light, a dazzling mixture of their own plasma weapons departing and then striking the Jung battle platform's shields, and the Jung mines exploding against the Aurora's hull.

"I'm losing more emitters!" Mister Riley warned. "I'm getting multiple cautions on the redundant jump array! If we lose many more..."

"...Can we still jump?" Nathan asked as he held on tightly to the sides of his command chair to keep from being knocked to the floor.

"Yes, sir!" Mister Riley answered, "but not for long!"

"Comms! Tell the Celestia to jump clear; rally at Bravo Papa!"

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Firing all cannons!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Platform's forward shields are down to fifty percent!" Mister Navashee reported. "I think both our fire is making a difference..."

"Captain! We're running out of emitters!" Mister Riley warned, desperation in his voice. "It's now or never!"

"Jump, jump, jump!" Nathan ordered.

The Aurora's navigator did not wait for his captain to complete the order, pressing the button to initiate the jump as soon as he heard the first 'J' sound from his captain.

Nathan was never so happy to see the all too familiar blue-white flash of the jump. Now so more than ever, it felt like a release...a cleansing away of all his troubles...at least for the moment. He took a deep breath to quickly collect himself before speaking. "Helm, turn toward Sol and prepare to jump."

The helmsman turned his head slightly to his left, looking back at his captain.

Nathan nodded at his helmsman.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles answered. "Turning towards Sol."

"Plot the jump, Mister Riley," Nathan added. "Comms, broadcast to all units. Regroup at the rally point. We'll recover the surviving Falcons and transfer the wounded from the Celestia before we jump home."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"And the battle platform?" Lieutenant Eckert wondered.

Nathan could tell by the lieutenant's voice that he was not questioning his captain's decision to break off the attack. The lieutenant was generally concerned for the welfare of their home world. They had just committed the first true overt offensive act against the Jung Empire, and he knew as well as his captain did that the Earth would be the platform's next target.

Nathan slowly rotated his command chair to the right, just enough to look back toward his tactical officer. "We'll have to try something else, Lieutenant."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Incoming vid-link from Celestia Actual," Naralena announced over the intercom.

"Put her on," Nathan said as he plopped down in the chair behind his desk. The large view screen on the forward bulkhead of his ready room came to life, revealing Cameron, also sitting behind a desk in her own ready room. "I don't want to hear it, Cam..."

"Hear what?" she responded from the view screen.

"That I should have gone over instead of under, or zigged instead of zagged..."

"We didn't do anything wrong, Nathan," Cameron interrupted. *"Jesus, stop being so defensive."*

Nathan sighed. "Sorry," he apologized as he leaned back in his chair, "I guess I'm just frustrated. I really expected it to work."

"We all did, and to be honest, it almost did work. After all, we just took out seven Jung warships, and seriously crippled a battleship."

"But the platform was the one that we really wanted," Nathan reminded her. "Maybe you are right, Cam. Maybe we should have attacked the battle platform first. Maybe if we would've concentrated all our resources on that one target from the get-go... Maybe, if we would've caught her off guard..."

"That's a lot of maybes, Nathan. Besides, if we had attacked the platform first, the rest of those ships would've been on us before we could finish the job. Then, not only

would we still have a battle platform to deal with, but we'd still have eight more warships to contend with."

"Perhaps," Nathan sighed again. "Still, it should have worked."

"The guns on this platform were better," Cameron said. "Better, faster, and more precise. It has to take years, more likely decades, to build one of those platforms. Maybe the first one we faced was an earlier model. Besides, with that battleship crippled, the platform is more likely to hang around to protect her, at least until they can protect themselves. Considering the damage we inflicted, that could be months."

"Yeah, you could be right. Still, we're going to have to find a way to destroy not only that platform, but any others we encounter."

"You're thinking about using KKV's, aren't you?" Cameron's tone had become more somber.

Nathan looked up at Cameron's face on the view screen. "Have you got a better idea?"

"Honestly?" This time it was Cameron's side. *"No, I don't. That doesn't mean that I like the idea of using KKV's anymore now than I did before."*

"I don't like it either, Cam," Nathan agreed. "I know the risks. I remember what our KKV's did to the Wallach, but we can't keep getting holes blown in our sides. We're running out of resources to patch ourselves up with. Besides, sooner or later, one or both of us are going to run out of luck."

"In a couple of months the Karuzara will arrive, and we'll be able to make real repairs, maybe even a few upgrades."

"And if the Centauri platform decides to head for Sol?"

"Then we figure out how to deal with it. If necessary, with KKV's."

"I'll remember you said that," Nathan told her. "I ordered Prechitt to leave a Falcon behind to keep an eye on that platform. If it moves, we'll know."

"Even if it does, it will take them four months, minimum, to reach us."

"Four months is not much time, Cam, especially considering the condition of Earth's infrastructure at the moment." Nathan looked directly at Cameron's eyes on the view screen again. "It's going to come down to KKV's. We both know that."

Cameron said nothing for nearly a full minute. *"And if doing so escalates things?"*

"Jesus, Cam, they're already trying to glass us. How much more can it escalate? Besides, if we hit them with KKV's they'll never see it coming. They won't have a chance to let anyone know what happened. Especially if we catch them in open space."

"And how do you propose we force them out of FTL?" Cameron asked.

"Maybe we don't have to."

"It's hard enough to hit a target traveling at sub-light speed, Nathan."

"I don't know," Nathan admitted in frustration. "We'll figure something out later. We don't even have any KKV's right now, so it's a moot argument at this point. However, I am going to ask Commander Dumar to expedite the weaponizing of a few comm-drones for us."

"Nathan..."

"I'm not saying I'm going to use them yet," Nathan interrupted. "I just want to have the option, that's all." Nathan looked at the screen again as Cameron nodded her acceptance of the situation. "Have you finished transferring your wounded over to us?"

"The evacuation will be complete within the hour," Cameron promised.

"Very well." Nathan leaned back in his chair, confident that they had exhausted the topic of how to deal with the Centauri battle platform. "We'll jump back to Sol as soon as you're done. As soon as you finish making urgent repairs,

you'll need to start making runs to Tanna to ferry back relief aid for Earth."

"Understood. It shouldn't take long for us to get under way. Most of the repairs can be done in transit or on our recharge layovers."

"Of course," Nathan agreed. Nathan looked at the monitor on his desk, calling up damage reports. "Is there anything else, Commander?"

"No, sir," Cameron answered.

"I'll expect a full damage report by the end of the day," Nathan added in business-like fashion.

"Of course, sir."

* * *

General Bacca had already been waiting patiently in Admiral Toliva's outer reception area when one of the aides finally invited him into the admiral's office. As irritating as such games were, the general was well versed in them. While the admiral was being deliberately disrespectful, the general knew not to let it bother him. Such was the nature of the upper ranks of the Jung military. So vast was the empire in comparison to the speeds at which one could travel its breadth, the independence required of its regional commanders tended to breed enormous egos. Admiral Toliva's was no exception.

"Admiral," General Bacca greeted with a slight nod of his head. Being of technically equal rank, a salute from either man was inappropriate. The weakness of the admiral's expected handshake confirmed what the general expected; that the admiral had granted the meeting out of procedural requirement rather than of genuine interest, let alone respect.

"General," the admiral responded. "You wished to speak with me?"

"Indeed."

“Please.” The admiral gestured toward the four overstuffed chairs clustered around a small serving table off to one side of his lavishly decorated office. “Make yourself comfortable.”

The two commanders moved to the overstuffed chairs in expeditious fashion. As they sat, another aide appeared. The admiral glanced at the aide, making a gesture that sent the aide scampering off to perform the requested task.

“Am I correct in assuming that the purpose of your visit concerns the recent arrival of the Ton-Tori’s communications drone?” the admiral asked.

“You are correct,” the general responded.

“Shocking news, really.”

The general turned his head slightly in response, cocking it to one side. “Then my suspicions have been confirmed. The Aurora has defeated the Ton-Tori.” The general’s tone did not infer a question, but rather a statement of fact.

“Yes,” the admiral admitted. “Unfortunate as it is, it appears that your threat assessment of both the Aurora and her captain was not an exaggeration. Please, forgive me for doubting you, General. However, at the time, the idea that a single ship could take down a Jung battle platform seemed so ridiculous that...”

“It’s quite all right, Admiral,” General Bacca assured him, despite the fact that every fiber of his being wanted to slap the pompous commander across his wrinkled face. “Had I not witnessed it first hand, I too would not have believed such claims. The Aurora, more precisely her subluminal transition system, represents the greatest threat the empire shall ever face.”

The admiral seemed surprised by General Bacca’s statement. “While I agree that this technology *is* a significant threat, don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“Hardly,” General Bacca argued.

“It is only a single ship.”

“According to the data from the Ton-Tori’s communications drone, it is now two ships, as well as at least a dozen interceptors that now have this capability.”

“Regardless,” the admiral continued, still appearing less concerned than the general would have expected, “when compared to both the number, and the combined firepower of the Jung Empire... Frankly, the idea that they could pose a serious threat is still ludicrous at best.”

“The Aurora already defeated one of your mighty battle platforms,” General Bacca reminded the admiral.

“And then failed to defeat this one,” Admiral Toliva countered. “The Ton-Tori was taken by surprise. Her commander was overconfident, and to be honest, I was never impressed with Admiral Jerral’s tactical prowess.”

“Be that as it may, the Aurora’s hit and run tactics have proven to be most effective...”

“The Jung have not faced a serious enemy for over a century,” the admiral interrupted. “This has led to complacency among those of us in command. Had you not alerted me to the Aurora’s capabilities, I might have been caught off guard as well. For that, I thank you. However, such hit and run tactics have been tried in the past, by the Jung as well as many of our former enemies. They failed then, and they shall fail now.”

“The difference now is that the Terrans can move about the galaxy much faster than we can. They can jump past our lines and attack anywhere they choose. They can cut off supply lines. They can pick off our warships one by one.”

The admiral’s aide returned carrying a tray of hot beverages and small finger foods.

“A war of attrition?” Admiral Toliva laughed as he took the cup handed to him. “Against an empire possessing hundreds of warships, and more than a dozen battle platforms?”

“It is not as far-fetched as you apparently would like to believe,” General Bacca retorted, his disdain for the

admiral's ignorance obvious in his tone.

"While the Terrans' new warships may be able to destroy our frigates and cruisers with relative ease, our platforms will present a significant obstacle," the admiral insisted, "as demonstrated by their failed attack against this very station only a day ago."

General Bacca sipped at his hot spice drink before speaking again. "As you yourself pointed out, Admiral, their failure was mostly the result of your foreknowledge of their capabilities, just as the destruction of the Ton-Tori was due to their lack thereof."

Admiral Toliva's eyebrows rose slightly in reluctant acceptance of the general's point. "Then we must see to it that the rest of the Empire is made aware of this threat, so that they may properly prepare."

General Bacca sighed. It was well known that the commanders of battle platforms were not chosen for their tactical or strategic abilities, but rather for their administrative expertise. The sheer scale of the platforms made such skills a requirement. However, because the battle platforms were also heavily armed, and many of them carried small fleets of ships as well, their leaders often saw themselves as great military leaders... which they were not. "Therein lies the problem," the general began, hiding the frustration that he felt at the need to explain such a simple fact to a man who held the rank of admiral. "Even with our fastest communications drones, we cannot hope to outrun the Terrans' STS technology. The Ton-Tori's communications drone traveled here at one hundred times light, and it still took more than two weeks to arrive. If Captain Scott chooses to go on the offensive, as he has just proven he is willing to do, he could quite literally attack every target in Jung space in far less time than it would take for word of the threat to reach even the nearest Jung stronghold."

Admiral Toliva's eyes squinted slightly as he considered the general's words. "The nearest forces would be in the Tau

Ceti system," he finally said. "Then you expect him to attack there next?"

"He will attack whatever forces represent the most immediate threats to Earth. His world is in shambles, their infrastructure all but ruined. Without infrastructure, he cannot wage war, especially not against so many ships. It is only logical that he would attempt to clear as wide a sphere of safety as possible about his homeworld."

"I see your point," the admiral admitted.

Finally, the general thought.

"Of course, their ships have no shields, and therefore they are quite easy to damage, even when they employ such hit and run tactics. It was merely a matter of throwing enough mines in their possible paths, and this station can produce such mines by the thousands."

"They are not alone, Admiral," the general reminded.

"Ah, yes, these 'Takarans' you spoke of in your reports. They are nearly a thousand light years away, are they not? Surely you don't believe they can be an effective ally?"

"I believe that if they cannot, then their technology most likely can. Remember, it only took two months for the Aurora to jump her way back to Earth from the Pentaurus cluster."

"But the logistics alone would make support of an ally so distant all but impossible."

"Not impossible, only more difficult. And when you compare their logistical timetables with their friends in the Pentaurus cluster with the empire's timetables within only one hundred light years, they still have a significant logistical advantage. That is why they must be stopped now, before the Earth has a chance to rebuild, and before their allies can provide the assistance they need."

Admiral Toliva's left eyebrow shot up suspiciously. "You are suggesting that I move this platform to the Sol system," he said as he set his cup down on the service tray on the small serving table between them. "I should tell you,

General, that my orders do not include attacking the Sol system."

"The Ton-Gar's desire to make Earth their seat of power has been known by all Jung commanders for several decades now," the general reminded the admiral, "since we first began picking up emissions from Earth once again."

"Of course."

"Therefore, it is the duty of every field commander to do whatever he feels will best serve the Ton-Gar's needs. I believe that if any of the Ton-Gar were here with us, their orders would be to capture or destroy the Aurora, and to retake the Earth, destroying all human life on the surface if necessary. I was unable to accomplish that task with the forces at my disposal, and shall carry the shame of that failure for the rest of my days." The general looked the admiral in the eyes as he spoke. "You, Admiral, are in the rather envious position of having not only the opportunity, but the power to give the Ton-Gar that which they most desire."

General Bacca continued to watch Admiral Toliva's face as the reality of his situation began to set in. As he had always suspected, the administrator in him prevented the admiral from thinking in such terms. Military conquest and imperial respect were not the goals of administrators. Theirs were of position and control... More importantly, of maintaining that which they had acquired. It was to this side of the admiral that General Bacca had appealed.

Admiral Toliva's eyes began to sparkle. "And what of the Jar-Pontahk?"

"Sacrifices must be made, Admiral," General Bacca replied coldly, "for the greater good of the empire."

* * *

The odd-looking, old ship coasted toward the massive storage array orbiting on the outer edge of the Takaran

system. It had four massive engine pods sitting at the ends of four truss-like structures, all emanating from a central fuselage with a small housing sitting atop its center.

Despite its impressive size, the ship was dwarfed by the approaching storage array. Rows of cargo pods of varying sizes and shapes, lined the array's many arms. Despite their variety, they all bore the same distinctive markings... that of the Ghatazhak.

The ship fired its maneuvering thrusters, slowing its approach to the storage array. Minutes later, it fired them again, reducing its closure rate to nearly an indiscernible rate to the human eye. Minutes after that, it made gentle contact with the nearest pod on the array. The gangly looking ship inserted its clamps into the cargo pod's recessed mooring points, pulling the pod into its underside to hold it firm for the long voyage that lay ahead.

Another blast of its thrusters moved the old cargo ship and its now-attached cargo pod away from the storage array. Thrusters facing aft caused it to accelerate laterally from the storage array. It fired its main engines and made a slow, graceful turn back in the direction from which it had come. Minutes later, the ship, and its cargo, disappeared in a brilliant blue-white flash.

* * *

"Look me in the eyes and tell me you haven't thought about it," Vladimir insisted, pointing his loaded fork at Nathan.

Nathan looked at his friend sitting across the table from him in the captain's mess. "I've never even thought about it."

"Liar," Vladimir responded as he put the fork full of food into his mouth.

"Are sex and food the only things you think about?"

"Mostly," Vladimir answered, still chewing. "And the ship... Oh, and sleep... Which I get very little of these days, thanks to you."

"What ever happened to 'I can fix anything'?" Nathan retorted.

"What ever happened to 'quick and clean,' or 'in and out as quickly as possible'?"

"File your complaints with the Jung high command," Nathan said, "*if* you can find them."

"*Da, da, da!* What is that all about? How can no one know where the Jung homeworld is located?"

"From what Telles tells me, not even the Jung commanders know its location. At least that's what the prisoners he has interrogated tell him."

"How do they get home?" Vladimir wondered.

"Apparently, very few of them are actually from the Jung homeworld. Most were born and raised on Jung-conquered worlds... worlds that have been under Jung control for so long that no one alive knows anything else."

"How do you hide a world?"

"I really don't know," Nathan admitted.

"Where do their ships come from?"

"We don't know a lot about that. So far, Telles has learned that there are many Jung shipyards located all over the core, and even a few in the fringe. It makes sense, when you think about it. Keep your production capacity spread out instead of all in one place," Nathan explained. "Makes it more difficult to put a significant dent in their production capabilities."

Vladimir nodded to the side, indicating partial agreement. "Not so much, *when* you have jump drives."

"Jump drives just get you there more quickly," Nathan said.

"*And* they get you past defensive perimeters."

"But you still have to put yourself into the kill zone in order to do any damage."

"Da, da, da," Vladimir agreed. *"Ya znaioo.* The reason I get so little sleep."

"We need shields, Vlad," Nathan urged.

"I know, Nathan, I know," Vladimir assured his captain. "But the only way I can give you shields now is if we use the jump emitters to generate those shields. If you want to have shields up and jump at the same time, we need not only an entirely separate emitter array, but a dedicated power source as well. All of that takes time, and preferably a shipyard, which we do not have at the moment."

"We only use two reactors to charge the jump drive, right? And in battle, we're not even using those reactors. We're using the power already stored in the jump drive's energy banks."

"Shields and jump drives are not the only things using power," Vladimir reminded him. "Main propulsion, maneuvering, weapons... Are you aware of how much power it takes to fire a plasma cannon? In battle, I have one reactor running the entire ship, another running propulsion and maneuvering, and the other two powering weapons."

"I've read the reports, Vlad," Nathan countered. "Ship's systems, propulsion, and maneuvering could all be run from a single reactor."

"If I run that reactor at eighty to ninety percent!" Vladimir argued. "Not a good level for a reactor during battle, my friend. And if one reactor goes down, what are you going to give up? Weapons, flight, or shields?"

"Systems can be run on the backup fusion reactors," Nathan said. "You told me so yourself."

"Da, that was a mistake," Vladimir mumbled as he took another bite of his breakfast.

"What, it can't?"

"No, they can," Vladimir corrected. "I meant it was a mistake to tell you that."

"What?"

"It is just like the one hour rule."

“Okay, you’ve lost me now.”

“Lieutenant Commander Patel taught me to always estimate an hour for something you can do in ten minutes. Then your captain will think you are a miracle worker.”

“Or that you suck at estimating task completion times,” Nathan countered. “So, is that what you’ve been doing? Padding your estimates?”

“Actually, no. I usually forget to do this.” Vladimir grinned. “Mostly.”

“*Captain, Comms,*” Naralena’s voice called over Nathan’s comm-set.

Nathan tapped the side of his comm-set. “Go ahead.”

“Incoming message from Karuzara, sir.”

Nathan looked at the wall clock. “I thought the comm-drone wasn’t due back for two more hours?”

“*The message comes via a new drone,*” Naralena explained. “*The message explains that this drone will serve as a dedicated link between Sol and Corinair. There are several production reports and resource availability estimates from Karuzara as well.*”

“Very, well,” Nathan answered. “Queue them up in my ready room. I’ll read them when I get there.”

“*Yes, sir.*”

“And pass the word to the XO. He’ll probably want to let our Corinairan crew members know that they can now communicate with their families back home.”

“*Yes, sir.*”

“That will make most of the crew very happy,” Vladimir commented.

“Yes, it will,” Nathan agreed, “and they deserve it.”

* * *

“How did we get stuck with this job again?” Josh inquired from the front of their Falcon’s cockpit.

"Everyone else has done it, why not us?" Loki answered as he watched his sensor displays.

"Oh, yeah." Josh thought for a moment. "But I thought we were supposed to be going through training?"

"You brought your data pad, didn't you?"

"Always."

"Then start studying."

"I already have been, and I'm already bored. This cold-coasting stuff sucks."

"Josh, we've only been at it for six and a half hours," Loki exclaimed.

"Only? You call six and a half hours of sitting on our asses, *only*?"

"Compared to the estimated eighteen hours this mission is expected to last, yes."

"God, shoot me now," Josh groaned.

"I am armed, you know."

"Funny." Josh lifted his visor and rubbed his eyes. "I can't read these training manuals anymore."

"We're supposed to stay on suit systems during cold-coasts, Josh," Loki reminded him. "That means visor closed. We don't want your body heat increasing the canopy's thermal signature."

"I had an itch, okay!" Josh exclaimed as he closed his visor again. "It's closed! You happy?"

"Delighted. If you're tired of reading the Corinari flight training manuals, then call up the broadcast bands and watch some of the media stuff coming from Kent."

"I already did that as well. It's just news and stuff. You know, they actually had some interesting stuff on there the last time we coasted through here. Not any more, though. Now the only thing people are talking about is how the Jung got their asses handed to them by a couple of unknown ships."

"Nothing about the two Jung ships that are still there?" Loki wondered.

“Nope.”

“Kind of odd, don’t you think?”

“Well, I mean, there’s some talk about them. People are wondering what they’re doing, why there hasn’t been a single shuttle going between the Jung ships and Kent. Some people think the Jung are getting ready to leave, while others think they’re just taking care of the damaged battleship, and they’ll start sending shuttles back down to Kent sometime soon.”

“They still got forces on the surface of Kent though, don’t they?”

“Yeah, but nowhere near as many as before. Apparently, the Jung used to censor the media broadcasts pretty tightly. Now they aren’t censoring anything. That’s why a lot of people think the Jung are getting ready to pull out.”

“Then they should be happy,” Loki observed.

“You’d think, but they aren’t,” Josh explained. “I mean, they are. Most of them, anyway. But a lot of them are scared. They talk about how the Jung don’t leave worlds behind. When they finish with them, they destroy them.”

“How do they know this?”

“I don’t know. They argue about that as well. They accuse the people predicting that the Jung will destroy them all before they leave of spreading fear for their own purposes.”

“I don’t know,” Loki said, “it sounds pretty interesting to me.”

“It was, for about the first two hours. Now it’s all the same arguments, over and over.”

“You can always watch the sensor displays,” Loki suggested. “There’s an endless stream of shuttles going back and forth between the battle platform and the battleship.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Not too surprising, either. My guess is that they’re trying to repair her... Get her under way again.”

“Not a chance,” Loki disagreed. “Her main propulsion is shot. She has damage all over her hull, including several breaches, and at least seventy percent of her emitters are down. She’s not going anywhere. If anything, they’re stripping her so that they don’t leave anything of use behind.”

“How long have they been doing that?” Josh wondered.

“According to the logs from Falcons Two and Three, more than thirty hours now,” Loki explained.

“Well, it is a big ship,” Josh decided. “There’s got to be a lot of useful stuff on board, right?”

“Sure, but some of those cargo shuttles are pretty big, maybe three times the size of our cargo shuttles.”

“Like I said, a lot of stuff.” Josh stretched slightly, then shifted in his seat. “Maybe I’ll take a nap. You’re wide awake, right? You’ve got all that fascinating sensor data to keep your eyes open, right?”

“Uh...”

“I’ll set my suit alarm for four hours, then you can take a nap.”

“Josh...”

“Come on, Loki. It’s not like I’m going anywhere. You can buzz me if you need me. You like that, buzzing me.”

“Josh, the platform is moving.”

“What?”

“It’s moving. It’s moving away from Kent and Rigel.”

“Where’s it going?” Josh wondered, sitting up straight and looking at his own sensor displays. “Sol?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so. The trajectory is wrong. I mean, it’s close, but it’s wrong.”

“Maybe they’re going to turn before they go to FTL.”

“A ship that size doesn’t turn unless it has to, Josh, and it doesn’t have to. It would just start its departure burn at the right moment to put it on the course it wanted. It takes a ton of energy to...”

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I remember. Energy, momentum, blah, blah, blah. Should we jump back and tell the Aurora?"

"We can't leave until she goes to FTL," Loki reminded him, "otherwise we'll have no idea what direction she's headed."

"That could take hours." Josh continued looking at the sensor displays. "There's still shuttles going back and forth, though."

"There are some coming up from the surface as well," Loki added, "but they're not going to the battleship. They're headed for the platform."

"But she's leaving."

"Those shuttles will still be able to reach her for a while. Probably right up until she goes into FTL."

"But they're not headed for Sol, right?" Josh asked.

"No, at least not directly."

"What do you mean, not directly?"

"They're headed in that general direction, but not actually toward Sol. More like halfway between Eta Cassiopeiae and Mu Cassiopeiae."

"Eta Cassiopeiae is sixteen light years away, Loki. Why the hell would they be going there?"

"How am I supposed to know? It doesn't matter anyway. Either way, we have to sit here and track that thing until they go to FTL. *Then* we jump back to Sol and report in."

* * *

"Lieutenant," Jessica greeted as she strolled up to the group of Ghatazhak assembled in the Aurora's main hangar deck.

Lieutenant Telles looked the lieutenant commander up and down, taking note of the fact that she was dressed in her standard combat gear, and was armed. "Going somewhere, sir?"

“With you,” Jessica answered. “Thought I could use some fresh sea air, maybe a walk on the beach.”

“In full combat gear?”

“Yeah, well, a bikini didn’t seem appropriate, what with half the planet being in ruins and all.”

“I am assuming that Captain Scott knows that you are coming along,” the lieutenant said.

“His idea, actually,” she told him as she checked her weapons. “I guess he’s afraid you and your boys will scare the locals. Friendly face, and all that.”

“And he chose you?”

“Hey, I can do friendly,” she exclaimed as she brushed past the lieutenant to board the waiting shuttle.

“This should be interesting,” Master Sergeant Jahal stated as he followed the lieutenant commander past Telles and headed up the ramp as well.

“Indeed.”

Ten minutes later, the shuttle was descending through the clouds over the Atlantic, making its way down to its destination from orbit.

“Why the Azores?” Jessica asked.

“Location, climate, size, defensibility,” the lieutenant answered. “Most of the chaos is in the Americas, southern Europe, and Africa. Once we get more combat jumpers, we should be able to respond to those areas with ease from that location.”

Jessica looked out the porthole as the shuttle broke through the clouds, revealing the small island below. “Why Porto Santo Island?”

“Big enough to support our operations without crowding out the locals, yet not too big to defend. It also has several smaller barren islands around it on which we can place automated long-range defenses.”

"Against what?" Jessica wondered. "Orbital bombardment? Seriously?"

"It is not attack by the Jung that we are concerned about."

"Our own people?"

"The Ghatazhak will be enforcing martial law across your world. There will be many who will oppose the idea, and many of *them* will be armed."

"The whole thing seems like a bad idea, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps," the lieutenant agreed, "but a necessary one."

"*Lieutenant,*" the copilot's voice called over Lieutenant Telles's helmet comms. "*We're two minutes from touchdown. We'll be putting down in the city center, just as you asked.*"

"Understood," the lieutenant answered. "Once we disembark, lift off and hold position at a safe distance until we secure the area."

"*Yes, sir.*"

"Trying to attract a crowd?" Jessica wondered.

"A bit direct, I grant you," Telles admitted, "but the leaders of the community and local law enforcement will be less likely to engage out of fear than those on the outskirts of the city."

"What outskirts," Jessica wondered as she gazed out the window at the tiny coastal city below. "I've seen college campuses bigger than that."

"*One minute.*"

The city center was quiet, with only a few people on the streets when the shuttle came swooping in from offshore. Its engines screaming, it came to hover directly over the intersection of the small city's two main streets, right in front of the local city services complex. Those few people that were in the area immediately took shelter, ducking into

the few local businesses that were still open, as well as the city services building itself.

Two policemen, each carrying a shotgun and sidearm, came running out of the main building as the shuttle touched down and dropped its rear loading ramp. Eight Ghatazhak soldiers, four on each side, came running down the ramp. They spread out to either side, taking up positions surrounding the shuttle as Lieutenant Telles, Master Sergeant Jahal, and Lieutenant Commander Nash came down the ramp after them. The two policemen ducked back inside, after quickly lowering their shotguns to more non-threatening positions.

The shuttle's engines roared again as it lifted off and climbed out to safety. Lieutenant Telles led the way toward the city services building, with Jessica and the master sergeant in tow. A slight gesture by the lieutenant, and two of the Ghatazhak closest to the building ran up the steps and slipped inside the front doors.

The lieutenant heard no gunfire from the building as he approached, only the shouts of his own men inside. "*Clear inside,*" the call came over the lieutenant's helmet comms.

Lieutenant Telles stepped confidently into the building as two more Ghatazhak came in from behind. He looked about at the faces of the locals inside. The two policemen, a clerk, and three older men. Two of the older men were wearing uniforms, although they were not the same. "We require the use of your island," he stated with authority.

"Jesus," Jessica mumbled as she entered from behind the lieutenant. "Is that how you ask nicely?"

Lieutenant Telles looked at Jessica. "The Ghatazhak do not 'ask nicely'."

"Apparently," she said as she continued past him. "Who is in charge here?" she asked the three older gentlemen.

"He is," one of the policemen said, pointing to the only senior gentleman that wasn't wearing a uniform.

“Relax,” Jessica whispered to the officer as she passed, noticing the frightened look in his eyes. “They’re not going to hurt you.”

“As long as you don’t touch your weapons,” Master Sergeant Jahal added for both officers’ benefit.

Jessica removed her helmet, smiling as she walked up to the three senior men standing in the middle of the office. “You guys must be the ones in charge,” she said, looking them over.

One of the locals in the room said something to Jessica in an unfamiliar language.

“He does not speak Angla,” Lieutenant Telles stated.

“No kidding,” Jessica answered. “It’s not Spanish, I know that.”

“I believe the primary language here is Portuguese,” the lieutenant stated.

“Someone around here has got to speak English,” Jessica said.

“I speak English,” the man in civilian clothing said, his voice broken and unsure.

“Great,” Jessica exclaimed. She looked at Telles. “See, this guy speaks English.” She turned back to the gentlemen. “Are you the mayor?”

“Yes, I am. I am Eduardo Borges. I am the Mayor of Porto Santo.”

“Nice to meet you, Mayor Borges,” Jessica said in as sincere a fashion as possible. “I’m Lieutenant Commander Nash, chief of security for the UES Aurora. Have you heard of the Aurora?”

“Yes, yes,” the mayor assured her. “Who among us has not?”

“Great. This is Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak,” she added, gesturing toward the lieutenant. “You’ve probably heard of the Ghatazhak as well, I imagine.”

“Yes,” the mayor replied, his expression becoming far less enthusiastic.

“Don’t worry,” she told the mayor, “they’re not as bad as everyone thinks. They’re actually pretty good guys.” Jessica turned toward Telles again. “Right, Lieutenant?” She made a face at him to go along. “Smile,” she told him under her breath.

A pained look came across the lieutenant’s face.

Jessica was slightly taken aback. “Seriously? That’s the best you can do?” She turned back to the mayor again. “You’re just going to have to trust me on that one.”

“What did he mean when he said he required use of our island?” the mayor asked.

“Well,” Jessica began, “what he means is that we would like to make a base of operations for the Ghatazhak on your little island here, and we were sort of hoping that you would be, you know, supportive of the idea?”

“Here? Why here?” the mayor wondered.

“Location, size, layout, nice sandy beaches, good weather, you know, the usual stuff,” Jessica answered.

The mayor leaned closer to Jessica, as if he did not want the others to hear his words. “But, they are killers.”

“Yeah, technically,” Jessica admitted, trying to play it off, “but they’re *our* killers. They work for us.”

“But they killed all those people,” the mayor reminded her. “I saw this on the net. It is true, yes?”

“Well, yes, but they were acting under orders...”

“Who would give such an order?”

“That’s not important right now,” Jessica told him, trying to change the subject. “What’s important is that they would like to use your island for their base.”

The mayor looked at the Ghatazhak again. They were dressed in their standard, flat black combat armor, most of them with their visors down. “Do we have a choice?”

Jessica’s head bobbed back and forth, not really indicating a clear yes or no. “Yes and no,” she said sheepishly. “Yes, as in you can agree to cooperate, but no,

as in, if you refuse we'll just round you all up and move you somewhere else, and still take your island."

The mayor looked at Jessica. "This hardly seems like a choice."

Jessica's head hung down. "Can we talk alone for a moment?" she asked, leading him away from the others. They moved to the far edge of the room, out of earshot of the rest of the people in the office. "Look, Mayor Borges, I know it seems unfair and all. I get that. But you've got to understand that things are pretty bad right now. The Earth is messed up. We're out there," she continued, pointing upward, "in space, fighting the Jung, day in and day out. We can't do that without help. Help from the Earth. We need the Earth's support. Her infrastructure, her industrial assets, we need all of that stuff, if we are going to continue fighting."

"But we are just a small island of farmers and fisherman," the mayor objected. "We cannot provide such..."

"These men, and the reinforcements that will soon be joining them, are tasked with the job of bringing order back from the chaos that the world is experiencing in the wake of the Jung attacks. Without order, the Earth's recovery will take considerably longer. In fact, without order, the Earth may never recover."

The mayor looked at Jessica again as he contemplated her words. "So, we are replacing one dictator with another."

"I know that it looks that way, sir, and maybe we are, but it's only temporary, until the governments of our world can get back on their feet and maintain order on their own."

"History is full of such promises," the mayor told her, "and they are almost always broken."

Jessica looked at the floor for a moment, searching for a different angle with which to convince Mayor Borges to cooperate. "How long has it been since you have received any goods from the mainland?"

“Several months, at least,” the mayor admitted. “Since the Jung were first driven away, I think. Maybe a few ships since then.”

“How are you doing on basic supplies? Things like medicines, equipment, fuels... You know, the stuff you use day in and day out?”

“Most things have been rationed, including water.”

“You have a desalination plant, don’t you?”

“Yes, but we try not to run it any more than necessary, for fear that it will break down, and then we will have nothing. We can barely even water our crops. If it were not for the sea, we would starve.”

“Well, the Ghatazhak will change all of that,” Jessica promised. “Our people will keep your desalination plant working. We will provide medicines, supplies, equipment... Well, maybe not a lot of medicine. I mean, we’re pretty short ourselves, and let’s face it, those guys almost never get sick. But, they need food. Heck, they eat four times as much as the average person, so they need lots of food.”

“They will buy our crops?”

“Well, no. They don’t have any money. None of us do, really. But you can help each other. The Ghatazhak will have the support of the Aurora, the Celestia, and the rest of the Alliance. Your lives will be vastly improved by their presence on your island.”

“And if the Jung return?” the mayor asked. “We shall be directly targeted.”

“If the Jung return, they won’t bother with targets,” Jessica admitted. “They’ll probably just wipe out everyone from orbit and start over.”

The mayor sighed as he looked about the room. “How much of the island will they need?” he finally asked.

“It was not necessary to negotiate with the locals,” Lieutenant Telles said as they walked down the steps of the

city services building to the street below. "We could have simply started our operations, and there would have been little they could have done to stop us."

"This way, they won't even try to stop you," Jessica argued. "Hell, they'll even help feed you."

"They would have fed us either way."

"Well, this way they won't pee on the crops before you take them. Besides, everyone on this little island probably knows each other. If a Jung spy were to try to infiltrate their ranks, they'd spot him."

"Assuming that spy has not already been among them for decades."

"You're kidding, right?"

Lieutenant Telles looked at her, managing the slightest of smiles as he tapped the comm control on the side of his helmet. "This is Telles, ready for pickup."

"Copy that. Be there in three," the shuttle's copilot answered.

"Better sugar than vinegar," Jessica said.

Telles looked at her again.

"By the way," she continued, "we need to work on your smile."

* * *

"The platform just went to FTL," Loki announced from the rear of Falcon One's cockpit.

"Finally," Josh exclaimed. "Same course?"

"Yup. Still halfway between Mu and Eta."

"At least now we can go home," Josh said, straightening up in his seat and switching his main display to flight mode.

"Hold on."

"What? Why?"

Loki stared at his sensors.

"What's going on?" Josh asked as he switched his primary display back to the sensors.

"The battleship... It's moving."

"I thought it was dead... As in *not* moving."

"Main propulsion was down, as was power generation."

"Well, if it's moving then it must have power again."

"It does," Loki agreed. "In fact, one of its antimatter reactors has just come back online."

"If main propulsion is down, then all that's left is maneuvering. Where can they go with that?" Josh wondered. "Hell, they can't even break orbit..."

"They're not," Loki interrupted. "They're slowing down. They're dropping out of orbit... Toward Kent."

"What?"

"Their reactor's power output is increasing."

"There must be at least a skeleton crew on board."

"They're really starting to slow down now. They're falling to the surface."

"What the hell? That thing can't land, right?"

"No, it can't," Loki assured him. "I don't understand..." Loki stopped mid-sentence as the readings on his sensor display suddenly rocketed. "What the hell?"

"Oh, my God," Josh declared. "Was that..."

Loki was speechless for a moment, his eyes fixed on his sensor display. "I think it was."

Josh's eyes were also fixed on his sensor display. "Loki? Where's Kent?"

"It's... It's gone."

"It can't be gone, Loki. It's a moon... A damn big moon at that!"

"All I'm showing is debris, Josh," Loki insisted. "Lots and lots of debris, as well as a full spectrum discharge from a matter-antimatter event."

"They drove their ship into a moon and set off their antimatter reactors?" Josh couldn't believe what he was saying. "No way."

"That's what it looks like."

“Who does that?” Josh exclaimed. “How many people were on that moon?”

“Several million, at least.” Loki still couldn’t believe what had just happened. “Fuck, Josh... They just scuttled their ship, and took out an entire civilization with it.”

“We have to get back and report this, Loki.”

“Yeah, right,” Loki agreed, snapping out of his stupor. “Plotting a jump sequence back to Sol.”

Josh switched his main display back to flight mode, and started powering up the Falcon’s flight systems. “I’m starting to think our enlistment might not have been such a great idea after all, Loki.”

* * *

“Our overall propellant storage capacity has been reduced by twenty percent,” Commander Willard reported, “however, based on our usage patterns, I don’t expect it to be of significance.”

“We can always pump some over from the Celestia when she returns from Tanna,” Nathan told him as he continued to study the reports on his desktop view screen. “She can top off again on her next trip back.”

“How many runs will she need to make?” the XO wondered.

“As many as it takes,” Nathan said. “They can make most of their repairs en route, and the Earth needs the relief aid that Tanna is providing.”

“Maybe we both should be making relief runs?”

“Until the Ghatazhak are reinforced, have a base operating on the surface, and have a few combat jumpers, one of us needs to stay in orbit as much as possible.”

“It’s not like we can do anything to keep the peace on the surface from orbit,” Commander Willard said.

“It’s a psychological thing,” Nathan explained, “at least that’s what President Scott believes.”

"How's your father doing?"

"Tired, stressed, overworked; just like everyone else I suppose."

"I don't see how he can deal with the chaos as well as he seems to."

"He takes it one crisis at a time," Nathan mumbled as he studied the reports again. "Always has."

Commander Willard turned slightly in his chair to point at the ship's schematics currently displayed on the large view screen on the forward bulkhead of the captain's ready room. "Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy thinks he can permanently seal off the middle baffle in the damaged propellant tank, then remove the damaged forward half and use parts of it for hull repairs."

"How hard will it be to pull those sections out?"

"He says it can be done without a shipyard. It's not a proper repair, but it will give us back that depressurized section again. That will make internal repairs easier in that area."

Nathan looked at the schematics for a moment. "What percentage of our total propellant did we use in the Centauri engagement?" he wondered.

The XO tapped some buttons on his data pad, then turned back to his captain. "Less than twenty percent."

"And in the original liberation of Earth?"

"Thirty-seven percent," the commander answered after tapping a few more buttons. "However, we were operating at higher speeds during those battles. To be honest, Captain, we've not used more than half of our total propellant in a single engagement since we first liberated Tanna."

"Which includes several trips between Earth and Tanna, all of which were jumped at less than a quarter light, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Maybe we don't even need to carry so much propellant." Nathan suggested. "After all, this ship was originally designed to travel using linear FTL propulsion, which uses a lot of propellant to get up to transition speeds. With the jump drive, we don't need such capabilities."

"What would you do with the gained space?" Commander Willard inquired.

"I don't know. Weapons? Cargo? Expand our pressurized crew space? There's got to be something we could do with the space we would gain."

"I'll run it past the cheng," Commander Willard said. "Personally, I'd choose more plasma cannons."

"Me too," Nathan agreed.

"In fact, we also have unused space in the aft section," the commander added. He turned back toward the main view screen on the forward bulkhead, switching schematics with his data pad. "Here and here," he said, highlighting the indicated sections on the ship's schematics, "on either side, above each outboard engine. Five bays per side, complete with bay doors that open to the outside. All of them can be pressurized as well. They're accessible via the access tunnel that connects the forward and aft torpedo bays."

"I remember those," Nathan realized. "They were put in to accommodate future weapons technologies. Things that existed in the Data Ark, but we didn't have the infrastructure and technology in place to begin developing them." Nathan studied the schematics for a moment before continuing. "Mention them to the cheng as well," he added, "although I doubt we'll be able to do much with either spaces until after the Karuzara arrives. After all, we've got enough to repair as it is, without trying to upgrade anything else right now."

"I'm sure the lieutenant commander would agree with you, sir," Commander Willard said.

"I'm sure he would, Commander."

The XO looked uneasy. "Sir, about my rank. Perhaps I should only be a Lieutenant, or a Lieutenant Commander at the most."

"You don't like being a commander?"

"No, sir, it's not that. It's that it feels wrong for me to outrank people such as Lieutenant Commander Nash, or Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy, or..."

"You can't really be a proper XO if you don't outrank pretty much everyone on board, except for me, of course."

"I understand that, sir. However, I still feel uncomfortable giving orders to such people. After all, they have been with you so much longer."

"Get used to it, Commander," Nathan insisted. "It's part of getting promoted."

"Yes, sir," the commander answered. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Look," Nathan said, changing his tone, "I know what you're going through. I felt the same way when I took command. I went from ensign to lieutenant to captain in the course of a week.—I think it was a week.—Anyway, point is, I had the same issues. I imagine most people would.—Except for Cameron. I'm pretty sure she had no trouble at all getting used to ordering others around.—But don't tell her I said that."

"No, sir."

"If it makes you feel any better, neither of the two you spoke of *cares* that you outrank them." Nathan cocked his head to one side, his left eyebrow shooting up. "Well, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy didn't care. Lieutenant Commander Nash? Well, I'd avoid giving her a direct order, at least for a while yet."

"Yes, sir."

"Just keep doing your job, Commander," Nathan told him. "Do it well, and you'll feel the respect of those you command."

"Even from Lieutenant Commander Nash?"

“Hey, she got used to Marcus as chief of the boat, didn’t she?”

“She did? When?”

Nathan laughed. “Did you get a chance to review the latest status reports from Karuzara?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, sir. I showed the Ghatazhak transport schedules to Lieutenant Telles, and he assures me that they will have the basics in place on Porto Santo by the time the first group of Ghatazhak reinforcements arrive next week.”

“That quickly?”

“Apparently Lieutenant Commander Nash was quite convincing. The locals are being very helpful.”

“The additional food we sent down probably didn’t hurt, either,” Nathan added.

“Yes, sir. Have you sent word of the destruction of Kent back to the Pentaurus cluster?”

“I was about to,” Nathan told him. “I was waiting for confirmation of the platform’s course and speed.”

Commander Willard could see the concerned look on his captain’s face. “Then it is coming to Earth?”

“It appears so,” Nathan answered. “It only did a short FTL hop and then used Proxima to alter its trajectory toward us.”

“Very clever.”

“Yes. Not only did they save themselves some propellant, but had we not been following them, we would have mistakenly assumed they were headed elsewhere.”

“How long?”

“Eighty-two days.”

“Not much time,” the commander observed.

“I don’t intend to wait for them to come to us,” Nathan assured him. “I intend to stop them in open space, long before they get anywhere near Sol.”

“KKVs, sir?”

“If necessary. Commander Dumar assures me they will be delivered well before the platform’s arrival. However, there are still a few other tactics worth trying before we start throwing KKV’s at them.”

CHAPTER FIVE

"Sorry I missed breakfast," Cameron said as she met Nathan at the top of the ramp at the main intersection of the Aurora's command deck. "We were a little late departing Tanna, and we only arrived a few hours ago. I had to go over a few things with my XO before I left."

"No problem, Captain," Nathan answered.

"Still feels odd," Cameron said, shaking her head. "*Captain Taylor*. Good, but odd."

"I know how you feel. How does everyone else feel about their promotions?"

"Commander Kovacic likes it just fine," she answered. "He was passed over for full commander last time around, even though he probably deserved the promotion."

"Why the late departure?"

"I was talking with the newly elected leader of Tanna," Cameron explained. "President Arachev. Very nice man. Not as dynamic as Garrett. Soft-spoken. Thinks about every word before he speaks it."

"Your kind of guy," Nathan mused as they approached the entrance to the command briefing room.

"He made an interesting suggestion," Cameron continued, ignoring Nathan's remark. "He believes that more aid would be possible if more people were to emigrate from Earth to Tanna."

"Really?" Nathan said as they stepped through the hatch into the briefing room.

"Attention on deck!" the guard at the hatch announced.

“As you were,” Nathan said out of habit before anyone in the room could stand.

“Tanna has the resources. They even have the infrastructure. But theirs is an infrastructure that was balanced by the Jung to meet only their needs, and the needs of the Tannans required to operate and maintain that infrastructure. What they are currently able to provide the Earth is that which would have supplied the needs of the Jung forces in their system, which wasn’t that much. They have been working double shifts, trying to produce more of what the Earth needs to get back on its feet, but there is only so much they can do. If more people from Earth migrated to Tanna, they could run their industries around the clock... Produce twice the volume they are currently producing.”

“I thought they had quarantined our people,” Nathan said, “kept them separate.”

“They have, but they offered to lift those quarantines, provided our Corinairan doctors are able to help them build up their medical facilities in order to deal with any new diseases the incoming Terran populations might introduce.”

“So their motives are not altogether altruistic,” Nathan mumbled as he moved toward the table.

“You can’t really blame them. They are also trying to rebuild their world.”

“I’ll run it past President Scott,” Nathan agreed. “I’m sure there will be plenty of volunteers.” Nathan took his seat at the head of the conference table. “Good morning, everyone,” he greeted as he slid his chair forward. “How are the repairs going, Lieutenant Commander?” he asked Vladimir, who was sitting to his left.

“Slowly,” he admitted. “We are still very low on resources, so we must choose carefully what to fabricate.”

“There’s still a lot of debris out there, right?” Nathan asked.

“Yes, but it takes time to recover that debris, and to sort through it, tear it apart, and decide what is usable. We don’t really have room on board for this, so we must bring the debris on board as space becomes available.”

“You could store some of it on board the Celestia,” Cameron offered, “at least temporarily.”

“Don’t you need the space for your aid runs from Tanna?” Nathan asked.

“Yes, but until Tanna can start producing more goods, we have the room. Our holds weren’t even half full this last trip, let alone our hangar bays.”

“We’ll hold that idea in reserve for now,” Nathan said. “You may need the room to haul people from Earth to Tanna.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nathan turned back to Vladimir. “Do what you can, Lieutenant Commander, but concentrate on our weapons for now.”

“Of course,” Vladimir answered.

“How soon do you plan to attack the battle platform again?” Cameron wondered.

“As soon as possible,” Nathan answered. “We can’t very well wait for it to come out of FTL in our own backyard again,” Nathan reminded her.

“If we don’t have any KKV’s, and we’re down to six Falcons, how do you plan to kill that thing?” Jessica wondered.

“We’re going to try something else,” Nathan answered. “Lieutenant?” Nathan said, handing the conversation to the young scientist.

Lieutenant Yosef cleared her throat before speaking. “Our plasma weapons do drain their shields a measurable amount,” she began, “and the lower their shield strength becomes, the greater the effect each shot has on them. If we can get a lot of plasma shots onto the target at the same

time, we should be able to collapse one of their shields from the outside.”

“You’re talking about a simultaneous time-on-target attack,” Jessica stated.

“Exactly,” Nathan said. “We take the target head on, one of us high and the other low, say, a kilometer apart so that we don’t collide or screw with one another’s jump fields. If we plot our firing points so that all our plasma charges will arrive at the same point in space at the same time, then all we have to do is start our attack run at the correct moment so that the battle platform will arrive at the targeting point at the same time as our plasma charges.”

“We’ve never jumped our ships so close together,” Cameron warned.

“Why not come in at angles then, instead of straight on?” Ensign Delaveaga wondered.

“That will require very precise executions,” Lieutenant Telles pointed out. “The jumps, the firing sequences... All of it must be done with extreme accuracy. Even then, the shots will more likely impact the target over a period of several tenths of a second.”

“And tenths of a second will make that big of a difference?” Luis wondered.

“For a target traveling at twenty times the speed of light?” Lieutenant Telles said. “It could mean the difference between a direct hit, and missing by several kilometers, at the very least.”

“The range over which all those jumps can be executed would be limited by the effective range of the first salvo,” Lieutenant Eckert said as he tapped instructions into his data pad. “At best, maybe... six or seven salvos.”

“So, at least forty-eight plasma torpedoes and thirty-six shots from the plasma cannons,” Nathan said. He looked over at Lieutenant Yosef.

“That might be enough,” the lieutenant said. “We’ve never gotten that many charges onto their shields at once,

so it's impossible to say with any certainty that it *will* work."

"Any good commander will recognize this strategy," Lieutenant Telles said, "probably before it has even concluded. You would need to complete your attack run and be clear of their course *before* they are able to detect your presence."

"That means we have to start our attack run from even further away," Cameron said.

"That will decrease the effectiveness of our weapons even further," Ensign Delaveaga realized.

"Given that, can you calculate how many shots we will need to put on the target in order to bring their shields down?" Nathan asked Lieutenant Yosef.

"I can give you a good guess based on the battle data collected thus far," she answered, "but it will only be a guess. We have no idea how many reactors they normally dedicate to shield generation, or if they are able to dump additional power into their shields if they are about to collapse." She looked intently at her captain. "This might not work at all, sir."

"We won't know unless we try," Nathan said.

"Captain, perhaps you should wait until the Karuzara completes the KKV's," Lieutenant Telles suggested. "The risk would be less."

"That won't be for at least a few more weeks," Nathan explained, "assuming nothing happens to the Karuzara in transit. Remember, *we* almost jumped into a singularity. Besides, there are undoubtedly more platforms out there, and their positions may preclude the use of KKV's. Therefore, we need to know if a simultaneous time-on-target attack is viable."

"Understandable," the lieutenant agreed.

"How long until we're ready for action?" Nathan asked, turning back to Vladimir.

"Both ships could use a few months in a spaceport," he insisted. "However, all necessary systems, including all

plasma weapons, should be ready in three or four days.”

“Very well,” Nathan said placing his hands on the table. “Lieutenants Eckert and Delaveaga, you will prepare the attack plan. I expect it ready for review by tomorrow’s morning briefing.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert answered.

Luis looked confused.

“Something wrong, Lieutenant?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir, except that you called me a lieutenant. I’m an ensign.”

“Oops,” Nathan answered. A small smile crept onto his face. He turned to Cameron, who was sitting to his right, across from Luis. “Captain?”

Cameron placed her closed hand out on the table, opened it, and withdrew it back to her side, leaving a pair of lieutenant’s bars on the table. “Congratulations, Lieutenant Delaveaga.”

It took a moment, but a huge smile began to form on Luis’s face.

“Take them,” Nathan urged. “You earned them.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me, Lieutenant,” Nathan told him. “She’s the one that promoted you.”

Luis picked up the bars, looking at Captain Taylor. “Thank you, sir.”

A small round of applause began as the others in the room offered their congratulations to the new lieutenant.

“That will be all,” Nathan said as he rose. He stepped over to his friend and shook his hand. “Congratulations, Luis,” he said with sincerity.

“Thanks.”

“Take a few minutes to soak in the moment,” Nathan added, patting Luis on the back. “Then get back to work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nathan and Cameron exited the compartment, leaving the others behind to enjoy the moment.

"There's going to be a lot of congratulations being handed out today," Cameron said as she started back down the corridor.

"Well, it's about time we promoted a few people around here," Nathan said.

"Have you given any more thought to what we're going to call ourselves?" Cameron wondered.

"Well, since technically neither the EDF nor the United Earth Republic exist, all of the Earth's remaining space forces fall under the control of the Alliance."

"Then we're the Alliance now?"

"I guess so," Nathan said.

"We're not going to have to change uniforms, are we?" she asked as they turned the corner. "I don't look good in black."

Nathan glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they walked, a small chuckle breaking out of him.

* * *

Prince Casimir strolled confidently down the corridor, flanked by his personal aides, who in turn were both preceded and followed by a dozen of his personal security forces. Both leading and following his entourage were the local Corinari security detail, which also numbered at least a dozen. To Casimir, it seemed a bit much, and he wished he had stood his ground with his own security chief and left half his forces on their ship. His chief's arguments, however, had been sound ones. There were still many members of Corinairan society who favored the old empire of Caius, and secretly wished for its return, under any leader. In addition, the nobles of his world had their own spies, even on Corinair... possibly even assassins.

The procession of armed men and well-dressed aides finally came to a stop in the anteroom of the Corinairan Prime Minister's office. An elderly gentleman with the same,

thick brogue shared by all Corinairans approached him in careful fashion, his hands clearly at his sides for all to see.

"Prince Casimir," the elderly gentleman greeted, his arms wide in a gesture of greeting. "It is indeed an honor to have you on our world once again."

"It is my pleasure to be here," Casimir began. "Hopefully, I will not be placed under arrest this time," he added with a wry smile.

"Of course," the gentleman answered, smiling in return. "I am Edard Galbrith, the prime minister's chief of staff. I apologize for the delay, but the prime minister is in transit at the moment and will arrive shortly. I assure you, had we known of your visit..."

"No apologies are necessary, Mister Galbrith," Casimir assured him. "Except one from me to you, for arriving unannounced. Unfortunately, I had to abide by the wishes of my security detail."

"Yes, of course," Mister Galbrith agreed. "A wise precaution, indeed." The prime minister's chief of staff turned toward the entrance to the minister's office, stepping to one side as he gestured. "Shall we wait in the prime minister's office?"

"Thank you," Prince Casimir said. The prince paused as two members of his security detail stepped forward. Understanding their intent, the two Corinari guards at the doorway pushed the doors to the prime minister's office wide open and stepped aside to allow Prince Casimir's detail to check the room. A minute later, one of the Takaran guards nodded his approval back toward his charge, and Casimir stepped forward into the room.

Although Corinair was still in the process of rebuilding itself after the fall of the empire, Casimir immediately took note that the office of the leader of the entire Darvano system showed no signs of recent turmoil. The room was quite large, with vaulted ceilings and massive windows that overlooked the capital city below.

"An amazing view," Casimir said as he strolled closer to the windows.

"It will be even more amazing a year from now," Mister Galbrith insisted. "There is still much rebuilding to be done."

"As it is with all worlds in the cluster," Casimir added, a note of sorrow in his voice. He turned away from the windows and back toward his host. "Time," he added with a more positive tone, "time and persistence."

"Indeed," Mister Galbrith agreed as he gestured to the sitting area. "Would you care for something to drink?"

"No thank you," Casimir said as he took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs. "Maybe later."

"I detected a hint of guilt in your tone a moment ago," Mister Galbrith said. "Surely you don't feel responsible for what has happened?"

"Would you expect me to feel otherwise?"

"Yes, actually."

"My actions did lead to the deaths of millions, possibly even billions of innocent lives," Casimir explained.

"My understanding was that you did not start any of this," Mister Galbrith said. "You were only trying to end the tyranny that your brother had begun."

"But at such great cost," Casimir said, staring out at the landscape through the great windows once again.

"You made a call to action, and the people followed. Willingly, I might add. You brought justice and freedom to us all."

"But did I do so for the right reasons?" Casimir wondered.

"I think you proved your reasons were just when you gave up your position as leader of Takara," Mister Galbrith insisted.

"Again, at what price?"

"You could not have foreseen what was to come from such a noble gesture."

"Noble." Casimir laughed. "Sweet irony."

“The so-called nobles of your world are protecting their own interests,” Mister Galbrith explained, “greedy and self-centered as they are, it is still what most men would do, especially in such a time of interstellar chaos.” Mister Galbrith shifted in his seat. “Surely, though, the leader of the house of Ta’Akar did not come to the leader of Corinair to seek forgiveness.”

“Quite right,” Casimir agreed. “I came to seek your assistance.”

“Our assistance? In what way?”

“The Earth has suffered tremendously at the hands of the Jung. Their entire society is on the verge of complete collapse. Their infrastructure is all but ruined. Only a few of their nation-states have managed to survive. Millions upon millions have died, and millions more fight for food, shelter, water, and what little medical care is still available.”

“The entire planet?”

“Most of it,” Casimir said. “There are places that seem untouched for the most part, but they are quickly becoming overrun by the refugees from areas harder hit.”

“What can we do?”

“Food, water, clothing, medical supplies, medical care...”

“We are doing better than before, much better, in fact,” Mister Galbrith said, interrupting the prince, “however, we are far from being able to offer aid to others.”

“I know, and I do not mean to belittle your own situation, especially since I feel, to some degree, responsible for your plight. But trust me, Mister Galbrith, compared to the state of the Earth, Corinair is a mecca of prosperity and comfort.”

“Then I would imagine that Takara is even more so,” Mister Galbrith said with one eyebrow raised, “by comparison.”

“I cannot deny that Takara is much better off than any of the systems in the cluster,” Casimir admitted. “However,

there is little I can do to affect change in that regard.”

“Are the nobles of Takara unwilling to send aid?”

“The nobles of Takara are unwilling to do anything that does not directly benefit the nobles of Takara.”

“Surely, helping the Earth to survive and in turn defeat an enemy that may someday threaten them as well is reason enough.”

“One would think,” Casimir admitted. “Unfortunately, that is not the case.”

“But you are a prince...”

“In name only,” Casimir corrected.

“You are also the leader of the most powerful house in the entire Takar system.”

“Which is why I can offer the people of Corinair payment for that which they provide.”

Mister Galbrith cocked his head to one side. “My dear prince, the amount of assistance you desire would require substantial payment, indeed. It is my understanding that you have already spent a great deal in getting the Karuzara loaded, staffed, and under way.”

“Your intelligence serves you well, Mister Galbrith.”

“It was not our intelligence services,” Mister Galbrith admitted, “but our financial reports.”

“I have indeed spent a sizable portion of my family’s holdings,” Casimir admitted, “however, I have not yet spent it all.”

“If we are to provide the amount of aid you seek, you shall,” Mister Galbrith warned. “I’m not even sure we *can* provide the amount you seek.”

“Yours is not the only world from whom I am requesting assistance,” Casimir assured him. “Ancot is my next destination.”

“Your nobles will not be happy,” Mister Galbrith warned. “They depend on Ancotan crops.”

“I doubt my purchases will interfere with the flow of grain to Takara,” Casimir insisted, “although it may drive the

price up a bit.”

Mister Galbrith smiled. “That will certainly get their attention, as will the sudden reduction in the flow of medical nanite technology. I assume you will wish to purchase that as well?”

“Indeed,” Casimir agreed. “However, I should warn you, Mister Galbrith, that my financial resources are not unlimited. In fact, when compared to the enormity of the Earth’s needs, they may be wholly insufficient.”

“I’m sure we can come to some agreement,” Mister Galbrith promised. “Profit alone is not always the best motive, and had the Aurora abandoned Corinair when challenged by the Yamaro, the Earth might not be in such dire need.”

“Indeed.”

“In addition, the establishment of new routes of trade is always in a world’s best interest, is it not?”

“Also quite true,” Casimir agreed. “As is political capital.”

* * *

“Final tracking data is coming in from the Falcons now, Captain,” Lieutenant Eckert announced from the Aurora’s tactical station. “I’d say we’ve got a nice clean track to use.”

“Very well,” Nathan answered. “Update your calculations and prepare to begin the attack run.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Riley answered. “It will only take a few minutes.”

“Sound general quarters, and pass the word to the Celestia,” Nathan added. “Have those Falcons move to observation positions and stand by.”

“Aye, sir,” Naralena answered as the accent lighting all around the Aurora’s bridge turned red.

"All weapons are charged and ready," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Firing patterns are programmed and loaded."

"All four reactors are running at ninety percent," Mister Chiles announced from the helm.

"No other contacts in the area," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"First jump point in three minutes," Mister Riley announced. "Jump sequence will be updated and ready in ninety seconds."

"All compartments report manned and ready, Captain," Naralena announced. "XO is in combat, COB is in damage control. The ship is at general quarters."

"Very well."

"The last Falcon just jumped away," Mister Navashee added.

"Celestia reports general quarters as well," Naralena announced.

"Two minutes to first jump point," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as his bridge staff continued to update him on the status of his ship. They were about to put more firepower onto a single target than ever before. If anything, he should have been confident of the outcome. But at twenty kilometers across, the target was also one of the largest ships they had ever faced, and the last time they had attacked this very platform it had not gone as well as expected. Once again, he was counting on luck to win the day.

"One minute to first jump," Mister Riley reported.

"Celestia reports her jump sequence has updated, and her battle clock is synchronized," Naralena announced.

Nathan turned slowly in his command chair as he heard footsteps behind him.

"Just thought we'd watch the show," Jessica said as she and Lieutenant Telles stepped up next to Lieutenant Eckert at the tactical station.

"Thirty seconds," Mister Riley updated.

"I hope it's a good one," Nathan told her.

"One hundred and twelve plasma shots at once?" Jessica exclaimed. "That's got to cause something worth watching to happen."

"Ten seconds."

"Starting our pitch maneuver," Mister Chiles added.

Nathan rotated his chair forward again. There was nothing for him to do, other than watch the status displays along the bottom of the main view screen, and listen to the voices of his crew as they executed the preplanned attack.

"Three.....two....."

"Pitch rate established," the helmsman interrupted.

"Jumping."

The blue-white flash of their jump fields washed over the bridge. Without hesitation, Lieutenant Eckert immediately fired his weapons. The fading blue-white flash was quickly followed by the red-orange light of their plasma shots as all eight of them streaked away into the blackness of space.

"All weapons away!" the lieutenant reported.

"Jumping in five..."

"The Celestia has also fired," Mister Navashee confirmed.

"...Four..."

"Four torpedoes and two cannon shots," the sensor operator added.

"...Three..."

"Pitch rate holding constant," the helmsman reported.

"...Two..."

"All weapons show ready to fire."

"...One..."

"Celestia's jumping," Mister Navashee reported.

"...Jumping..."

The jump flash washed over them once again.

"Firing," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Jumping in five..."

"Celestia has fired."

"...Four..."

"Maintaining pitch rate."

"...Three..."

"All weapons ready to fire."

"...Two..."

"Celestia is jumping."

"...One.....jumping."

Nathan sat quietly as the Aurora jumped again and again, his tactical officer firing all four forward plasma torpedo tubes as well as all four of their plasma cannons, all at the same time, after which his crew would jump the ship forward the exact distance necessary to execute the next firing sequence. Over and over, they repeated the process, sending waves of plasma charges hurtling toward their target between each jump, all of which were timed to deliver their weapons onto the target simultaneously.

Again, Nathan felt a strange disconnect. However, it was not as before. There was no threat of enemy weapons fire. No visual of the target. It felt like they were executing a drill, instead of attacking a live target—one that was hurtling toward them at twenty times the speed of light.

"If the platform is in FTL, then we can't see it, right?" Jessica wondered as they continued to jump and fire. "How did you get the system to fire if there is nothing for it to lock onto?" she wondered as the next jump flash washed over them.

"Firing," the lieutenant announced.

"Pitch maneuver halted," Mister Chiles reported from the comm. "Altering course one degree down relative."

"Final jump in five..."

"We've been firing everything in test mode," the lieutenant told her.

"...Four..."

"The system thinks this is a drill."

"...Three..."

"Clever," Jessica said.

"...Two..."

"Celestia is jumping," Mister Navashee reported.

"...One.....jumping."

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge for the ninth time in less than two minutes.

"Jump series complete," Mister Riley reported. "We are now clear of the target's flight path."

"Weapons should impact in ten seconds," Lieutenant Eckert announced.

"Scanning the target area," Mister Navashee said.

Nathan sat in his command chair, swiveling to his left until he could see Mister Navashee, Lieutenant Eckert, and Jessica. At their current distance from the target area, even if they managed to destroy the Jung battle platform, there would be nothing to see.

Jessica raised both eyebrows as Nathan's eyes met hers. "This should be good."

"Weapons impact in three.....two.....one.....impact." Mister Navashee continued to stare at his sensor displays.

Jessica frowned slightly, unsure of what was going on.

"Relativity," Nathan said, noticing her expression. "We're twenty light seconds away."

"I guess I've been away from the bridge for too long," Jessica said.

Nathan glanced at the battle clock as they waited for the light from their target to reach them.

"Five seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge was deathly quiet. Nathan's eyes shifted from the battle clock to his sensor operator as the clock arrived at zero. His sensor operator said nothing. "Mister Navashee?" Nathan asked five seconds later.

"I'm getting something," his sensor operator answered, "but..."

"But?"

"I'm not sure... I mean, I can't believe what... I need to double-check my readings, sir."

"What is it?" Nathan wondered. He had never heard his sensor operator sound so befuddled.

"Uh, I'm not sure, sir, but... No but. I'm sure," he finally said as he turned toward his captain. "Our weapons passed right through them."

"What?" Jessica exclaimed.

"How is *that* possible?" Lieutenant Eckert asked.

Nathan took a deep breath. "What exactly did you mean when you said our weapons passed right through them?"

"If I'm interpreting these readings correctly, and I'm pretty sure that I am, our plasma charges arrived at the target point, disappeared for a second, then reappeared again with their trajectory unchanged."

"Did we miss?" Jessica asked.

"Impossible," Lieutenant Eckert insisted. "Unless they suddenly changed course on us."

"*Did* they suddenly change course at the last moment, Mister Navashee?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir. I checked. They're already past us, so we can detect their red-shifted light. They're still holding the same course and speed, Captain."

"Are our targeting systems off?" Nathan wondered, looking at Lieutenant Eckert.

"No, sir," the lieutenant swiftly answered. "I triple-checked them before we started our attack run, and I just ran a systems check a moment ago as well. We fired all sixty-four of our charges right onto the assigned targeting point."

"The lieutenant is correct, sir," Mister Navashee assured him. "All our plasma charges arrived on the targeting point, and all within a zero point three second variance. Based on the target's course and speed from the last Falcon's tracking data, and the tracking data I just collected as they passed

us by, they should have been at the targeting point when our weapons arrived.”

“You said the plasma charges disappeared for a moment?” Lieutenant Telles asked.

“Yes, sir,” Mister Navashee answered. “It was like when a moving light passes behind something, momentarily making the light disappear.”

Nathan looked at Lieutenant Telles. “Does this mean something, Lieutenant?”

“It means the Jung are more advanced than we originally believed,” Lieutenant Telles answered. “I suspect their battle platforms are not using mass-canceling fields to achieve faster than light travel. Instead, they are folding space.”

“How is that possible?” Nathan asked.

“I cannot explain how, as the Ta’Akar do not yet possess such technology. I can only explain the theories. To put it simply, they are manipulating space, both in front of and behind them, creating a bubble of normal space around them in the process. If so, all matter that enters this ‘folded space’ would simply be directed around the platform. That would explain the momentary disappearance of our weapons charges, as well as the fact that they seemed to pass right through the target.”

“Great!” Jessica exclaimed. “How the hell are we supposed to destroy the thing if our weapons just go around it?”

“We must find a way to force them out of FTL just prior to any attack,” Telles said, surprised that they had not already arrived at that conclusion.

Nathan sighed as he looked at Jessica, Lieutenant Telles and Lieutenant Eckert. “I don’t suppose any of you have any ideas on exactly *how* we can do that, do you?”

Again, the bridge was quiet.

* * *

Lieutenant Telles and Lieutenant Commander Nash stood in the control tower of the Porto Santo airport, looking out across the airfield. Below them, work crews made up of a mixture of local residents of the island and a handful of Corinairan engineers from the Aurora's crew were busy in one of the large hangars on the far side of the main runway.

"Yup, that's an airport all right," Jessica mumbled. "Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"They have converted several of the larger hangars into receiving facilities. They will house the incoming reinforcements during their wake cycles and subsequent medical checks and physical training."

"Where are they going to live after they are wide awake and ready to go?" Jessica wondered.

"Further back, in that valley to the right, barracks are being constructed," he explained. "Along with dining facilities, command, medical, and training areas. They will be spread out amongst the various breaks in the forest. The hills will separate the living and training areas from the airfield itself, providing an additional layer of security, as well as reducing collateral damage to the base should the airfield suffer an accident or direct attack."

"An aerial shot would've been fine," Jessica said.

"You once said that you never felt like you belonged on board a spaceship," Lieutenant Telles said. "I thought you might welcome an excuse to leave the ship."

"Yeah, well, this isn't exactly what I meant."

"Lieutenant," one of the tower operators interrupted. "Aurora comms reports that Boxcar One just jumped into orbit. They should be jumping down to us shortly."

"Very well."

"Finally," Jessica exclaimed. "It has to feel nice, knowing that you're about to get one hundred more men added to your command."

"I will feel even better once a few hundred more have arrived," the lieutenant told her, "as well as several combat

jumpers and at least one heavy cargo jumper. Until then, we will not be fully operational, at least not to the level that we need to be in order to help restore order to your world.”

“I still don’t see how you hope to accomplish that, especially with only a few hundred Ghatazhak and some jump shuttles.”

“Within a few months, there should be at least one thousand Ghatazhak stationed on Earth. Even with only five or six combat jump shuttles, we will be able to move personnel anywhere in the world within a few minutes. Our ability to respond to events will be our advantage, as will be the appearance that we are present in nearly every major population center on this planet. One thousand will seem as one hundred thousand, and no one will be the wiser, not even the residents of Porto Santo.”

Jessica looked at the lieutenant and smiled. “You’re sneakier than I gave you credit for, Lieutenant.”

“Deception is as much a weapon as a gun,” the lieutenant said. “Used properly, it can win wars.”

“Now you sound like the captain.”

“Captain Scott is well versed in the history of your world. Because of this, I have been studying your history, from before and after the bio-digital plague. Your people have always been quite violent, even more so than the Ta’Akar. Considering their lineage, it is not surprising that the Jung are a merciless culture. When examined as a whole, humanity always resorts to violence in the end.”

“And you find this surprising?” Jessica wondered.

“Actually, no. As Ghatazhak, we were taught this at an early age. It is why the ability to fight, to commit extreme acts of violence, is of foremost importance. We embrace our violent nature, rather than deny it. Because of this acceptance, we can learn to control it, to use it as a means to an end. What I do find surprising is how your people react to violent acts.”

“How so?”

"They upset you. They cause you to feel outrage, to demand justice. They even trigger violent retaliatory acts, many of which are not even directed at the original perpetrators."

"Yeah, well, people are strange that way," Jessica said. "They need to vent."

"So, destroying something else... anything else, feels justified in their minds?"

"Humans have an amazing ability to make themselves believe they are doing the right thing if it suits their needs. We build these bubbles of false reality around us, in order for us to better deal with the harsh realities of life."

"A very astute observation," Lieutenant Telles agreed.

"I read it somewhere. Stuck with me."

"The Ghatazhak see things how they truly are, not how we wish them to be."

"Contact," the tower operator reported, interrupting their discussion. "Two kilometers out, to the east."

Lieutenant Telles stepped over to the large glass windows to his right. He tapped the glass once, turning the entire sheet opaque. A moment later, the image feed from cameras on the roof of the tower filled the window. A gesture with his fingers caused the image to magnify until the ship they referred to as Boxcar One filled more than half the window.

"Wow, that is one ugly looking ship," Jessica commented.

"It is actually a very functional design," the lieutenant assured her. "Old, but still quite functional."

"It looks like a big bug, or a claw, holding a crate," Jessica said. "Why do they call them boxcars?"

"They were once prevalent in most of the systems of the Pentaurus cluster. They were used to move cargo containers of various sizes, usually between the surface and orbit. They were also used to ferry cargo between worlds within a system."

“Those? For interplanetary flights?” Jessica couldn’t believe it. “They look more like boat lifts than interplanetary cargo ships.”

“They would not make such flights as individual units,” the lieutenant explained. “Rather, they would join their containers to one another, end to end, forming a long chain of ships, all of them working together to reach their destination. Upon arrival, they would break apart and deliver their containers to their various destinations on the surface of the destination world.”

“I still don’t get the ‘boxcar’ thing.”

“You have trains on your world, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So do we. When lined up they form a train. Like many boxcars all joined together.”

“Right.” Jessica looked at the image of the ship, the camera tracking it as it rode its four main engines down to the surface. “Still ugly, though. I can’t believe that thing jumped all the way from Takara to Earth.”

“It is quite an accomplishment, especially for such an ancient vessel.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier for them to jump in just above the surface, instead of riding their engines all the way down?”

“I expect this is their first jump into the atmosphere of any world,” Lieutenant Telles explained. “The pilot probably felt it safer this way.”

“No doubt,” Jessica mumbled as she continued to watch the magnified image of the ship as it hovered just above the landing target. Doors on the lower corners of each of its four massive engine pods opened and long, thick legs extended downward. Once extended, their lower portions folded open, revealing four large wheels on the end of each of the four gear legs. Its landing gear now fully extended and ready, the gangly looking ship descended the last meter, coming to rest on its four wheeled legs. As its engines wound down, its

landing gear contracted somewhat as it took the full weight of both the ship and its cargo container.

“Boxcar One, Porto Santo Tower,” the tower operator said over the comms. “Copy engine shutdown. You are cleared to taxi to Hangar One.”

The boxcar began to move, slowly at first, picking up speed as it rolled toward the massive hangar off the middle of Porto Santo’s main runway.

“Now it’s a rolling crane?” Jessica wondered, looking slightly surprised.

“It will taxi into the receiving hangar where it will deposit its cargo containers. It will then be free to taxi to the maintenance hangar to be readied for its next flight.”

“Huh. You were right,” she admitted. “It is a functional design. Ugly, but functional.”

“Aurora reports a combat jump shuttle has also arrived in orbit. They will be jumping down in a few minutes.”

“Excellent,” Lieutenant Telles said as he tapped the glass, turning it back into a normal window once more. “I would very much like to speak to the flight crew once they land,” he said as turned toward the exit.

Jessica and the lieutenant were greeted by a clap of thunder as the new combat jump shuttle suddenly appeared in a blue-white flash of light, not more than five meters above the center of Porto Santo airport’s main runway. The shuttle hovered for a moment as the pilot got his bearings, then began to descend slowly to the surface. As it neared the surface, four pairs of wheels extended from its underside, locking into position a second before they touched the runway.

Lieutenant Telles and Jessica climbed into a small, open cockpit service vehicle and sped off across the airport toward the combat jump shuttle. As they approached, the side door of the shuttle slid open, revealing a member of the

shuttle's three-man crew as he stepped down to the surface. A ground support team of three Corinari technicians pulled up in another service vehicle and quickly moved to secure the ship as its engines wound down.

Telles and Jessica pulled up to a stop a few meters from the combat shuttle as the copilot's door swung open and the copilot climbed down as well. It was obvious that both men felt somewhat unsteady on their feet, as they adjusted to the unfamiliar gravity of Earth.

Lieutenant Telles climbed out of the service vehicle and moved toward the copilot and crew chief, as the shuttle's pilot came around the front of the ship. "Gentlemen, welcome to Earth. I am Lieutenant Telles, local commander of the Ghatazhak. I trust your flight was uneventful?"

"And long," the crew chief answered.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Nash, the Aurora's chief of security."

"I am Lieutenant Tavich," the pilot announced. "This is my copilot, Ensign Daner, and our crew chief, Sergeant Branwell."

"I take it you're all Corinari?" Jessica inquired.

"Did my accent give us away?"

"That, and you're all wearing black," Jessica answered.

"Only for lack of an alternative uniform to wear," Lieutenant Tavich told her. He turned his left shoulder to her, showing that he wore no Corinari patch on his jumpsuit. "We gave up our places in the Corinari to join up with Commander Dumar and the Alliance. Figured things might be a bit more interesting out here."

"How long did it take you to make the trip over?" Jessica wondered.

"Better part of seven days," Lieutenant Tavich answered. "But we were taking it slow, dialing in our jump plotter and taking a lot of scans along the way to send back to the Karuzara. It should make the trip a little easier for those who follow."

"Seven days. How many jumps?"

"Just under five hundred, I believe," the pilot answered, looking to his copilot for confirmation.

"Four hundred and ninety-seven."

"That's a lot of jumps, especially in only seven days," Jessica said.

"The jumpers that follow will have shorter trips," he explained, "as the Karuzara gets closer to Sol."

"How many combat jumpers are we talking?" Jessica wondered.

"Twelve for sure," Lieutenant Tavich answered.

"That's more than I expected," Lieutenant Telles admitted happily. "We will need more ground crews than I had planned."

"Once the Karuzara arrives, you should have more than enough personnel for ground support," Lieutenant Tavich promised.

"Excellent," Telles said. He looked up at the double-barreled plasma cannon on the side of the shuttle just aft of its large side door. "I see you got my weapons specifications."

"Yes, sir," the crew chief responded. "Twins on each side, point five eights with four fifty charges, and twin nine hundreds in top turret."

"And the turret raises up?"

"Yes sir. Jacked up, she has twenty degree line of sight downward."

"The four fifties can also angle up and down as well as forty-five out, just as you specified," Lieutenant Tavich added. "We can clear the LZ from five kilometers out, Lieutenant."

"Yes, these will do quite nicely," Lieutenant Telles agreed. "Quite nicely indeed."

* * *

“Have you seen the satellite images of that place?” Josh asked. “Not exactly what you’d call a resort.”

“It’s not supposed to be, Josh,” Loki argued. “It’s a base for the Ghatazhak. All I’m saying is that it has a beach. You’ve been wanting to go to the beach since we first got to Earth. This is the only one we’re going to see any time soon.”

“You’ve got a point, I guess.”

“Swing around this rock so I can scan the other side,” Loki instructed.

“Why are we bothering with rocks this small?” Josh wondered. “It’s not even a kilometer across.”

“Captain wants every nook and cranny of every single...”

“...planet, moon, comet, and asteroid in the inner system scanned for possible Jung surveillance devices. Yeah, I was at the briefing, remember?” Josh fired their thrusters and guided the Falcon around the small asteroid. “At least we’re not the only ones doing the shit-work this time.”

“I, for one, am more than happy doing the shit-work,” Loki proclaimed. “At least no one is shooting at us.”

“But its b-o-r-i-n-g,” Josh whined.

“So is death.”

“Got me there.”

“Uh, I’m picking up something, Josh.” Loki’s eyes squinted as he studied his sensor display. “Wait... It’s gone.”

“What was it?” Josh asked.

“Something metallic, I think.”

“You think?”

“It could have been raw metallic ore in the rock,” Loki admitted. “It wouldn’t be the first time... But...”

“But what?”

“It was very refined, and it had various elements that you wouldn’t... Josh, can you swing back around so I can try and get another look at it?”

“Sure, why not?” Josh moved his flight control stick to the right and twisted it slightly, sending the Falcon into a tight starboard turn. “We’re moving so slow, this turn will barely use any propellant at all.” Josh kept his eyes forward, paying little attention to the flight data display on his console, as the small asteroid outside gave him all the references he needed. “Want me to get a little closer this pass?”

“Just a bit, please,” Loki answered, “and try to come back on the exact opposite flight path.”

“You got it.”

Loki continued to study his sensor display as Josh guided the Falcon down closer to the asteroid’s surface, carefully skimming over its tallest ridges. His eyes suddenly widened. “There it is again.” Loki adjust his sensors. “And it’s gone again.”

“Want me to hover over that point?”

“Good idea.”

“Okay, coming back around.”

“That definitely was not naturally occurring metals. It is way too refined. I may have even detected a faint power signature, although it may only be radioactive ores.”

“Uh, you don’t think it’s a weapon, or some kind of—what do they call them—booby traps?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, if we’re gonna be hovering right over it, I’d kinda like to know, Loki.”

“I thought you liked getting shot at? The excitement and all.”

“If I’m gonna be a target, Lok, I’d prefer to be a moving target. A fast-moving target would be even better.”

“On that, I would agree,” Loki said.

Josh again brought the Falcon around, guiding it over the surface even more slowly than before. “I’m back on the original course, flying at a crawl. Keep your eyes on those

sensors, Loki. If something fires at us, let me know. My hand is on the damn throttle."

"Gotcha," Loki answered as he continued staring at the sensor display. "Slow it down even more."

"I'm down to a meter per second, Lok," Josh warned. "You want me to go slower?"

"I want us down to less than a meter per minute, Josh. I think we were looking down a crack or something. That's why the signal disappeared so quickly."

"I know we were flying slower than usual the last two passes, but still. At that speed, that would be an awfully big crack for the signal to last a full second."

"So slow down and we'll get a nice long look at it," Loki insisted.

"Slow down so we'll be a target for a nice long time," Josh sneered. "That beach is looking a lot better right about now."

"There it is!" Loki exclaimed. "Full stop!"

"What?"

"Stop!"

"Why the hell are we stopping?" Josh demanded as he fired the Falcon's braking thrusters and brought the ship to a stop directly above the crack in the surface below.

"There's definitely something in there, and it's not a weapon. It's some kind of device, though. Like a comm transceiver or something. Yes, there's the high-gain dish."

"Is it Jung tech?"

"I don't know," Loki admitted. "It's similar to the tech originally used on the Aurora, but it's different. It's hard to tell, 'cause I'm getting a lot of bounce off the walls. I think there's a cave at the bottom of that crevice, though." Loki lifted his head up, looking forward toward Josh. "We need to report this, Josh."

* * *

"Entering the crevice now," the copilot reported over the loudspeakers on the Aurora's bridge.

Nathan watched the images being transmitted from the shuttle's external cameras onto the Aurora's main view screen.

"It's a lot wider than it looks from outside once you get inside," the copilot continued. *"I'm pretty sure it widens at the bottom."*

"How deep is it?" Nathan wondered, looking toward Mister Navashee at his left.

"A little over three hundred meters, sir. I'm getting scans of the object Loki reported now. It definitely looks like a comm-dish of some kind."

"Is it transmitting anything?" Nathan asked.

"No sir," Mister Navashee reported. "I am picking up a very small power signature, however. Fusion reactor. Very small. Very low power."

"Bozhe moi," Vladimir gasped as he stood next to Jessica and Lieutenant Eckert. "Can you zoom in on that dish?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

The image on the main view screen wavered, then zoomed in closer on the base of the crevice. The dish was clearly visible now, the lights from the approaching shuttle illuminating the dish and the floor of the crevice on which it sat.

"You recognize that?" Nathan asked.

"It's ours," Vladimir told him.

"What is it?" Jessica wondered.

"It's a portable comm transceiver."

"That?" Jessica said, surprised. "Doesn't look very portable to me."

"It's not like the ones you use for surface to orbit. It's a deep space comm transceiver. Interplanetary. It runs on its own miniature fusion reactor."

“For a fusion reactor, it’s not putting out very much power,” Mister Navashee said.

“It’s probably in standby mode,” Lieutenant Eckert commented.

“Nearing the bottom of the crevice,” the shuttle’s copilot reported.

“What the hell is it doing at the bottom of a crevice, in an asteroid, way out here in the belt?” Nathan wondered. “Who the hell is it trying to communicate with? It’s pointed toward open space.”

“That asteroid is rotating,” Mister Navashee told the captain. “Slowly, but at a constant rate. That crevice will point toward Earth once every fourteen days.”

“Holy crap,” the copilot’s voice said over the loudspeaker.

On the main view screen the image feed from the shuttle began to pitch up as the shuttle reached the bottom of the crevice. The bottom of the crevice opened up into a cave not much bigger than the Aurora’s main hangar bay. Tucked neatly inside the cave, lit only by the lights from the hovering shuttle, was a ship.

“Holy crap is right,” Jessica agreed, her mouth agape.

“Gospadee,” Vladimir exclaimed.

“I’m hoping someone knows what that is,” the copilot called out.

“That,” Nathan said, “is one of our early FTL Scout ships.”

* * *

“Hard seal confirmed,” the shuttle’s crew chief stated. “Chamber is pressurized. Opening the hatch.” The crew chief slowly opened the hatch to the breach box to avoid stirring up the dust on the outside of the Scout ship’s hull.

“There will not be gravity on the Scout ship,” Vladimir said.

“Great,” Jessica said, looking back at him. “Why?”

“The ship is dormant. Running on minimum power. Why would you have gravity?” Vladimir explained. “You do not like zero gravity?”

“Had a big lunch.”

“Then I will go first,” Vladimir announced, climbing through the hatch. As soon as entered the breach box, he felt himself becoming weightless. He rotated his body in mid-air, reorienting himself so that he was standing on top of the Scout ship’s outer hull, straddling one side of the ship’s meter-wide outer hatch. He reached down and carefully brushed the dust off the control panel, then pressed on the panel. The panel slid open, revealing the controls.

“It’s gotta be locked, right?” Jessica surmised.

Vladimir held up a small chip. “Command code card.”

“From the captain’s safe?”

“*Da.*”

Vladimir inserted the chip into a slot on the edge of the interface, causing it to light up. He pressed several buttons, then turned back to Jessica who was now straddling the hatch opposite him, keeping herself from floating away using handholds on either side of the breach box.

“You sure we don’t need pressure suits for this?”

“*Nyet.*” A light on the interface turned green. “See? The control system has detected the pressure on our side, and has pressurized the airlock.” Vladimir touched another button on the interface, and the outer hatch began to slide open, sending dust floating gently upward. The dust began to swirl about, as air from inside the airlock moved into the slightly lower-pressure air inside the breach box. Both Vladimir and Jessica waved their hands back and forth to disperse the rising dust to avoid breathing it in.

The hatch finally disappeared into the outer hull, and the lights inside the Scout ship’s airlock flickered to life. The

airlock was narrow, just big enough for a single person in an EVA suit.

Vladimir looked at Jessica. "Ladies first?"

"Big lunch, remember?"

Vladimir held onto the rails on either side of the breach box to steady himself, then pulled his feet in together, pushing himself downward with his arms into the airlock below. The airlock tunnel was relatively short, only four meters in length. At the bottom, he paused long enough to open the inner hatch using the control interface at the end of the tunnel.

The inner hatch slid open, and Vladimir pushed himself down through the hatch into the dark EVA room below. The system immediately sensed his presence, and the lighting switched on. "Everything appears to be in working order so far."

Jessica floated down through the hatch, coming to a stop next to Vladimir as her feet brushed the deck below her. The first thing she noticed were the suit lockers on either side of the compartment. They were all full. "Holy crap."

"*Shto?*" Vladimir asked.

"All the suits are still here."

"So?"

"That means the crew is still here," she explained as she grabbed one of the overhead handrails and pushed herself toward the aft end of the compartment.

"Maybe they were evacuated by a rescue shuttle," Vladimir suggested as she drifted past him. "Or maybe this ship was just placed here without a crew," he added as he turned to follow her.

Jessica drifted through the aft hatchway into the main cabin of the Scout ship. Again, the system sensed their presence and activated the lights. The room was exactly as it had appeared in the schematics she had studied before they had left the Aurora. A large room, about six meters

wide and eight meters long, with a low ceiling that became higher on either side to allow additional overhead clearance for the stasis chambers along the port and starboard bulkheads.

Vladimir drifted through the hatch behind her, turning to his left to access the environmental control interface alongside the hatchway. "I am activating the artificial gravity."

Jessica felt herself become heavy, her feet coming back down to the deck as the ship's gravity slowly approached Earth normal. She looked at the windows in the four stasis chamber doors along the starboard side of the compartment. They were all dark. She stepped forward and touched the control panel next to one of the doors. The inside of the chamber in front of her began to glow a warm amber from the inside of the chamber door, revealing the face of a young man in a standard EDF duty uniform, his eyes closed as if sleeping.

Jessica turned and looked at Vladimir. "I told you," she said as she tapped her comm-set. "Aurora, this is Nash. Guess what we found?"

* * *

Nathan entered main foyer of the Aurora's medical department. Near the entrance to the quarantine bay, Jessica was putting her weapon holster back on. "How did they take it?" Nathan asked as he approached.

"Not too bad," Jessica answered. "They were a little surprised to see us, though. Apparently they were expecting to be awakened by a signal from Earth or something. They were even more surprised when we told them what ship we were from."

"Where's Vlad?"

"He left a few minutes ago."

"How much did you tell them?" Nathan wondered.

"Just the basics. We came back, we kicked ass... Repeatedly. The Earth is a mess, and that you and your pop are running the show now."

"You have such a way with words."

"It's a gift," she said as she checked her sidearm and placed it back in its holster.

"They tell you anything about what happened?"

"Nope. Just that they've been in stasis for about eight and a half months, but we could see that on the stasis clocks."

"That's all?"

"Yup. I figure their CO is waiting to be debriefed by a senior officer, which would be you, Skipper."

"Are you ever going to stop calling me that?"

"Hey, at least I'm only doing it in private, now." Jessica flashed a sarcastic smile, then pointed toward the exit. "If there's nothing else, I'm going to go and wash the asteroid dust off my bod... Sir."

"Dismissed," Nathan told her.

Jessica offered a lazy half salute before turning to depart. Nathan returned the salute with similar effort then turned to enter the quarantine bay, pausing to note that the sign that prohibited entry was not lit. He made his way through the outer room, the transfer airlock, and into the main quarantine area, where all eight of the Scout ship's crew were putting their uniforms back on.

"They're all in good health," Doctor Chen said as she approached the captain. "Electrolytes are a little off, and they're all slightly dehydrated, but no more than you'd expect after eight months in stasis."

"Thank you, Doctor," Nathan replied. He looked over the crew of the Scout ship, sitting and standing about the exam tables around the perimeter of the medical quarantine bay. The men appeared somewhat shaggy, which was not unexpected after eight months of stasis. As they were all still only half dressed, Nathan had no idea which one of

them was in command. "Which one of you is the CO?" he asked openly.

A man at the far end of the room raised his hand slightly. "That would be me."

Nathan looked at the man as he moved toward him. He was older than the rest of his crew, although not as old as Nathan might have expected. "Nathan Scott," he said as he extended his hand.

"Gil Roselle," the man answered, accepting Nathan's handshake. "Where's Captain Roberts?"

"I'm afraid Captain Roberts was killed in action eleven months ago, sir. He passed command to me just before he died."

"I see," Captain Roselle replied, noticing the captain's insignia on Nathan's lapel. "No offense, *Captain*, but you seem a little *young* to be senior staff?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I wasn't," Nathan admitted, "I was the helmsman, a lieutenant for less than a week, actually. We didn't have a full senior staff at the time, not even a full crew. A bit of a long story," he added, "one that you'll probably find hard to believe."

"One that I'm sure I'm going to *want* to read."

Nathan noticed the concern in Captain Roselle's voice. "Did you know Captain Roberts?"

"I knew *of* him," Captain Roselle replied. "I never met him personally, however. Different decades, different academies, and all that."

"French?" Nathan asked, noticing the captain's accent and hoping to change the subject.

"It still shows?"

"A bit. I'm good with accents."

"I guess I figured it would've disappeared after all this time with these guys."

A confused look came across Nathan's face.

“This is the most Australian crew in the EDF,” Captain Roselle explained. “They’re all Aussies, except for myself and my cheng over there.”

Nathan turned to look at the man Captain Roselle had indicated to be his chief engineer—a short, squat, muscular-looking Chinese fellow who didn’t look very happy.

“He always looks that way,” the captain said, noticing Nathan’s reaction to his cheng’s expression. “He’s actually quite jovial.”

“So, what happened, Captain?” Nathan asked, getting straight to the point. “How did you end up in an asteroid for eight months?”

“Simple enough. Buckeye. Plan B. Fleet command transmitted the code word, so I broke open the buckeye packet in my safe and followed my orders. That asteroid was already chosen for us. It took some fancy maneuvering to get there without being detected, though. Jung ships were actively searching all over the place. We had to ride a drifting chunk of the Zhang-Ti’s hull for more than twelve days before we could transition to that asteroid and slip down inside while it was pointed away from Earth.”

“What were you waiting for?”

“A signal from the EDF. They had spec-ops units and marines already lined up and ready to go underground, long before the Jung attacked. Underground storage bunkers, comm-networks, consumables, medical, you name it. They had to have been stashing supplies for some time. My guess is that they wanted us to lie in wait until they needed us, although for what exactly I have no idea.”

“So there are more of you?” Nathan wondered. “Hiding in the asteroid belt?”

“I couldn’t tell you for sure,” Captain Roselle admitted. “We would normally spend so much time going in and out of FTL, we’d have no idea what the other Scout ships were doing. Our orders included a list of hiding places, though. Not just the one. We chose that one because it was the

closest. It also seemed a good idea to be closer to Earth rather than further out."

"Further out?"

"Other than a few in the asteroid belt, the other hiding places on the list were some of the smaller moons of Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus. The rest were out in the Kuiper belt." The captain's expression suddenly changed to one of puzzlement. "How'd you find us, anyway?"

"We've been searching the entire system for any signs of leftover Jung surveillance assets," Nathan explained. "It was just dumb luck that one of our Falcons caught a glimpse of your portable comm-dish during a flyby."

"Falcons?" Captain Roselle wondered, unfamiliar with the designation.

"Another long story," Nathan said. "Any idea if the other Scouts were issued the same list? It would make finding them a lot easier, assuming any others survived."

"Unknown," the captain told him. "But it doesn't matter. We were all issued activation codes to transmit if we needed to wake up any other hidden survivors."

"Sounds kind of risky," Nathan said, one eyebrow raised. "What if the Jung got hold of that code?"

"What would they get with it? A few thirty year-old, five-c Scout ships? Besides, they'd need my retina to access the codes."

"I trust you'll loan it to us, sir?"

"After a bit more confirmation, yes," the captain agreed. "Scott, about the Earth. Lieutenant Commander Nash indicated it wasn't doing well?"

"I'm afraid she's right, Captain," Nathan admitted. "The Jung have bombarded it twice now. Once on their way out during the battle for liberation, and then again when they tried to retake it."

"How many ships?"

"Plenty," Nathan told him, "including a battle platform."

"A what?" Captain Roselle asked, obviously unfamiliar with that ship designation as well.

"Think 'massive fort in space'. Lots of guns, lots of fighters. They can't maneuver worth a damn, but they *can* go twenty times light. Oh, and their shields are unbelievably difficult to bring down, which makes them a bitch to kill."

"But you killed one?" Captain Roselle asked.

"We got lucky."

"How many ships do you have?"

"Counting the Aurora, two."

"Two? That's it?"

"Well, three now, counting yours."

"Mine? We're not a warship, Scott."

Nathan smiled. "Not yet, sir."

CHAPTER SIX

Cameron sat across the picnic table from Abby, picking at the pasta salad in front of her. She set her fork down and took in a deep breath, looking up at the sky. "It really is nice here," she said. "It seems like forever since I saw the sky and breathed fresh air, even that of another world."

"Tanna's not too different from Earth," Abby told her. "Far less habitable land mass, and the seasons are nothing like home, but it is nice. How did you manage to sneak in here?"

"No sneaking necessary," Cameron explained. "Not since they lifted the separation requirements between Terrans and Tannans."

"Why the civilian clothes?" Abby wondered.

"I figured you didn't want to attract attention to yourself."

"You're probably right. It wasn't easy explaining Josh and Loki's visit. I told them they were family friends. I'm not sure if they believed me, but no one's asked about them since."

"I'll make sure you don't get any more surprise military visitors from now on," Cameron promised.

"How are things going?"

"That's why I came to see you," Cameron said. She paused a moment, glancing about to see if anyone was paying them undue attention. Her scans stopped on a gentleman sitting at a table on the other side of the outdoor dining area. The man nodded at her.

Abby noticed the man's nod. "A friend of yours?"

"Security detail," Cameron answered. "Four of them. They wouldn't let me leave the ship without them."

"Corinari?"

"Yup." Cameron nonchalantly pulled her data pad from her bag and placed it on the table, turned it on, and slid it across to Abby.

Abby studied the information displayed on the data pad, scrolling through the numerous pages of sensor readings and action reports.

"Telles thinks the Jung can fold space," Cameron said under her breath.

"Based on these readings, I'd say he is correct." Abby shook her head slightly. "My God, do you know how much energy it would require?"

"A lot?"

"A *lot* would be an understatement. Especially for a ship that size. Do you have any idea what they are using for a power source?"

"We haven't been able to scan the core of a battle platform, yet."

"They would need a lot of antimatter reactors," Abby insisted, "or a few ZPEDs."

"You think they have ZPEDs?" Cameron asked. "That would explain their more powerful shields."

"Doubtful, based on what we've seen of their technology thus far," Abby said.

"They *are* scavengers," Cameron reminded her. "Maybe they got it from a recently conquered civilization?"

"It seems unlikely that any of the core or fringe worlds would be that advanced," Abby said. "They all suffered the same type of setbacks that we did when the plague hit."

"We've already seen a few that fared better than Earth did."

"No, ZPEDs are *way* more advanced. The Takarans are just now implementing them, and they didn't have the plague to set them back."

"But they did lose time when they first settled the Pentaurus cluster."

"A few hundred years, maybe," Abby argued, "but their technology is still at *least* five hundred years ahead of us."

"I knew they were more advanced," Cameron said, "I just didn't realize they were *that* much more advanced." Cameron leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Maybe the Jung have been venturing further out than we originally thought? Maybe they've found, and conquered, a civilization that has ZPEDs?"

"Or some other method to generate massive amounts of energy. There are more than one."

"Of course."

"You destroyed one of these platforms already, right? In Sol?"

"Yes, but only because we got lucky. We were in retreat. The commander of the platform must have thought he had already won. If it hadn't been for those Falcons..."

"But that didn't work in the Alpha Centauri B system?"

"No, it didn't. Nor did our time-on-target attack. The damned thing just swallowed up a hundred and twelve plasma charges and spit them back out. It was like they passed right through them."

"Or in this case, around them," Abby corrected.

"So, folding space is pretty advanced stuff."

"Yes and no. Obviously, it is quite advanced, but the ability to fold space has been around since before the bio-digital plague. The Earth had already developed a prototype by the late twenty-first century, but the invention of artificial gravity, and then inertial dampening fields eventually led to mass-negation fields. That, combined with electrically accelerated propellant systems quickly became the status quo for faster-than-light travel, as it required far less energy."

"Then why are the Jung not using it for their battle platforms?" Cameron wondered. "They use it for all their

other ships.”

“Probably because of the size of the platform,” Abby explained. “The propulsion systems required to get that thing moving to even a tiny fraction of light would be massive.”

“And the platform doesn’t need to maneuver,” Cameron realized, “at least not in the same way that a cruiser or battleship does.”

“Why dedicate all that space to propulsion when you can use it for energy production instead?”

“Energy that can be used for both FTL and shields.”

“But probably not for both,” Abby added, “at least not at the same time.”

“Why would they need them? Everything we fire at them goes around them.”

“Another advantage to folding space,” Abby pointed out. “No one can attack you while you’re in FTL.”

“We have to find a way to knock that thing *out* of FTL before we attack it,” Cameron said.

“The kind of fields used to fold space are very sensitive and must remain in perfect balance or they will collapse.”

“We just threw over a hundred plasma shots at it, Abby,” Cameron reminded her.

“Plasma shots are just energetic mass,” Abby explained. “What you need is something that will disrupt their folding of space. Something like pure energy. The Aurora’s antimatter cores are designed to be ejected intact if the ship breaks up, correct? Are not the Jung’s as well?”

“They are. In fact, we’ve already harvested at least a dozen of them back in Sol,” Cameron said.

“Is that all? I would think a battleship would use that many alone.”

“They’re not as easy to detect as you might think. Plus, they don’t always leave them behind.”

“Yeah, I heard about Kent,” Abby said, her head hanging down.

"Would a dozen of them do the trick?" Cameron wondered.

"Possibly, but remember, the less matter around, the less the antimatter has to react with. However, I would expect that the delivery device would provide enough matter for a sizable reaction to occur. During an antimatter detonation, you're creating specific energy levels in excess of what you might find in a supernova. When you realize that all the exotic particle creations are bound by relativity, the effects of such a powerful detonation in a small region of space may damned near create a singularity. This process might disrupt the Jung's spatial folds enough to cause them to come out of FTL for a bit."

"Any chance you'd be willing to come back and help us figure it out?" Cameron asked, looking at Abby with pleading eyes.

"You don't need me for this," Abby admitted. "Kamenetskiy is smart enough to make it work." A smirk formed on Abby's lips. "Just don't tell him I said so."

* * *

"We're ready to broadcast the activation codes," Naralena announced over the intercom.

"Very well," Nathan answered. "Begin transmitting."

"Aye, sir."

"How long do you think it will take for someone to answer?" Vladimir wondered.

Nathan glanced at the time display on the forward bulkhead of his ready room, just above the big view screen. "It takes about eight hours for a signal to reach the Kuiper belt. Assuming there is anyone else hiding out there to receive the signal, we should know something by tomorrow morning, I would think."

"It will take them a few hours to wake up and power up all their systems," Vladimir pointed out.

“How much do you know about the old Scout-class ships?”

“Everything,” Vladimir insisted. “As Earth’s first post-plague FTL ships, we learned all their systems. Much of our systems are based on theirs, just slightly improved due to better production methods that were available by the time the Explorer-class ships went into production.”

“How much do you think we can do with them?”

Vladimir tapped his data pad several times. The main view screen on the forward bulkhead came to life, displaying the schematics for the Scout-class ship. “Making them into jump ships should be relatively easy,” he explained. “Just replace their mass-negs with jump field generators, and swap out their field emitters with the improved designs that Lieutenant Montgomery and his team came up with. Those ships should be able to jump about just like Falcons.”

“What about weapons?” Nathan wondered.

“You want them to have weapons?”

“Of course.”

“They don’t have the same hull protection that we have, Nathan,” Vladimir warned. “A single round from a medium-sized rail gun will obliterate them.”

“I’m not planning on sending them on the attack, Vlad,” Nathan explained, “but I don’t want them to be defenseless, either. Besides, I’m hoping that we’re all going to get shields once we get this last battle platform off our backs, and the Karuzara gets close enough to act as a port for major overhauls.”

“Shields would be nice,” Vladimir agreed. “I am getting tired of repairing our hull. Many layers; very tedious.”

“Weapons?”

“Oh, *da*. Well, since they will no longer need excessive speed, they will not require as much propellant. We could remove some of the forward tanks to make room for defensive laser turrets.”

"I was hoping for something more substantial," Nathan told him. "What about removing the outboard tanks in the drive section?"

"Those two tanks combined hold half of the ship's propellant," Vladimir cautioned. "What is it you wish to install there?"

"I was thinking of plasma torpedoes."

Vladimir's eyebrows shot up. "So much for not sending them into battle."

"We've got to utilize everything we've got, Vlad..."

"Nathan, those ships would not last five minutes against anything larger than a gunboat."

"Not in a conventional engagement, no," Nathan agreed, "but if they jumped in on, say, a frigate, and fired a round of triplets before jumping back out? That frigate would be dead, and the Scout would come out without a scratch."

"If they catch them by surprise," Vladimir cautioned. "That is a very big if, my friend. Perhaps you should consider using them only as recon ships?"

"Recon ships that can go on the offensive, if the tactical situation is favorable."

Vladimir sighed, realizing that he was not going to convince his friend otherwise.

"Can you put weapons in that ship?"

"Of course I can put weapons in that ship," Vladimir admitted. "*Gospadee*. It's a spaceship, Nathan. We can attach weapons all over the outside, if you want."

"I just might."

"Nathan," Vladimir begged.

"Relax, Vlad," Nathan interrupted, "I'm not about to send them off on a suicide mission. I'm just weighing my options for the future. For now, let's just worry about making it jump-capable. There is still a lot of recon to be done."

"*Captain, Comms*," Naralena called over the intercom.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"Sir, Boxcar Two just jumped into Earth orbit. They're requesting permission to jump down to Porto Santo."

"Clear them in, and notify Porto Santo they're on their way down."

"Aye, sir."

"Another load of Ghatazhak?" Vladimir wondered.

"That brings them up to two hundred and thirty-two," Nathan said.

"Gospadee," Vladimir exclaimed.

"Yeah, I know," Nathan agreed. "And we thought thirty-two of them were frightening."

* * *

Darkness filled the compartment. Only the eerie glow from the series of multi-colored status lights across the tops of the four doors on either side of the room provided any sense of direction or space.

An interface panel near the forward hatch suddenly came to life. Lights began to pop on across the panel as internal systems controlled by the interface spun up and began to report their status on the interface board.

Light panels built into the ceiling flickered to life, revealing several items floating about the compartment. A pen, a hat, and a folded slip of paper, each drifting about at various locations in the room all fell from the air at the same time—the hat landing on the table at the center of the compartment—as the ship's artificial gravity came to life.

The status lights located along the top of each of the eight doors located along either side of the compartment began to change colors. Yellow to green, red to yellow, green to blue. More lights appeared next to them, adding to the arrays of color.

The windows in the eight doors all began to glow, gently illuminating the faces of the eight men asleep in the stasis

chambers. They all were unshaven, with at least a few weeks' growth showing on their faces.

Sounds began to fill the room. First, ventilation fans began to whir in the background as the ship's environmental system began to recycle the air, adding heat into the frigid room. Beeps announced the changes in the stasis chambers. The beeps were followed by a computerized voice announcing the start of each man's waking cycle. "*Anders, Aiken, Captain; waking,*" the voice reported. "*Frisch, Otto, Sergeant; waking. Scalotti, Donati, Lieutenant; waking.*" The voice continued reporting as the wake cycles began for all eight of the ship's crew.

A few minutes later, one by one, the doors slid open. The men were breathing, slowly at first, but their breathing rates increased almost immediately.

One of the men's eyes opened. He gasped, taking in a sudden deep breath as if he had been holding his breath for months. Steam came from his mouth and nose as he breathed out. "Damn," he grumbled, his voice rough and harsh after months of his vocal chords not being used. "Why the hell don't they ever warm the place up before they wake us?"

"Just so that you'd have something to complain about, Fritz."

"It's Frisch, jackass."

"*Alert. Alert,*" the computerized voice called out. "*Medical emergency. Anders, Aiken, Captain. Insufficient cardiac output. Insufficient respiratory rate...*"

"Oh, fuck!" Fritz exclaimed as he burst out of his stasis chamber and ran toward the captain's open chamber.

Captain Anders's body fell forward like a falling tree as several of his crew rushed toward him, catching him just in time.

"What the fuck happened!" one of them yelled as they lowered the captain's now limp body onto the deck.

“How the hell do I know!” Fritzi answered. “Get the resuscitation kit!”

“I got it!” another man reported as he stepped out of his stasis tube and grabbed the red kit from the compartment next to his tube.

The ship’s XO opened his eyes suddenly to the sound of chaos. He blinked several times. His eyelids felt stuck together and he had to force them apart. The sound of his fellow crewmen yelling grabbed his attention, snapping him out of what they referred to as the ‘post-stasis fog.’ He looked at the group of men huddled over someone on the floor as they worked frantically to revive the fallen man. He stepped clumsily out of his stasis chamber onto the deck, pausing a moment to get his balance. He looked to either side, noticing the rest of the crew stepping out of their stasis chambers as well, immediately rushing to help. Adrenaline began to flow throughout his body, giving him the strength and coordination needed to push the fog aside and join the action.

“Clear!” Sergeant Frisch yelled. The other men pulled their hands away from their captain’s limp body as Sergeant Frisch, their only medic, delivered an electric shock to their captain’s body. Sergeant Frisch paused, staring at the monitor screen. “Asystole! Continue compressions!” he ordered as he dropped the paddles and reached for the intubation kit.

The XO stepped up beside them, looking down at the man’s body, realizing for the first time that it was their captain lying dead on the floor in front of them. It wasn’t just their captain, it was *his* friend. As much as he wanted to help the resuscitation efforts, he couldn’t. He was in command now, and he had to check on the status of their ship. Why were they awakened? Was the ship in danger? Had they been activated? Were they supposed to take action? “Agari! Take over for Scalotti!”

“Yes, sir,” Agari answered, moving into position to take over compressions from the lieutenant.

“Don, check main power and environmental, ASAP. I want to know the condition of this ship.”

“Aye, sir,” the lieutenant answered as he stepped out of the way to make room for Ensign Agari.

“Wells, get on the comms and find out what’s going on. I want to know if we received any action orders.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Wells answered, moving past the commander to head forward.

The XO looked down at his men as they tried to resuscitate their fallen captain. “Do what you can, Fritz.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant answered as he inserted the breathing tube into the captain’s mouth.

“I’ll be on the flight deck,” the XO announced as he turned to head forward. He stepped through the hatch into the EVA prep room, slipping around the ladder that led upward into the airlock tunnel, as well as downward into the maintenance crawlway below the main deck.

The next hatch forward brought him to the control deck, where his comm operator was already spinning up the ship’s communications systems. He moved past him and up the four steep steps that led to the elevated flight deck. He moved forward and climbed into the pilot’s seat—the one his captain usually sat in—and immediately began flipping switches to fire up critical systems. He wanted to know the condition of his ship. Were they still space-worthy after all this time?

It suddenly dawned on him. *How long have we been out?* He shook the concern off for the moment, instead focusing on the task at hand... Could they fly?

“Commander!” Ensign Wells called from the lower deck. The XO grabbed the comm-set lying on the glare shield in front of him and placed it on his head, tapping the activation button on the side. “What have you got, Wellsy?”

"We were activated, sir," the ensign told him over the comm-set. "I've got a valid message in the queue. It was transmitted eleven hours ago... By the Aurora?"

"The Aurora? That can't be right. She was lost with all hands."

"The message is valid, Commander," Ensign Wells assured him. *"I've double-checked the codes. Both the wake signal and the message are from the UES Aurora, under the command of Nathan Scott."*

"Who the fuck is Nathan Scott?"

"Wasn't he the president's son?"

"What the...? You'd better be damned sure that message is valid, Ensign."

* * *

"Captain on the bridge," the guard announced as Nathan moved quickly from the airlock corridor into the Aurora's bridge.

"Report!"

"It's another Scout ship, sir," Mister Navashee reported. "It came out of FTL a few minutes ago. Its transponder IDs it as DSS Three."

"There were six of them, right?" Nathan asked Lieutenant Eckert at the tactical station.

"Eight originally," the lieutenant corrected. "Two of them never returned from their initial deep space missions. Once the rest of them returned, they were assigned to patrol the outer edges of the Oort, to detect any Jung ships entering the system."

"With six ships?" Nathan said. "That's a lot of space to monitor for six ships."

"I believe they concentrated their efforts on the logical approach paths into the system, Captain."

"They'd have to."

"They're requesting permission to come alongside and dock with us," Naralena reported.

"Permission granted," Nathan told her. "Notify medical. Standard quarantine procedures. None of our people are allowed aboard that ship until medical clears her crew."

"Yes, sir," Naralena answered.

"Looks like our fleet just got a little bigger," Lieutenant Eckert said.

"Let's hope a few more show up," Nathan added.

* * *

"DSS Three just showed up," Nathan announced as he entered the captain's mess.

Vladimir was already starting on his breakfast. "That is good news."

"Two recon ships are better than one," Nathan said as he sat down at the table.

"What was wrong with the Falcons?" Vladimir asked as he ate.

"They don't have room for a full sensor package, for one. They also aren't really designed for long-duration missions. Do you have any idea how uncomfortable it gets sitting in a cockpit for fourteen hours?"

"They have waste collection systems in their suits," Vladimir pointed out.

"Those Scout ships already have a full sensor package, they just need a few upgrades. Those ships are also designed to support a crew for weeks. Not that they would need to. Not after we equip them with jump drives. But if necessary, they could loiter for long periods and collect massive amounts of intelligence."

"This is true."

Nathan took a bit of his eggs, following it with some coffee. "I talked to Cam this morning."

"When did they get back?"

"Around zero five thirty. She talked to Abby."

"*Da?* How is she doing?"

"Fine. She works in some planning office for the Terran camp."

"I thought they were going to start integrating them?"

"It takes time. Abby thinks we should use some of the captured Jung antimatter cores to try and knock the battle platform out of FTL so we can get a good clean shot at it. She thinks that a sizable enough matter-antimatter event might destabilize the fields they are using to fold space around themselves. Think you can rig those cores up to breach on cue?"

"No problem," Vladimir promised. "Slap some explosive on it, a trigger linked to a receiver, a little math to calculate when to send the detonation signals. No problem at all."

"She said to make sure the mass of the device equals the mass of the antimatter stored within."

"She says this to upset me, you know."

"What?" Nathan wondered, seeming perplexed.

"Everyone knows this."

"I didn't know it."

"You're a pilot," Vladimir replied. "How many cores have we collected?"

"Twenty, I think. I'd have to check with Commander Willard."

"I do not believe it will take more than a few. Four, maybe five... Or six. I will do the math."

"The sooner the better," Nathan told his friend. "I'll feel a lot better once we no longer have that platform headed our way."

"*Da, da, da,*" Vladimir agreed. He pushed his empty plate away, picked up his mug of coffee, and took a sip. "Have you been to Porto Santo yet?"

"Haven't had the time," Nathan admitted.

"I was there for a couple hours yesterday. The beach on the southern side of the island is beautiful. It used to be a

resort before the Jung invaded. It is mostly empty now. Lieutenant Telles told me that the mayor of Porto Santo offered to make it available to our crews for R and R."

"Wow. That sounds great. I'm sure our people could use some. I'll talk to Willard about arranging a rotation schedule, once we deal with that battle platform."

"You know, the Ghatazhak are up to three hundred and thirty-two, now."

"I thought the third boxcar wasn't due to arrive until later today?" Nathan said.

"They arrived a day early. The sixth combat jump shuttle will arrive either late today or early tomorrow."

"That's great news," Nathan said. "I know that Telles was hesitant to start deploying his men into trouble spots until he had at least five or six combat jumpers to support them."

"He was planning on asking to keep one or two of the boxcars for their use as well," Vladimir said.

"Yeah, he already asked me," Nathan said. "He wants to use them as heavy jump transports to move vehicles or large amounts of troops at once. I told him he's going to have to wait until we have a few more. Right now, we need those boxcars to be making regular runs between Earth and Tanna. The Earth needs food, along with... Well, they need pretty much everything, and Tanna needs immigrants from Earth to help them produce the goods that Earth needs. Those boxcars may not be able to move as much as the Celestia can in a single trip, but since they can multi-jump their way to Tanna, they can make about ten round trips in the time it takes the Celestia to make a single run. Once we get five or six of them making four round trips per day, we'll be moving a lot of Terran *emigrants* there and a lot of *aid* back to Earth."

"Even with ten of those things, it's still going to take years for the Earth to get back on her feet."

“But she will,” Nathan added, “as long as we can keep the Jung away from her.”

* * *

“Captain?” Jessica called from the ready room hatchway. “Got a minute?”

“Sure,” Nathan answered. He looked at Jessica, noticing that she was wearing ragged-looking civilian attire. “Costume party?”

“I’m going down to Porto Santo,” she answered.

“The *Ghatazhak* are having a costume party?”

“Preparedness drills. I’m leading a group of locals pretending to be insurgents. We’re going to take out their combat jumpers.”

“They know it’s a drill, right?” Nathan asked. “The Ghatazhak, I mean.”

“Of course.”

“Well, good luck with that.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure we won’t even be able to breach their perimeter, let alone destroy anything, but Telles wants his new reinforcements to get some experience in dealing with Terran tactics, as well as those of the Jung.”

“Who plays the role of the Jung?” Nathan wondered.

“Some of Telles’s original guys, since they have experience fighting them.”

“Makes sense. Is that what you came by to tell me?”

“That, and that I’m going to need the names of the two Scout ship crews so that I can run them against the EDF records that we have.”

“You think the Jung have spies on the Scout ships?”

“Not really, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t have my people do backgrounds on all of them. ‘No one sets foot aboard any of our ships unless we know who the fuck they are.’ Your words, remember?”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t say ‘fuck’.”

Jessica smiled. "I embellished a bit. Makes you sound tougher."

"I'll see to it that you get all twenty-four names and service numbers," Nathan promised. "We're meeting with them all after the third crew clears medical. It would probably be a good idea if you were there as well."

"I'll try to get back in time. Pretty good chance that I will, since we're probably going to get our asses kicked in short order."

"Probably."

"Wait," Jessica said, suddenly realizing that something was amiss, "the third crew?"

"Yes," Nathan said. "A third ship checked in a few minutes ago. Comms notified security."

"I must have been donning my insurgency attire," Jessica said, gesturing to her ragged clothing. "Speaking of which, I'd better head to the hangar bay, or I'll miss my ride."

"Have fun at the ball," Nathan said as she left.

* * *

"What do you say to men whose homeworld has fallen apart while they've been in stasis," Nathan said to Cameron as they walked down the ramp from the command deck. "Their families may have died while they were hiding out in some asteroid."

"They were following orders," Cameron reminded him. "Just as you were when you ordered us to abandon Earth just before the Falcons arrived."

"And I'm pretty sure I would've had a hard time living with that order as well."

"Just tell them the truth, Nathan. They're not children."

"They know most of it already," he told her as they came to the bottom of the ramp and turned around to head forward, down the flight deck's central corridor. "All three

COs have been pouring over our ship's logs since they got here."

"That'll take a while," Cameron said. "It has been eleven months, you know."

"Believe me, I know," Nathan insisted as they approached the starboard flight briefing room. Nathan stopped short of the entrance, turning to look at Cameron. "All three of the COs in there are older and have more time in than I do."

"But none of them has seen as much action as you have," Cameron reminded him.

"Perhaps, but it still feels weird. Every one of them has the right to take command away from either of us, you know that."

"Technically, one could make a case against that, Nathan," Cameron insisted. "Remember, by the rules of its charter, the EDF no longer exists."

"Would you buy that if you were in their shoes?" Nathan asked as he turned and stepped through the hatchway.

"Captain on deck!" Major McCullum barked as Nathan and Cameron entered the flight briefing room.

As he stepped up to the podium, Nathan glanced out at the room. The crews of all three Scout ships were seated in the rows of high-backed chairs. "Gentlemen, I am Captain Nathan Scott, commanding officer of the Aurora and currently the ranking officer of what was once the Earth Defense Force. By now, all of you are aware of the events that have occurred on this ship, on the Celestia, and on Earth, as best we know them. Our current mission is simple... Defeat the Jung, using whatever means possible. Not just for the Earth, but for all the core worlds, the worlds of the fringe, and those of our allies in the Pentaurus cluster. As long as the Jung military exists, all of these worlds are at risk, as well as countless others. For the Jung's mission is also simple. They wish to rule everything, and everyone. We

cannot allow that to happen, and until that possibility no longer exists, none of us are safe.”

Nathan paused and took a breath, scanning the faces of the men before him, looking for any indications of what might be going on inside their minds. Were they angry? Were they scared? Were they curious? What were the commanding officers of the three Scout ships thinking? As best he could tell, they were simply listening to him speak without expression. These were not recruits fresh out of the Academy. These men had been in space for quite some time, even before they had gone into hibernation.

Nathan swallowed hard before continuing. “Before I continue further, you should all be aware of one thing. The EDF no longer exists, just as the United Earth Republic no longer exists. According to the rules of the EDF charter, they ceased to exist once the United Earth Republic collapsed and gave in to Jung rule. Therefore, in accordance with terms of the Sol-Pentaurus Alliance, all assets once belonging to the Earth Defense Force are now under the control of the Alliance. Those members of our crews who left their homes in the Pentaurus cluster to come here and fight for Earth have become members of the Alliance. Those of us who were once members of the EDF have also chosen to become members of the Alliance, for our goals are the same. Now, each of you has a choice to make. You can join us, as members of the Alliance, and continue to fight, or you can leave now and return to the Earth, such as it is, to live out your lives. If you chose to leave, we shall do everything within our power to help you find your families, should they still be alive.”

Again Nathan paused, half expecting the room to explode in anger and confusion.

“You’re not really expecting any of us to leave, are you, Scott?” one of the COs asked.

Nathan offered a half smile. “Not really, no.”

"I think most of us would like to know what happened to our families," one of the men said.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Nathan promised, "although, it may take a while. We had a network in place for just that purpose, but the most recent attack has made matters even worse on the surface."

"How bad is it?" another man asked.

Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before speaking. "I'm not going to lie to you, it's pretty bad down there. Infrastructure is all but destroyed in most of the major population areas, and those that were lucky enough not to be hit are being overrun with refugees from the fallout zones. Food, water, medical care, sewage, power... You name it, and the Earth is in desperate need of it. The only real break we've had is in the form of relatively mild weather that has kept the planet from becoming completely blanketed by radioactive fallout, but that's probably not going to last."

"Surely these Takarans have the technology to help clean up the Earth," Captain Roselle suggested.

"Yes, and our allies are preparing to provide that technology as we speak. However, it will take time to get the resources needed to Earth."

"Then there is some kind of plan?" another man asked.

"Right now, the plan is to use the Ghatazhak to help restore order, and hopefully hand control back over to the regional governments as soon as they are able to receive it. In the meantime, we have started evacuating as many refugees as possible to Tanna, one of our newest allies located about forty-seven light years away, out in the fringe. Those refugees in turn can help Tanna spin up her industry to provide Earth with the aid that it needs to recover."

"How do you evacuate a planet?" Ensign Wells wondered.

"Right now, a little at a time, using the Celestia and three heavy transports from the Pentaurus cluster known as

'boxcars'. Over the weeks ahead, as more of these heavy transports become available, our capacity to move people and aid between our worlds will increase. Right now, we can move about twelve thousand people per day. Within a few months, we expect that capacity to quadruple. Even then, it's going to take years for the Earth to even begin to recover. Right now, our world is nearly as bad off as it was just after the bio-digital plague struck."

"And if the Jung return?" Lieutenant Scalotti asked.

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. "If the Jung return and we are unable to stop them, then the Earth, as we know it, is finished. The Jung will wipe it clean and rebuild it to suit their needs. If you doubt me on this, just ask the people of Kent."

Nathan scanned the faces in the room again. He knew full well that the recent destruction of Kent at the hands of the Jung was in the logs that these men had read, and he knew the impact of the words he had just spoken.

"What will our role be in this 'new world order'?" Captain Roselle inquired.

"First order of business is to make your ships jump-capable," Nathan explained, trying to ignore the captain's cynicism.

"Obviously," Captain Roselle agreed.

"The second is to give you some weapons."

"Our ships don't have thick hulls like the Defender- and Explorer-class ships," Captain Roselle reminded Nathan. "Our ships are thirty years old, remember?"

"That's why the third order of business is to install shields on all three of your ships."

"What kind of weapons are we talking about?" Captain Roselle wondered.

"Laser turrets and plasma torpedo cannons," Nathan replied. "We believe that by pulling a few of your propellant tanks from the lateral sides of your forward sections, as well

as the outboard tanks in your drive sections, we can give you four laser turrets and two plasma torpedo tubes.”

“If you pull those tanks, you’re taking away half our propellant,” Captain Roselle argued.

“Trust me, Captain,” Nathan said, “with jump drives, you won’t need all that propellant.”

“That seems like a hell of a lot of refit,” Captain Roselle said. “How long are we going to be down for, and what are our crews going to do during the refit?”

“Actually, Captain, your crews will be doing the refit, at least most of it. As for how long it will take, I don’t have that information just yet. I would expect a few months just to get you jump-capable. By that time, the Karuzara asteroid should be within a few jumps of Sol, so you can make port there for the rest of your refit.”

“Our FTLs are still in working order,” Captain Roselle’s cheng stated. “It seems a shame to tear them out and toss them aside.”

“The jump drive is our biggest advantage over the Jung,” Nathan explained. “It means we can move about with impunity. We can jump in, fire, and jump away, all within seconds. We can execute simultaneous time-on-target attacks, delivering ordnance onto a target from many different directions. The term ‘enemy lines’ no longer has significance. We could literally jump in and attack the Jung homeworld, if we chose to.”

“Why don’t we?” DSS Three’s XO wondered.

Nathan looked at the commander, having missed what he had said. “Excuse me?”

“Why don’t we just jump in and bomb the crap out of the Jung’s homeworld, just like they’ve done to ours,” the commander said. “Seems to me they have it coming.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Nathan assured him. “Unfortunately, we don’t know where the Jung homeworld is located, Commander...”

“Nash, Robert Nash. I’m the XO on DSS Three.”

"Oh yes, I heard about your CO," Nathan said. "My condolences to you and your crew, Commander."

"Thank you, sir."

"Like I said, we don't know where the Jung homeworld is located. According to our allies, the Jung have purposefully kept the exact location of their homeworld a secret. Even their line officers don't know where it is located."

"A pretty good way to avoid being targeted," Captain Roselle commented.

"Indeed it is," Nathan agreed. "But that is where your three ships will come in. I want you to find the Jung homeworld."

"It can't be that hard to find," Captain Roselle insisted. "There aren't that many Earth-like worlds in the core."

"You're assuming the Jung homeworld *is* an Earth-like world," Nathan argued. "It might very well be. If so, then your job will be relatively easy as there are only twenty-three Earth-like worlds within fifty light years of Sol. However, if you add in the worlds that could have been terraformed, that number triples. And that doesn't even include the worlds, and moons for that matter, on which the Jung could be living in surface domes or underground. If you include bodies that have sufficient water to support a large-scale civilization, or even ones that lie in a system that has enough water nearby... Well, now we're talking hundreds of worlds. And you're not going to be able to just jump in and take a look around. You're going to have to cold-coast through them, monitoring them from afar. And if the Jung are trying to keep their location a secret, they're going to be trying to hide their emissions. Hell, they might even be planting decoys for all we know. So you see, the task might not be as easy as you think."

Captain Poc, the most senior officer in the room, cleared his throat before speaking. He was obviously older than the others, with a dark complexion and a full head of jet-black hair that grayed slightly at his temples. "Captain Scott," the

captain began in perfect English, “as we have not yet had adequate time to fully digest your ship’s logs and analyze the current situation, I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we need a bit more time before we are able to commit our ships, and our crews, to this ‘Alliance’ of yours.”

“Captain,” Nathan began, “I assure you...”

“I understand your assertion that the EDF no longer legally exists,” Captain Poc continued, ignoring Nathan’s attempt to defend his position. “However, the mere fact that a fallback plan had been established and properly activated raises the question as to whether or not the Earth Defense Force did, in fact, cease to legally exist.”

Nathan’s eyes squinted. “I’m not sure I’m following your logic, Captain.”

“Buckeye was conceived and put together after the Aurora’s reported demise,” Captain Poc explained. “Might it not be possible that an amendment was added to the charter in order to provide the ability for the EDF to continue to legally function, even without the United Earth Republic’s existence?”

Nathan glanced at Cameron out of the corner of his eye. She continued to look straight forward at Captain Poc, her usual ice-cold expression on her face. “I suppose that would make sense,” Nathan agreed. “However, none of the remaining EDF forces that we have made contact with on Earth have mentioned such an amendment, nor have any leaders of the surviving governments on Earth, including the president of the NAU, who, at the time when such an amendment would have been added, would have been one of the signatories of such an amendment.”

“That would be Dayton Scott, your father,” Captain Roselle interjected.

Nathan felt a surge of anger inside in response to the captain’s accusatory tone.

Captain Poc placed his right hand in the air in front of Captain Roselle, who was sitting to his right, as if to hold

him from speaking further. “No one is accusing you of doing anything wrong, Captain Scott. We are simply asking for additional time to ensure that the decisions we are about to make—decisions that I think you would agree are quite important ones—are wise and well considered.”

Nathan paused and took a breath in silence. “Of course, sir.” Nathan swallowed again. “And I will be more than happy to provide you with access to any information you require.”

“Thank you, Captain Scott,” Captain Poc replied.

“Are there any other questions, gentlemen?” Nathan asked politely.

“Yes” Captain Roselle said. “Where are we going to do these drive refits?”

“You should be able to do much of your prep work in orbit via your crawl spaces. We also have crawlers that you can use for exterior work. However, at some point we’ll have to bring you into our main hangar bays in order for you to do the jump drive installations.”

“You want us to land in your hangar bay? We don’t have landing gear, Captain,” Captain Roselle told him.

“We’ll turn off our artificial gravity and float you down onto blocks positioned under your hard points,” Nathan explained.

“Will we even fit in your hangar bay?”

“If we switch the bays into combat mode and lower the aft bulkheads to let you in, yes.” Nathan looked at them again. Nathan scanned their faces again, looking for any signs of additional questions. As much as he wanted to get off the podium and out of their crosshairs, he also knew that he desperately needed these men on his side. “If there is nothing further, gentlemen, then I have ship’s business to attend to. If you have additional questions, feel free to contact myself, or my executive officer, Commander Willard.” Nathan scanned their faces one last time. “Thank you, gentlemen. I look forward to working with each of you.”

Nathan stepped down from the podium and moved toward the exit. He could feel the eyes of the men, especially the commanding officers of the Scout ships, on him as he headed for the hatchway.

Cameron stepped up next to Nathan causing him to pause, as the crews of the Scout ships began to leave. "The XO of Scout Three," she said under her breath. "Did you notice his last name?"

"Yeah, I did," Nathan said. "Do you think..."

"She had five brothers, didn't she? All of them older."

Nathan turned to look at the three COs, talking among themselves near the other exit. "Commander Nash," Nathan called out, "a word?"

Commander Nash turned back toward the captain, making his way forward. "Captain," he said as he approached.

"I assume you'll be taking command of Scout Three?"

"Per protocol, yes."

"Good. You might as well consider yourself captain from this point forward. We'll try to find you a good copilot to take over as your XO."

"Thank you," the commander said.

"If I may ask, Captain Nash, are you from Florida?"

"Yes, I am," Captain Nash answered, his brow furrowing somewhat.

"From a family of five brothers, and a tomboy of a little sister?"

"Uh, yes." Captain Nash now appeared more curious than before. "Why do you ask?" he wondered, becoming worried.

Nathan looked at the doorway. "Sergeant, get a team and a shuttle. We're going to Porto Santo."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Weatherly answered.

"Captain, what's this about?" Captain Nash wondered.

"I'll explain on the way down, Captain," Nathan said. "I think you need to speak with my chief of security," he

added as they headed for the door. Nathan looked back at Cameron, smiling. "Tell Willard he has command."

Cameron smiled back. "Yes, sir."

* * *

"I knew she was attending the Academy," Captain Nash said, "I just figured she would have ended up stationed planet-side. I mean, less than thirty percent of the EDF ends up in space."

"When was the last time you spoke with her?" Nathan asked as he removed one of his rank insignia pins.

Commander Nash looked at the window of the shuttle as it approached Porto Santo. "It's been a few years," he admitted, "even before the Jung attacked. Hell, I didn't even know she was on the Aurora."

"I imagine none of your family knew," Nathan said. "Here, put this on," he added, handing the captain's insignia pin to Captain Nash. "We'll get you some full pairs when we get back."

"Thank you, sir," Captain Nash said as he removed the commander insignia pins from his collar.

"She's spec-ops, you know."

"Jess? Little Jess is spec-ops?" Captain Nash laughed. "Well, she always was a feisty one, that's for sure."

"Yeah, that sounds like our Jessica," Nathan agreed. "Were you two close?"

"Not really. I'm the oldest, Jessica is the youngest. When I was commissioned, I think she was about five or six years old. I really only saw her when I came home on leave. Once I got assigned to the deep space Scout program, that wasn't too often. Most of our original assignments were long-duration sleeper missions."

"How old are you?" Nathan wondered.

"Technically, I'm thirty-eight," he explained, "but when you factor in all the time I've spent in stasis, well, let's just

say that your Doctor Chen set my cellular age at thirty-two.”
Nathan chuckled.

“So, all those things in your logs, the ones done by Lieutenant Commander Nash... Those were all Jess?”

“Yup.”

“Damn.” He laughed again.

“Yup, that girl is hard to kill.”

“We all are,” Captain Nash said. “We get it from our mother. She’s a pretty tough lady as well. Not as tough as Jess, apparently, but just as stubborn.”

“To be honest, I doubt any of us would still be here if it wasn’t for her,” Nathan admitted. “Myself, especially. Her sarcasm and rebellious nature have helped me on more than one occasion.”

Captain Nash looked at Nathan. “You got a soft spot for my little sister, Captain?” he joked.

“Nothing like that,” Nathan insisted, remembering the last Founders’ Day celebration at his parents’ estate. “Jess, Commander Taylor, Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy, and myself... We’ve been through a lot together. We’ve become like family, in a sense.”

“That happens when you work closely with people,” Captain Nash said. “Trust me, I know.”

“I imagine you would.” Nathan replied. “Captain, may I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I got the impression during the briefing that Captain Roselle and Captain Poc seem somewhat distrustful of me.”

Captain Nash looked at Nathan. “Can you blame them?”

“You too, huh?”

“Look, Scott, I don’t know you from Adam, so don’t take offense. But try to look at it from our point of view. The Aurora disappears, then shows up five months later with the son of the NAU President in command. Now the Earth is in ruins, and your father is leading a new world order, all while you back him with an army of super-soldiers.”

"That's a bit of a simplification of the events, isn't it?"

"Probably, but that's the impression one gets at first glance," Captain Nash told him.

Nathan sighed. "I noticed you used the word 'our'. I take it you have your reservations as well?"

"It would be irresponsible of me not to, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I see your point," Nathan admitted.

"Look, Scott, none of us are looking to take your command from you. Well, maybe Roselle. He was on the short list for command of the Celestia, you know."

"It's not my command I'm worried about," Nathan assured him.

"Just give us time to figure this all out for ourselves," Captain Nash said. "We *are* all on the same side, after all."

"*Captain, I have Lieutenant Telles on comms for you,*" the shuttle's copilot called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Put him through," Nathan ordered.

"*Scott, Telles,*" the lieutenant called over the comms.

"Lieutenant, I need to speak with Lieutenant Commander Nash, ASAP, and she's not on comms. Any idea where I might find her?"

"*She and her team of insurgents are attempting to sneak through our defensive perimeter as we speak, Captain. So yes, I can tell you exactly where you can find her.*"

The moon was blocked by clouds, leaving the hills of Porto Santo Island shrouded in darkness. Waves crashing on the distant shores of the tiny island hid the sound of the insurgents as they slowly crawled on their bellies through the brush toward the distant watchtower.

Jessica paused, belly down in the brush, and tilted her head slightly upward. In the distance, she could barely make out the Ghatazhak guard in the tower as he scanned the

hillsides with his helmet visor lowered. "He's probably using thermals," she whispered to the man next to her.

"They will spot us, yes?"

"That's why we went immediately after sundown," she reminded him, "while the ground is still warm."

Jessica continued crawling along on her belly, moving ever so slowly toward the tower. She heard a screeching noise in the distance, and froze. She glanced upward and noticed the lights of an incoming shuttle.

"A ship is coming," the man next to her whispered in warning.

"It's probably just a supply shuttle or something," she whispered back. "Don't worry about it. With any luck, it will distract the tower guard."

She continued forward again, crawling just a little faster than before. The shuttle continued toward them, its lights becoming brighter as it grew closer. Finally, she realized the shuttle was not headed for the base. "Fuck," she exclaimed. "Everyone freeze."

The shuttle came straight in, its engines screaming as it descended, landing only a few meters in front of them.

"Nobody move until I do," Jessica tried to tell them above the noise of the shuttle's engines. The thrust wash sent dust and debris flying in all directions, including directly in their faces. "Son of a bitch," she cursed under her breath.

The shuttle finally touched down, smashing the low-lying brush beneath its hull. As its engines begin to wind down, the side hatch opened and the debarkation steps extended from the hull.

"What the hell?" Jessica cursed as she saw Sergeant Weatherly and three of his men come jumping down out of the shuttle, their weapons held ready across their chests. Flood lights on the side of the shuttle came to life, illuminating the area.

"Lieutenant Commander Nash!" Sergeant Weatherly yelled. "The captain needs to speak with you!"

Jessica rose from the bushes, climbing to her feet as she slung her weapon across her back. She could see Nathan climbing down the steps from the shuttle. "This better be fucking good," she mumbled as she headed for the shuttle.

"Sorry to crash the party this way, Lieutenant Commander," Nathan began, "but I need you to verify the identity of one of the Scout ship crewmembers."

"Are you kidding me?" Jessica demanded as she continued toward Nathan, anger in her eyes. "You couldn't find someone else to..."

"You always talk to your CO that way?" Captain Nash said as he came down the steps from the shuttle.

Jessica was silent for several seconds. The voice sounded familiar, but she couldn't see his face due to the glare from the shuttle's floodlights. The man moved closer, and his features became clearer. "Bobert?"

"I always hated that nickname," the captain said. "How are you doing, little sister?"

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed as she threw her arms around him. "I thought you were dead," she said, her face buried in his chest.

"Nope, just sleeping. You know how hard it is to kill a Nash."

"Good enough reason to interrupt your drill?" Nathan asked.

Jessica pulled her face away from her brother's chest, wiping a tear from her eye. "You're forgiven," she said, "this time." She sniffled again. "Just for the record, though, we were about twenty minutes from breaching their perimeter."

"No, you weren't," Nathan insisted.

"How do you know?"

"Telles has been tracking you for the past hour," Nathan told her. "How do you think we knew *right* where to find you?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Jump complete," Mister Riley announced.

"Position verified," Mister Navashee reported.

"Maneuvering to the first deployment point," Mister Chiles announced from the helm.

"Captain," Captain Poc, the CO of the third Scout ship began, "I'm curious how your people were able to put together antimatter mines on such short notice?"

"We've managed to harvest over twenty antimatter cores from the Jung ships that have been destroyed within the Sol system."

"Why do you think so many of them survived?" Captain Poc wondered.

"According to my chief engineer, the Jung antimatter cores are similar in design to our own," Nathan explained. "Fully self-contained units, complete with their own power source for maintaining their antimatter containment fields even when separated from the reactor itself. When their ships come apart, the cores eject automatically, just like ours. We do it because antimatter is not an easy thing to create. The Jung take it one step further. They rig theirs with miniature sensor suites and detonators. If they sense a ship that is *not* transmitting a Jung ID code, they wait until the ship comes close enough, then deactivate their containment fields."

"They become mines," Captain Poc said. "How did you manage to avoid setting them off?"

"We retrieved the deactivation codes from the Jar-Keurog before she was lost."

“Coming up on the first deployment point,” Mister Chiles announced.

“The first two mines are on the topside launch pads and ready for deployment,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“Very well,” Nathan said. “Deploy as planned, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Topside cameras?” Nathan added. The image on the main view screen switched from the standard forward view to a camera on the forward section of the main drive, facing forward. The image zoomed in, centering on the starboard dorsal launch pad. On it sat a large, rectangular cargo container, with a thruster pack attached to each end, and transceiver array fixed to its middle.

“We put the cores into small cargo containers, connected everything up, then packed the containers with debris from the destroyed Jung ships in order to provide the correct amount of matter for the antimatter to react with.”

“A simple, effective solution,” Captain Poc admitted.

“And one that uses the Jung’s own detonators,” Nathan added. “Gotta love the irony in that one. Truth is, we’ve had a lot of experience with makeshift engineering over the past eleven months.”

“Launching the first mine,” Lieutenant Eckert announced.

All eyes watched the main view screen as the thrusters at each end of the cargo container fired briefly. With the artificial gravity on the launch pad set at only a fraction above zero, the cargo container rose easily off the deck, drifting higher with each passing second.

“First mine is away,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“Moving to second deployment point,” Mister Chiles announced.

The image on the main view screen zoomed back out, causing the cargo container to become a tiny dot floating above the forward section of the ship. The stars appeared to

shift slowly upward as the ship pitched down slightly and started moving. Their only perception of forward motion was the cargo container itself as it moved toward the camera growing ever larger with each passing second. A half minute later, the container nearly filled the view screen as it passed overhead.

"How many mines are you laying?" Captain Nash wondered.

"We only had time to make eight of them," Nathan explained, "so we're laying them out in two rows of four, each of them one hundred kilometers apart."

"That's an awfully small net," Captain Roselle commented, "even for a ship with a twenty kilometer beam."

"We have her course and speed precisely calculated," Nathan assured him. "We expect the energy spread per antimatter mine detonation to be enough to create an overlapping field of intense energy. We're confident that the battle platform will fly right into our trap. The most challenging part will be the detonation. Too soon, and the intensity of the event may fade too rapidly to be effective. Too late, and the target is flying away from the event faster than the event's energy field expands."

"Coming up on the second deployment point," Mister Chiles announced.

"It would have been better to do a test detonation of one of those mines, first," Captain Poc suggested.

"We have a limited supply of the antimatter cores," Nathan explained, "and it may require more than one attempt. Sometimes you just have to trust the math and make your play."

* * *

Cameron sat quietly in her command chair at the center of the Celestia's bridge, the lighting around her tinged with

red.

"Twenty seconds to first jump point," Mister Jakoby reported.

Lieutenant Delaveaga scanned the tactical console before him. "All plasma weapons at full power, ready for triplets."

"Pitch maneuver started," Ensign Hunt reported from the helm.

"Jump one, in five seconds," Mister Jakoby added.

"Final tracking data from the Falcons has been received," Ensign Kono said. "Target's course and speed remain unchanged."

"Very well," Cameron said.

"Jumping in three..."

"By the numbers, everyone," Cameron added. It was an unnecessary statement, yet one she felt compelled to say.

"...Two..."

It was times like this, when her crew were executing a well-planned sequence of events, that she felt most useless. She loved being in command, as it had been her dream since long before she was accepted at the EDF Fleet Academy.

"...One..."

Yet, here she sat, in command of an interstellar warship, with nothing to do except listen.

"...Jumping."

She had to constantly remind herself that in such situations, she was there not to deal with the expected, but rather, the unexpected.

"Jump one, complete," the navigator reported.

"Position verified," Ensign Kono confirmed.

"Firing all weapons in three..." Luis began from the tactical station behind her, "...two.....one.....firing."

Cameron watched the main view screen as eighteen balls of red-orange plasma streaked over their heads, on their way to a target that was still several million kilometers

away. As powerful as their plasma weapons were, she knew that at such distances, their effectiveness would be greatly reduced by the time they reached their target. Assuming that they were successful in forcing the target out of FTL to begin with.

“Weapons away,” Luis confirmed.

“Jump two in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Celestia’s bridge as the ship instantly jumped forward a predetermined distance, her nose continuing to rise at a rate that would put her nose on the target’s position relative to the Celestia’s new position.

“Jump two, complete,” Mister Jakoby reported.

“Position confirmed,” Ensign Kono added.

The tactical officer took his cue from the battle clock and began his count. “Firing all weapons in three.....two.....one.....firing.”

Again, the Celestia’s bridge was momentarily awash in brilliant red-orange light as the plasma charges left their weapons and streaked ahead toward the target that was now only slightly closer than it was before.

“Jump three in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

“Jump four, complete,” Mister Riley reported as the blue-white light from the Aurora’s jump flash disappeared from her bridge.

“Position confirmed,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Firing weapons in three.....” Lieutenant Eckert began.

Captain Nash watched the Aurora’s bridge crew with fascination as they executed their plan.

“...Two...”

“Jump five is ready,” Mister Riley reported.

“...One...”

“Nose is coming onto the targeting point,” Mister Chiles announced. “On point... Now.”

"Firing," Lieutenant Eckert said a split second later.

The bridge again filled with the red-orange light of the Aurora's plasma weapons as they raced toward their unseen target. The captains of the three Scout ships stood in front of the comm station at the rear of the bridge, watching over Lieutenant Eckert's shoulder as he expertly manipulated the ship's weapons.

"Weapons away," the lieutenant reported calmly.

"Jump five in three..." Mister Riley began.

"How many jumps are we performing?" Captain Poc wondered.

"...Two..."

"Eight, in this attack run," the lieutenant answered.

"Why only eight?" Captain Nash inquired.

"...One..."

"Our plasma weapons have a limited range," Nathan explained as his crew continued executing the attack plan.

"...Jumping..."

"That's as many shots as we could comfortably fit into the time and distance available," Nathan continued as the jump flash washed over them.

"Jump five, complete."

"Our plasma weapons have a limited range, after which their effectiveness begins to diminish rapidly," he explained.

"Position verified," Mister Navashee reported.

"Firing weapons in three..."

"We might be able to squeeze in one or two more salvos..." Nathan said.

"...Two..."

"...but we'd probably be decreasing our targeting accuracy."

"...One..."

"The key here is to put all the plasma charges onto a single section of their shields..."

"Firing," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“...all at the same time, in order to cause them to fail,” Nathan finished as the red-orange light washed over the bridge again.

“Weapons away,” Lieutenant Eckert announced.

“Jump six, in three.....” Mister Riley began.

“Jump seven, complete,” Mister Jakoby reported from the Celestia’s navigation station.

“Position verified,” Ensign Kono announced.

“Firing weapons in three...” Luis began.

“How long until the antimatter mines go off?” Cameron wondered.

“...Two...”

“Twenty-eight seconds, sir,” Ensign Kono replied.

“...One...”

“Very well.”

“...Firing,” Luis announced, ending his count.

Cameron glanced at the battle clock at the top of the center console that separated the navigator from the helmsman, noting the time as the next round of plasma weapons streaked overhead in a red-orange flash.

“Weapons away,” Lieutenant Delaveaga reported.

“Jump eight, in three...”

“Time to detonation, fifteen seconds,” Ensign Kono reported.

“...Two...”

“We’re going to be cutting it close,” Cameron said, more to herself than to her crew.

“...One.....jumping.”

The jump flash washed over the Celestia’s bridge as they again jumped forward just enough to launch the next round of plasma weapons at the same targeting point, one that was still a considerable distance ahead of the oncoming battle platform.

“Jump eight, complete,” Mister Jakoby reported.

"Position verified," Ensign Kono confirmed.

"Firing all weapons in three..." Luis began.

"Ten seconds to detonation," Ensign Kono added.

"...Two..."

"Jump nine, plotted, locked, and awaiting your order, Captain," Mister Jakoby announced.

"...One..."

"Very well," Cameron replied.

"Firing."

Cameron turned toward her sensor operator to her left as the Celestia's bridge again filled with red-orange light for an instant.

"Five seconds to detonation," Ensign Kono reported. She continued to stare at her sensor displays as she counted. "Three.....two.....one....." There was silence that seemed to last an eternity.

"What the..." Luis started to say.

Cameron raised her hand, cutting her tactical officer off in mid-sentence. "Wait for the light to come back."

"Detonation confirmed!" Ensign Kono reported. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed as her sensor displays offered her readings that she never thought she would witness.

"What about the battle platform?" Cameron urged. "Can you see her?"

"I can't see anything, sir," Ensign Kono explained. "The blast is obscuring all my... Wait..."

Cameron held her breath. If the antimatter blast failed to force the battle platform out of FTL, then the folded space around the target would again swallow up all their plasma shots and spit them back out the other side, leaving them with no choice but to fight the platform in yet another do-or-die scenario in their own system.

"Contact!" Ensign Kono finally reported. "Just came through the... Weapons impact! Fuck!" Ensign Kono glanced over her shoulder toward her captain. "Sorry, sir," she

apologized, "I've just never seen that many weapons strike a target all at once."

"Its shields, Ensign," Cameron reminded her. "Its shields."

"Her forward shields are down!" Mister Navashee reported from the Aurora's sensor station. "All neighboring shields are at half strength! I'm showing exploded shield emitters all across her forward arm!"

"Jump nine!" Nathan ordered. "Snap jump!"

"Snap jump, aye," Mister Riley answered as the Aurora's jump flash began to wash over them.

"Stand by all forward weapons," Nathan continued in a slightly calmer fashion. "Target their forward arm. Triplets on all weapons."

"Jump nine, complete," Mister Riley reported as their jump flash subsided.

"Target is ten kilometers, dead ahead!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Nose on the target," Mister Chiles added from the helm.

"Locking all weapons on the forward arm, triple shots," Lieutenant Eckert announced.

"Fire when ready, Lieutenant," Nathan said. "Mister Riley, execute jump ten as soon as our weapons are away."

"I have firing solutions!" Lieutenant Eckert announced. "Firing! Triple shots on all weapons!"

"Standing by for jump ten," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Target is firing!" Mister Navashee reported as red-orange light washed over the bridge. "All forward rail guns!"

"Weapons away!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Jump ten! Snap jump!" Nathan ordered. His navigator was one step ahead of him, as the blue-white flash of their next jump was already lighting up the main view screen and filling the bridge.

"Jump ten, complete," Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia's jump flash subsided.

"Turning toward next jump point," Ensign Hunt added.

"Did you catch anything before we jumped?" Cameron asked her sensor operator.

"Only that our weapons hit the target," Ensign Kono replied. "We jumped before I could assess the damage."

"Well, if we hit them, we damaged them," Cameron said confidently. "That much, I'm sure of."

"Turn complete," Ensign Hunt reported.

"Jump eleven, in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Jump eleven, complete," Mister Riley reported from the Aurora's navigation station.

"Starting our next turn," Mister Chiles added.

"How are our weapons holding up?" Nathan asked.

"Main cannons are still a little hot," Lieutenant Eckert said, "but they'll hold up, Captain."

"Jump twelve, ready," Mister Riley reported.

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported. "Pitching down to firing angle."

"Jump twelve in three seconds..." Mister Riley began.

"All weapons charged and ready," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"...Two..."

Nathan sat unmoving in his command chair, trying to appear calm and collected. This was the moment he was waiting for. This was the moment that they needed, to give the Earth a chance to recover, and to give them a chance to prepare to take the battle to the Jung with all their might.

"...One..."

Without their shields, the battle platform was as vulnerable as they were, with nothing more than a thick hull

between them and the weapons of their opponents. They would take rail gun fire, of that he was sure. By now, the battle platform would undoubtedly be spraying the area in front of their missing shields with as many rail gun rounds as possible in the hopes of denying the Aurora and the Celestia a decent firing angle. However, both ships were willing to take the hits. As long as their jump drives still worked and their weapons still fired, they would continue to press the attack until they reached the only acceptable outcome.

“...Jumping.”

The blue-white flash washed over them once more.

“Jump twelve, complete,” Mister Riley reported.

“Position verified,” Mister Navashee confirmed as he began scanning for the battle platform.

Seconds went by in silence.

“Mister Navashee?” Nathan finally asked.

“I’m not picking up any contacts, Captain,” the sensor operator reported. “Only debris.”

Nathan felt his emotions beginning to rise, as if he were about to explode in triumph.

“Something is *wrong*, though,” Mister Navashee continued. “There’s not *enough* debris.”

“Lieutenant?”

“Nothing on target scanners either, sir,” the lieutenant reported.

“Stand by one,” Mister Navashee urged.

Nathan felt his heart sinking.

“I have a red-shifted target,” Mister Navashee finally announced. “Same course and speed as before.” He turned to face his captain. “They went back into FTL, sir.”

“How is that possible?” Nathan wondered. “We just blew the hell out of their forward arm. You reported dozens of emitters had exploded before we even fired that last round.”

“They must not be using the same emitter arrays for both shields and folding space,” Mister Navashee surmised.

Nathan said nothing, only leaned to his left and rubbed his eyes. "Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

"Celestia just jumped in to start her attack run, sir," Mister Navashee added.

"Stand down from general quarters," Nathan said, his frustration barely hidden. "Contact the Celestia, tell her to return to Sol."

"Standing down from general quarters, aye," Lieutenant Eckert acknowledged.

"That's it?" Captain Roselle said.

"Celestia acknowledges," Naralena reported.

"You're not going to try anything else?" Captain Roselle added.

"The target has already gone to FTL," Nathan explained.

"Then go after them," Captain Roselle argued. "You have the initiative now..."

"Captains," Nathan said rather forcefully as he rose from his command chair and turned aft. "Perhaps you'd like to discuss this in my ready room?"

"Celestia has jumped away, sir," Mister Navashee reported.

"Scott..." Captain Roselle continued to press.

"In my ready room..." Nathan demanded, his eyes fixed on Captain Roselle's, "...Captain."

Captain Roselle did not turn away as he spoke. "As you please... Captain."

"Mister Riley," Nathan said, his eyes still locked on Captain Roselle, "jump us back to Sol."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley acknowledged, "plotting the jump back to Sol."

Nathan waited for all three of the Scout ship captains to turn and head for the entrance to his ready room before turning to look at his tactical officer. "You have the conn, Mister Eckert."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant answered calmly.

Nathan followed the captains aft, his eyes catching those of the sergeant standing by the hatchway to his ready room. The look on Sergeant Weatherly's face told Nathan exactly what he had expected; that his trusted sergeant had been watching the entire exchange with great interest. "Sergeant."

"Captain." Sergeant Weatherly did not smile. He didn't need to. The look in his eyes told his captain exactly what he was thinking. He waited for his captain to step through the hatchway, then reached in, pulled the hatch closed and assumed his position in front of it.

"Captain Roselle," Nathan began as he moved around the three men to get to his seat behind his ready room desk, "I would respectfully request that in the future if you have a problem with my course of action, that you raise your concerns in private rather than in front of my crew."

"Oh, fuck you, Scott," Captain Roselle replied as Nathan took his seat. "Who the hell do you think you are? Did you think you could just put on Roberts's insignias and sleep in his bed and that would make you captain? Did you even change the sheets? If the Jung hadn't shown up, you probably would've gone down to his house to fuck his wife, too! That seems to be about the level of thought you demonstrated when you first took over and you let hostile security forces board your vessel... Twice!"

Nathan sat quietly at his desk, watching Captain Roselle and listening to his tirade, unsure of what to make of it. "By the way," Captain Roselle continued, "did it ever occur to you that nothing about that passage authorizing you to open up trade with other powers authorized you to declassify anything about the ship's systems that you were sworn to protect? I bet that one slipped your mind as you were committing treason!"

"Gil..." Captain Poc interrupted, trying to no avail to bring his fellow officer down a notch.

"While some aspects of your reports were somewhat vague, you were clear in describing how much you liked that green-eyed bitch... What's her name? Jalala or something?"

"Roselle, come on," Captain Nash urged.

"You were Earth's first emissary to a new people, and you couldn't even say 'hello' properly without giving away the whole fucking farm while chasing some terrorist tail, and now you want us to back your play as you commit Earth to a course of action which may lead to the annihilation of everything we know and love?"

"Enough, already," Captain Poc insisted.

"Shut up, Poc," Roselle insisted. "I'm not done with this guy yet." The captain turned his attention back to Nathan. "You know, Scott, you gave away everything and what did you get for it in return? Did Jalala at least give you a piece?"

Nathan could feel his anger building as Captain Roselle continued on his rampage. It was not the first time he had been chewed out by an officer. During his first year at the Academy, it had occurred with some regularity. However, he knew he had deserved it back then.

"What about this entire course of action screams 'fulfillment of the EDF charter'?" Captain Roselle continued. "From what you yourself have reported, you would have been better served to have signed a deal with Caius and turned over all of your little terrorist friends! Hell, he'd at least have made sure you got laid! I bet that crazy little fuck would have had warships crawling all over Sol in our defense by now. What did you really know about him anyways, other than what your little band of rebels told you? Did you ever think for a second that maybe you were getting played?"

"ENOUGH!" Nathan yelled, coming quickly to his feet.

The hatchway swung open, Sergeant Weatherly stepping inside, one hand on his sidearm holster and a

menacing look in his eye. The sergeant said nothing at first, his eyes darting back and forth as he assessed the position of each person in the ready room. "My apologies, sir," the sergeant said. "I thought I..."

"That's quite alright, Sergeant," Nathan said calmly. "As you were."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant answered, closing the hatch behind him on his way out.

Captain Roselle's eyebrows were up. "So that's how it is, huh, Scott?" he said as he gestured toward the now-closed hatch.

"Knock it off, Roselle," Captain Poc said, this time with the authoritative tone of a senior officer rather than a fellow Scout ship commander. "The sergeant was only doing his job, and you know it." Captain Poc looked at Nathan. "Sit down, Scott." He turned and looked at Roselle. "You too, Gil." He paused a moment, waiting for both men to take their seats, as well as to let the situation de-escalate. "While you raise obvious concerns, Gil, we were *not* there. We couldn't possibly begin to understand what happened and therefore we have no moral authority to second-guess Captain Scott's decisions. The plain truth is that he did in fact follow the rules as they were written." Captain Poc looked at Nathan again. "You should also understand, Scott, that you pushed the absolute limit of those rules. And while a greater authority may someday demand that you answer for your actions, it is not our place to make that demand... And most certainly it is not the right time. The facts, as they appear, are that a young Lieutenant Scott had the responsibility thrust upon him, all without the proper training or resources. The fact that this ship is still alive today is at the very least a testament to either his tireless efforts, or his extreme luck... Most likely, both. Regardless of whether he was right or wrong, he now holds the hopes of all the people of planet Earth in his hands."

"It is no longer just about the people of Earth," Nathan reminded Captain Poc.

"I stand corrected," Captain Poc agreed with a nod. "Right, wrong, or indifferent, for the sake of us all, we have to make sure that Captain Scott is successful, no matter the consequences, or how we may feel about him personally."

The ready room was quiet for several seconds.

"Roselle?" Captain Poc asked.

"Is that an order?"

"It can be," Captain Poc replied.

"Understood," Captain Roselle finally agreed.

Captain Poc looked at Captain Nash.

"Agreed," Captain Nash said.

Captain Poc turned to look at Nathan again. "Captain Scott. Until such time as a proper chain of command can be established, by whatever entity we should all fall under, it might be best if the three of us were included in your briefings from this point forward. I believe you will find that we can bring quite a lot of valuable experience to the table."

"I would appreciate that, sir," Nathan assured him.

Captain Poc took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I think that should do it for now, gentlemen." Captain Poc rose to his feet, as did Captain Roselle and Captain Nash.

Captain Roselle looked at Nathan. "Don't fuck this up, Scott," he said as he turned, pulled open the hatch, and left the compartment.

"Captain," Captain Nash said, offering his hand to Nathan.

"Captain," Nathan replied, shaking hands.

Captain Poc waited a moment as Captain Nash left the compartment as well. He turned back to Nathan, both his eyebrows raising. "My apologies, Captain. It is not easy to wake from an eight-month sleep and find your world in ruins. It is more difficult still to wonder if you could have done anything to prevent it."

"I understand, sir," Nathan replied. "Believe me, I understand."

"I'm sure you do, son," Captain Poc said as he turned to exit. "I'm sure you do."

Nathan stood there watching as the last captain left his ready room.

A moment later, Sergeant Weatherly leaned into the hatchway. "Everything alright, Captain?" he said under his breath so that no one on the bridge behind him could hear.

"Ask me in a couple hours," Nathan said as he moved toward the sergeant.

"Now you know why I don't want to be promoted," the sergeant said with a grin as he stepped aside to make room for Nathan to pass. "Where to, sir?"

"I don't know, Sergeant," Nathan said as he passed. "I don't suppose there's a still somewhere on this ship?"

* * *

"I know what you're going to say," Nathan warned Cameron as she entered his ready room, "but even you have to admit that we have no other choice at this point. There is simply no way to put more shots onto that platform using our current resources."

"I agree," she said as she closed the hatch behind her.

"You what?"

"I agree with you, Nathan."

"Okay. I didn't see that coming."

"We tried, we failed," she said as she took a seat across the desk from him. "Twice, in fact. We don't have an unlimited number of antimatter mines to keep knocking them out of FTL so we can take more shots at them. It could take three or four more passes to take them down, even with *all* their shields down, and they're not going to just lie there and let us pound away at them. They'll be pounding right back. I don't know about you, Nathan, but I've got

more than enough holes in *my* ship right now. Besides, we'll be lucky to get one more shot at them, and we can't let that platform reach Earth, it's just too risky. The next shot *must* work, therefore we have no alternative. We *must* throw a kinetic kill vehicle at them."

"And here I was expecting another ass-chewing."

"Besides, the Jung have bombed Earth three times now, and they just took out Kent for no strategic reason, other than to possibly deny us use of it. I think the idea that we should not escalate to the use of such weaponry was an argument played out on only one side. It was obviously never a consideration for the Jung."

"Well now I don't know where to go next," Nathan admitted. "You agreeing with me is unfamiliar terrain."

"This isn't the first time that I've agreed with you, Nathan."

"Perhaps, but it happens so infrequently that I forget what it feels like."

"Is that what you think of me?" she wondered. "You think I just automatically take the opposite side of every issue from you?"

"Well, you used to."

"True, but do you know why I used to do that?"

"Because deep down inside, you enjoyed taunting me?" he jeered.

Cameron sneered at him. "Because you make decisions in such haphazard fashion, without carefully examining all the angles. Maybe not as much as you used to, I admit. But you still do, on occasion."

"Or, maybe I do consider the angles, but I don't bother taking the time to chew them over with everyone."

Cameron looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Okay, I admit it," Nathan said, "half the time I do go on instinct. But I have been right more often than not. That's got to account for something."

"Perhaps," she admitted.

“Anyway, the KKV won’t arrive for ten days yet, and we’re still going to have to test it.”

“That will put the platform just under three light years away,” Cameron said. “Still plenty of time. Maybe you want to wait until we get our other two plasma cannons working? The extra firepower might make a difference.”

“If we hit it with a KKV, we won’t need the extra firepower.”

“Since our antimatter mines are limited, maybe we should wait until we have more than one KKV to fire at it?”

“I thought of that as well,” Nathan said, “but to be honest, waiting any longer than necessary to kill that thing makes me nervous. Besides, I’ve got Yosef analyzing the sensor data from the first antimatter event. I’m hoping that she’ll tell us that we don’t need to use so many of them, that one or two will be enough to knock them out of FTL. At least then we’ll have the option to just keep hacking away at it.”

“I still think it would be better to wait until we can put a half dozen KKV’s into it,” Cameron argued.

“I’m sure the three captains would prefer that as well,” Nathan said.

“Is that what you meant by ass-chewing?”

“Roselle chewed up one side of me and down the other,” Nathan told her.

“For what?”

“Let’s see... There was failure to follow the EDF charter, chasing terrorist tail, not changing the sheets before I slept in the captain’s bed, wanting to fuck the captain’s wife... Oh, and of course treason. We can’t leave that one out, can we.”

“Who committed treason?” Jessica asked as she entered the room.

Nathan threw up his hands. “Does anyone knock around here? I am the CO of this ship, you know.”

"Apparently the three Scout ship captains just gave Nathan a classic ass-chewing."

"Damn, I wish I'd seen that," Jessica said, plopping down on the couch next to Nathan.

"Thanks for your support."

"Wait a minute," Jessica said. "Did my brother..."

"It was pretty much all Roselle," Nathan said. He looked at Cameron. "Do they teach you how to do that in command school or something? If so, I'm pretty sure he aced that class."

"You had to be expecting this, didn't you?" Cameron said.

"You too?"

"Look at it from their point of view, Nathan," Cameron insisted.

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't make it any easier, though."

"Stop whining," Jessica told him. "Surely that wasn't your first butt-chewing."

"Oh, God no."

"I hope you at least stood up for yourself, just a little," Jessica said.

"About all I got out was the word 'enough'," he told her. "But I did yell it, though."

"You yelled 'enough' at a senior officer who was chewing your ass?" Cameron said, stunned.

"Yeah, kind of surprised myself as well," Nathan admitted. "I'm pretty sure I surprised Weatherly as well. He came charging in with his hand on his holstered weapon."

Jessica smiled. "He wasn't surprised. He was just doing his job, helping you out. He knew when you all went into your ready room that you were going to get your ass handed to you."

"How do you know?" Nathan wondered.

"He told me about an hour ago," Jessica admitted. "That's why I came over. I figured you'd be sitting here all sad-eyed feeling sorry for yourself."

Nathan took in a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

After a nearly minute-long silence, Cameron spoke. "So, did you?"

"Did I what?" Nathan wondered.

"Did you change the sheets before you slept in the captain's bed?"

Nathan looked at her, squinting. "I honestly do not remember."

* * *

"I asked Master Chief Taggart to come up with a way to dock all three of the Scout ships to the aft cargo airlock," Commander Willard said.

"Good idea," Nathan agreed as they turned the corner and headed up the ramp to the command deck.

"He suggested that we join a few cargo containers together like we did for the troop staging area during the attack on Ansvari. He wants to connect several breach boxes to its sides. One to connect to the aft personnel boarding hatch, and the other three for the Scout ships to dock with. The containers will be like a hub where they can stage gear, tools, EVA suits, that sort of thing. The other two breach boxes will be used as an EVA airlock and an attachment point for crawlers. If it works, we won't have to undock from all three ships whenever we need to get under way. We just have to detach from the main hub."

"Like a little spaceport," Nathan said. "Good idea."

"The master chief calls it a maintenance hub."

"That works too. Tell him to get started. I'd like all three of those ships to be stripped of their FTL field generators and their extra propellant tanks by the time their jump drives arrive. They'll need to be inside our main hangar bay to complete the installation, and the faster we get them in and out the better."

"Yes, sir," Commander Willard agreed.

"Did you get all the size requirements from the Scout ships' chengs?" Nathan asked as they reached the top of the ramp, jogged to the left, and continued forward.

"Yes, sir," Commander Willard answered, handing him a data chip. "They're all on here."

"Great. I'll give this to comms to be sent to the Karuzara so that they can customize the builds to fit. That should save us some time." Nathan stopped at the entrance to the bridge. "Anything else, Commander?"

Commander Willard looked down at his data pad. "Uh, the Ghatazhak will be up to five hundred and thirty-two in a couple days, as well as eleven combat jumpers. Also, Boxcar Three will be ready to join the Earth-Tanna route tomorrow."

"Great," Nathan said. "A few more boxcars and the Celestia can stop plying that route."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Commander Willard warned. "Commander Kovacic and I were going over the numbers, and even with ten boxcars, we're still not going to be able to move enough aid back to Earth to make a significant difference. In fact, it would be even better if both the Aurora and the Celestia were making regular runs."

"I'm afraid that's going to have to wait until the Karuzara arrives," Nathan explained. "We have to keep at least one ship here to act not only as an orbital base of operations, but also to defend Earth. There's still the chance that an unannounced Jung ship might suddenly appear. It has happened before."

"Of course, sir. The commander and I came to the same conclusion."

"Very well," Nathan said. "I'll give these specs to comms. Keep up the good work, Commander."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't forget," Nathan said as the commander was walking away, "I'm leaving the ship at nineteen hundred, so you'll be in command."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Nathan gazed out the window as the shuttle descended through the clouds toward Winnipeg. As the clouds broke, the city twinkled below him. It was not the vast landscape of lights that one might expect to see when viewing a city at night, but rather the lights were few and far between. Some of them were bonfires that were lit by residents in the middle of the streets at night to let would-be raiders know that on that particular block, people were watching. Other lights were running off batteries powered by solar panels or windmills. Only a handful of the lights below were powered by the city's power grid, and those were only to provide some modicum of safety.

As poor as conditions were, only a month ago the situation had been far worse. In the first few weeks after the last bombardment, the planet had been in turmoil as those whose lives lay in ruin were forced to take what they needed by force. People who were otherwise honest, upstanding citizens were forced to commit heinous acts in order to protect and provide for their loved ones. So it had become on his homeworld, regardless of his best efforts to protect it and keep it from harm.

Despite all his victories, whenever he turned his attention Earthward, Nathan felt like a complete failure. Millions upon millions had died because of the choices he had made, both good and bad. He tried to dismiss his guilt by telling himself that he had done everything he could, but he knew that was untrue. As he contemplated all the decisions that had led him to this moment, he could easily see how many of them could have led to a far different outcome for his world. The sights below, however, convinced him of one thing. The Jung deserved no mercy.

The ride from the Winnipeg airport to the NAU capitol center was equally disturbing, for now he could see the gruesome realities of life on Earth, up close and personal.

Winnipeg had only been hit by conventional weapons. The nearest nuclear detonation was in Philadelphia, and the winds had thus far kept the fallout away from them. Yet there was still devastation here, and plenty of it. Much of the rubble had been cleared away, but there were still plenty of buildings waiting to be demolished, buildings that were no longer safe for human occupation, despite the fact that many humans still resided within them.

A brutal assault caught his eye, causing his head to turn sharply to the left as their vehicle continued down the roadway at a rapid pace. His first instinct was to call out to the driver to stop so that he and his men could intervene, but he did not. He could not right all the wrongs that occurred day in and day out. No one could, not even the Ghatazhak, try as they might. So stretched was everyone's resources that the lesser events had to be overlooked. The plain truth was that the people had to protect themselves. They could not count on the world's few functioning governments. They could only count on one another, and even then only to a certain extent.

Yet there were still places on the Earth where everything appeared normal. Porto Santo was a prime example. Their island was literally untouched by what had happened to the Earth. If it wasn't for the lack of resupply to the island, and the news reports that bounced around the world via the few functioning communications satellites that remained in orbit, the people of that tiny island would be none the wiser.

"It's not your fault, sir," Sergeant Weatherly said from the seat next to Nathan.

"What?"

"None of this is. It all would've happened whether you had been in command or not. Yeah, maybe a few more people might have lived, but all of this still would've happened. Just a little bit differently."

Nathan looked at the sergeant. "You really believe that, don't you?"

“Of course I do,” the sergeant said. “What other choice do we have, but to believe?”

Nathan sighed. “How is it you’re still a sergeant?”

“If you’re thinking of promoting me, please don’t, sir.”

“Why not?” Nathan wondered. “You sure as hell deserve it.”

“I like my job, Captain,” Sergeant Weatherly explained. “Protecting your six is important. I can’t change any of this, Captain, but you, you just might be able to. So by keeping you alive, I’m doing what I can to help fix all this.”

“Very well, Sergeant,” Nathan agreed. “You’ll stay a sergeant... For now, at least.”

The remainder of their trip passed in silence. Nathan tried not to pay too much attention to what was going on outside their windows, in the dark streets of the city. The sergeant was right. He had to keep his mind on the big picture. There will always be people who suffer. It was one of the unfortunate attributes of human civilization.

The convoy of military vehicles finally pulled through the heavy gates into the secure garage beneath the capitol complex. They came to a stop in front of the main elevators that would take them down several levels to the secure bunker where President Scott and his staff both conducted the business of the North American Union and resided.

Sergeant Weatherly swung open his door and stepped out, scanning the area as he waited for his men to deploy. The garage might be one of the most secure places on Earth at the moment, but he was not one to take chances.

Satisfied that the area was secure, he moved around to the other side of the vehicle and opened the door for his captain. Nathan climbed out of the vehicle and moved briskly to the elevator, followed by the sergeant and two of his men.

Five minutes and several checkpoints later, Nathan found himself at the entrance to his sister’s suite, where a

polite man in the uniform of the NAU security forces escorted him inside.

“Ma’am, you have a visitor,” the guard announced as they entered the small living room.

His sister, Miri, was sitting on a sofa that had seen better days, various data pads strewn about within easy reach. Wearing her usual T-shirt and shorts—her standard ‘at home’ attire—she was buried in her task of helping to connect the citizens of the NAU with their missing loved ones.

Miri looked up and smiled at her younger brother, rising eagerly from her sofa to greet him. Her smile made him forget all of his responsibilities, if only for a moment, taking him back to the carefree days of his youth when he and Miri would waste perfectly good afternoons discussing any number of meaningless topics. She was the youngest of all his sisters, only two years older than Nathan, and was the only sister of five with which he felt close.

“Nathan,” she said as she approached. She wrapped her arms around him and gave him the warmest of hugs, which he eagerly returned. “It’s about time you came down to visit,” she added as she released him and stepped back. “Something to drink?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Nathan Scott doesn’t want a drink?” she teased. “Does this mean that you won’t be pickled at this year’s Founders’ Day celebration?”

“You’re not serious,” Nathan said as he moved to the chair across the coffee table from her.

Miri plopped back down on the sofa. “About getting pickled or Founders’ Day?”

“How can anyone possibly think of celebrating, after all that has happened?”

“People need a reason to celebrate, Nathan,” Miri insisted, “especially when times are bad. Besides, our father

insisted. He thinks it will help restore a sense of continuity and cooperation to the world."

"I'll warn the Ghatazhak," Nathan said. "I'm pretty sure they're going to want to increase their alert levels on that day."

"Since when did you become such a pessimist?" Miri asked.

"Occupational hazard," he explained. "What's for dinner?"

"I have no idea," she admitted. "We just take whatever the kitchen has cooked up for the evening. Everyone down here does. It's easier that way. Food is still a big problem, I'm afraid."

"I thought you had plenty stored up down here?"

"This way, we are able to make a little go a lot further. We were able to give nearly half of our food stores to the public food kitchens. We figured, since the citizens are lining up to eat whatever is being served, why shouldn't we have to do the same thing."

"So, we have to go to your mess hall?"

"Actually, no. Normally I do, but seeing as how you were coming, I arranged to have our food delivered. Perks of being one of the president's daughters."

"I see," Nathan nodded. "How is everyone else? How are your kids?"

"They're fine. They're staying with Becky and her family down in Detroit Lakes. There's a huge refugee camp there. Her husband is running the place, so it's a nice, secure location."

"Why not keep them here with you?"

"Underground? Look at me, Nathan. When's the last time you saw me looking this pale?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"Children need sunshine, fresh air, other children. They need a normal routine. I can't give them that here, not while

I'm doing all of this," she explained, gesturing at all the data pads laying on the sofa around her.

"Can't you get someone to help you?"

"Every department is understaffed. I've got several volunteers who help in their off hours. But twelve- to eighteen-hour days is the norm down here."

"But a refugee camp?"

"They don't actually live in the camp," she explained. "They live in town, in a secured neighborhood."

"What's that?"

"They barricade streets and create single-gate access to entire neighborhoods now. Sometimes there are two or three gates, but usually only one. Guards track everyone coming and going, making sure that only people who belong there are allowed in. It's all handled by volunteers from within the neighborhoods themselves. They've been popping up all over the place. Local governments are promoting them heavily, and even the Ghatazhak have been helping people set them up. Some of the neighborhoods even set up their own distribution centers, health clinics, and schools. The one Becky's family lives in is so complete she rarely even needs to leave the neighborhood."

"So the people *are* accepting the Ghatazhak presence on Earth?"

"I wouldn't call it *accepting*," Miri said. "It's more like choosing the lesser of two evils. Nobody *wants* to live in a police state, Nathan, but nobody wants to be killed going to the distribution center for a few gallons of water and some food rations, either. It's true, however, that some people think we've traded one dictator for another."

"They're calling Dad a dictator?"

"Only because of the Ghatazhak. The media hotheads refer to them as 'Scott's guard dogs'. No one takes them seriously, of course, but you know how people are. They listen to rumors and believe what they want to believe. It's

easier for them to deal with things when they have someone to blame.”

“It doesn’t seem fair,” Nathan said. “How is he taking it?”

“He doesn’t care, as long as they are in the minority. Still, that’s probably why he asked you to deploy the Ghatazhak in the first place; to scare the crap out of everyone so that they *wouldn’t* try to revolt. It’s all about control, Nathan. Control, and appearances. It’s also why the neighborhood security programs are being so heavily promoted. Restricting movement decreases the chances of organized revolts.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“What do you mean, I guess?”

“I’m just surprised that people are putting up with it so easily. A year ago, everyone was screaming about their freedoms being violated, and now they’re allowing their movements to be tracked and controlled? It doesn’t sound much like the NAU we grew up with.”

“It isn’t,” she agreed, “not by a long shot, but it *is* necessary. It’s a matter of survival, plain and simple, and the people know it. They don’t want to admit it, but they know it. Before they started gating everything up and controlling access, gangs were stealing everything they could get their hands on and then selling it on the black market. People were afraid to leave their homes, not just because they were afraid of getting mugged or killed, but because they were afraid that what little they had would be gone when they returned. It sucks, yes. Having to go through a dozen checkpoints a day just to pick up food and water for your family is not fun, but it is better than the alternative.”

“I guess so.”

“And those are the lucky ones,” she reminded him. “There are still areas right here in Winnipeg where if you go out after dark you likely will not survive.”

“Yeah, I witnessed as much on the way in.”

“It’s chaos down here, yes. But it’s organized chaos, and the greater the Ghatazhak presence becomes, the fewer the Jung-sponsored insurgent attacks will occur. After the last attack, that was all you heard on the news. Now, they’re down to one every other week or so. So you see, it *is* getting better with each passing day. Once basic infrastructures are restored, changes will take place at an accelerated rate. You’ll see.”

“I’m sure I will,” Nathan agreed. He knew from experience that once Miri believed in something, there was no convincing her otherwise, and in this case, he sincerely hoped that she was correct. “How is all this going?” he asked, pointing to her pile of data pads strewn about her sofa.

“It’s still slow. Network connectivity is still intermittent at best. Once the net becomes more reliable, the process will move more quickly. The biggest problem is the lack of data communications coverage. Once that is restored, people will be able to log in and search for missing loved ones on their own. Unfortunately, that’s going to require launching a few dozen communications satellites.”

“Maybe after the Karuzara arrives,” Nathan suggested. “They should be able to fabricate the sats and launch them.”

“That would be a big help,” she admitted. “Not just in helping people reconnect, but also in the distribution of aid. One of the biggest logistical problems we have is that no one knows what everyone else has to offer. If they did, they could be arranging trades of needed goods to help each other out. So far, that’s only taking place on a regional basis. Imagine if that could take place over all of North America? Or the world?”

“I’ll mention it to Commander Dumar in my next message.”

"Commander Dumar?" she asked, unfamiliar with the name.

"The commanding officer of the Karuzara asteroid base."

Miri shook her head. "I still have a hard time believing that an entire asteroid can jump its way across a thousand light years of space, and in only a few months. How big did you say it is?"

"Big enough to fit both the *Aurora* *and* the *Celestia* inside, and then some," he explained. "I understand that they've been excavating additional bays and tunnels as well, so who knows how much space they have in there now."

"And you drove your ship inside of this thing?"

"Flew," Nathan said.

"*Flew* your ship inside of it."

"Yes, I did."

"Isn't that difficult?"

"It was a little nerve-racking, yes. Especially since I was hand-flying it at the time. By now they probably have it set up to auto-flight ships in and out."

Miri shook her head. "Still hard to imagine."

"It was pretty overwhelming the first time I saw it," he admitted.

"You know, Pop's been talking that asteroid up a lot lately. Not officially, mind you, but the word has gotten out, and it has given the population renewed hope. That, and the mass migrations to Tanna."

"How's that been going?" Nathan wondered.

"It's slow, but not because of a shortage of volunteers," Miri explained. "Nearly every displaced person is ready to go start over on another world, especially one that isn't at the top of the Jung's target list. I don't suppose you can get more of those transports?"

"The boxcars?" Nathan said. "They're coming, but it takes time. Once they are rebuilt, they have to fly from the

Karuzara back to Takara to pick up a load of Ghatazhak, then fly to Earth. The whole thing takes about ten days."

"So we will get more of them later?"

"Yes," Nathan assured her. "Within a couple of months our capacity to move people and aid between Tanna and Earth should quadruple."

"That will help," Miri agreed.

The entry door opened and the guard stepped into the room. "Dinner is here, ma'am."

"Finally," Miri said as she rose. "I'm starving."

Nathan also rose and looked through the doorway, spotting Sergeant Weatherly outside. The sergeant looked at him and nodded, indicating that everything was okay.

"Put it on the table, please," Miri told the young man pushing the food cart.

Nathan moved over to the table and took a seat as the man finished placing two metal dinner trays covered with clear, heat-retaining shrink wrap in front of them.

"What are we having tonight?" Miri asked the man.

"Beef stew, canned green beans, and brown rice, ma'am," the server answered.

"Sounds great," Miri said, trying to be enthusiastic.

"If you say so, ma'am," the server said as he turned to leave.

Nathan removed the plastic, picked up his spoon and sampled the stew. "Next time, we eat at my place."

* * *

"Captain on deck!" the officer of the watch in the flight operations center announced as Nathan entered the room.

Nathan moved toward Majors Prechitt and McCullum who were both standing at the center of the room, studying the holographic map hovering over the plotting table.

"Captain, I wasn't expecting you, sir," Major Prechitt said. "Stretching your legs again?"

"I can only sit in my ready room for so long," Nathan said. "I have read every manual, every procedure, every word of every book ever written on or about the EDF and each of its ships, and that includes every surviving piece of intelligence about the Jung, what little there is of it."

"Sounds riveting, sir," the major joked.

"Next is the history of the Pentaurus cluster."

"That should really put you to sleep," the major said. "Right up until the point that Caius decided that he should be emperor."

"Maybe I'll start there, and go back and skim the stuff before that at a later date."

"Good idea," the major agreed. "Your timing, however, is excellent. We've pretty much wrapped up our search of the Sol system. By now, we've logged every object, human-made or otherwise, that is any bigger than a square meter, not to mention a few thousand things that are smaller."

"That's good news, Major," Nathan said, "and quicker than I thought."

"The good news is that other than battle debris, we have not found any other Jung technology within the Sol system, from the inner edges of the Kuiper belt inward. The bad news is that it will take our computers a few days to map out all of the objects, including the debris fields."

"I think we can wait."

"Major McCullum and I were just discussing ways to begin searching the Kuiper belt as well."

"The Kuiper belt can wait until we have a few automated probes available," Nathan said, "I have something else for your Falcons to do. I need you to recon every system within twenty light years of Earth, systematically, starting with the closest systems and working outward," he explained. "I want to know which systems contain Jung assets, and which ones do not. And once that is established, I want to know that any system that does *not* have any Jung assets, is also free and clear of Jung monitoring sensors. I want to know

which systems we can utilize without resistance. I also want detailed recon of any system that *does* have Jung assets. The usual stuff, fleet elements and strength, ground forces, infrastructure, and civilian population densities and locations. Most importantly, do not get caught! If we know something as a fact, I don't want the Jung to know that we know it as such. Think your guys can handle that?"

"That's a lot of systems, Captain," the major admitted, "but I'm sure we can handle it. How soon do you need it done?"

"The sooner the better. If we're going to fight a full-scale war against the Jung, we need time to repair and upgrade our ships, and to develop more weapons. To do all that, we need infrastructure and support, not just from Tanna but from Earth as well. So I need to know where anything that could eventually attack us is located. The Karuzara will be here in just under two months, and I'd like to know how much we can do to our ships before she arrives. To make those decisions, I need a time frame."

"Understood, Captain," Major Prechitt said. "We'll make it happen, ASAP."

"Thank you, Major," Nathan said. He nodded at Major McCullum as well. "Major."

"Captain."

Nathan walked away and exited the flight operations room.

"The reports you wrote about the captain were not accurate," Major McCullum said under his breath, so that only Major Prechitt could hear him.

"How so?"

"He does not seem indecisive to me."

"He has grown considerably as a commanding officer the last few months. There was a time when he was always second-guessing himself, sometimes to the point of frustration."

"If that is the case, I am surprised that you tolerated him as long as you did."

"He has always had good instincts," Major Prechitt explained. "Instincts that have served him well in difficult situations. Besides, the poor man was thrown directly into the fire and has been in it ever since."

"I'd say he's doing quite nicely, then," Major McCullum said.

* * *

Captain Nash climbed down the ladder from the topside airlock tunnel, dropping the last two rungs to the deck below. The artificial gravity in his ship was back at Earth-normal now that his ship was getting its power from the Aurora through the docking hub that the Aurora's chief of the boat had slapped together. The jerry-rigged apparatus wasn't pretty, but it was functional.

He turned forward and hollered. "Wellsy, come aft for a minute." He bent over and looked into the open access panel in the deck, trying to see below as Ensign Wells came into the compartment from the forward hatch. "Anyone down there?"

"Keesh and Tweety. LT is in the aft systems bay; Toosh is in the head, and Fritz is at Aurora medical learning about nanites."

"Get Keesh and Tweety up here for a meeting," Captain Nash ordered.

"Yes, sir," Ensign Wells answered. He bent over and yelled into the opening in the deck. "KEESH! TWEETY! SKIPPER WANTS YOU ON DECK! PRONTO!"

"Jesus, Wellsy," Captain Nash said, rubbing his ear nearest his comm officer. "I could've done that."

"Sorry, sir."

Captain Nash headed aft, stepping through the hatch into the main cabin. He reached to his left and pounded on

the door with his fist. "How many times a day do you need to shit, Toosh?"

"I didn't shit for eight months, Captain," Ensign Agari called from behind the closed door. *"I'm making up for lost time."*

"You didn't eat, either," the captain said as he moved to the aft end of the main cabin. "So where's it coming from?" He leaned into the open aft hatch. "Donny! Ship's meeting!"

"Be right there, sir," the lieutenant answered from deep inside the Scout ship's main power and propulsion section.

Captain Nash pressed a couple of buttons on the console directly over the center table, activating a holographic projector. He inserted a data card into the panel and pressed another button. A schematic of their ship appeared hovering over the table in the middle of the compartment. At the touch of another button, the outer hull disappeared, revealing the structures underneath. Several other pieces of equipment appeared along the top edge of the hologram, each of them labeled with special codes identifying their purpose.

"What's all this?" Ensign Wells asked as he entered the compartment.

"You don't recognize your own ship, Wellsy?"

Ensign Agari came out of the head to the left of Ensign Wells.

"Whoa!" Wells said, holding his nose. "Something die in you, Toosh?"

"What's going on, sir?" Lieutenant Scalotti asked from behind after entering the compartment from the main propulsion section.

"Gather 'round, gentlemen," Captain Nash began, "and meet the new Scout-class, Armed Reconnaissance Vessel."

"They're not seriously planning on turning this thirty year-old bucket of bolts into a warship, are they?" Lieutenant Scalotti asked.

“Indeed they are,” Captain Nash replied, “and we start with the FTLs.”

More than one groan was heard.

“Hey,” Nash said, “look at it this way. At least you won’t have to keep fixing the damned things.”

* * *

“Good morning, everyone,” Nathan began as he took his seat at the conference table in the Aurora’s command briefing room. “I know we all have a busy schedule so I’ll just work my way around the room as quickly as possible.” Nathan turned to his left and looked at Vladimir. “You’re closest, so we’ll start with you.”

Vladimir looked across the table at Cameron. “Would you like to change seats?”

“How are repairs going?” Nathan asked directly, ignoring his chief engineer’s attempt at humor. “Everything ready for tomorrow?”

“*Da*, weapons, power, propulsion, and maneuvering, they are all operational... Some with, and some without redundancies. Of course, we still have plenty of holes in our hull.”

“Holes in the hull can wait,” Nathan said. “As long as we can jump, shoot, and maneuver, I’m happy for now.”

“Then we are ready,” Vladimir agreed.

“What about the antimatter mines?”

“Eight more of them are ready to go.”

“I’ve analyzed the data from the last encounter,” Lieutenant Yosef said. “Four mines should be sufficient.”

“How many antimatter cores do we have left?” Nathan asked.

“Eight,” Vladimir replied. “Four of them will be converted into mines by the end of the week.”

“Let’s stick with six again,” Nathan said. “We know it worked, and I don’t want to take any chances since we don’t

know how many more times this will work.” Nathan looked at Lieutenant Eckert. “Any change in the target’s course and speed, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir. They appear to be making it easy on us, which makes me worry.”

“You think they’re trying to lure us into a trap of some kind?” Cameron wondered.

“Anything is possible,” the lieutenant admitted.

“Maybe they don’t believe we’re a threat to them?” Luis suggested, “Or maybe they adjust their FTL systems so that our mines won’t knock them back into normal space again.”

“Or maybe they just don’t want to waste the propellant to change course,” Vladimir said.

“All are possibilities,” Nathan agreed, “however, we don’t really have much choice at this point. We could wait, track them some more, but what would that tell us? If we strike now, as planned, and it works, our immediate problem is solved. If it is a trap, we jump the hell out of there and *then* we come up with something else.”

“Assuming we’ll be able to jump the hell out of there,” Cameron warned. “Their plan *may* include a way to prevent us from jumping away.”

“So we lure them into *our* trap instead,” Nathan suggested. “We do it the same as before. We lay the mines, execute our T-O-T attack, and detonate. Only this time we jump in a little further out, at an angle they aren’t expecting. The extra distance will give us time to react to their weapons. Remember, we’re not really trying to kill them with our plasma cannons. We just want them to *think* we’re trying to kill them with our plasma cannons. Then our KKV slams into them, and they’re done.”

“Captain, we don’t really need to launch a simultaneous time-on-target attack,” Lieutenant Yosef explained. “Our KKV will penetrate their shields with more than enough energy left over to cripple, more likely *obliterate* the battle platform.”

“But we *want* them to think it’s just another T-O-T attack,” Nathan insisted. “We *want* them to think that we are still not a significant threat. In fact, nothing would please me more than for that platform’s CO to decide to stay out of FTL a bit longer and try to take us down. The longer he does, the better chance we have of hitting him with our KKV. Remember, we only have one fully tested KKV right now. We won’t have any more for several weeks, so we need to do whatever is necessary to make this work *this* time, as we undoubtedly will *not* get many more chances.”

Nathan looked around the conference table, looking for signs of a dissenting opinion, but received none. He then looked at Lieutenant Eckert again. “I trust that the KKV *is* ready?”

“Yes, sir. We finished testing it yesterday.”

“Very well. We proceed according to plan. Departure is tomorrow at eleven hundred,” Nathan reminded them. “Lieutenant Commander Nash, you’re next.”

Jessica picked up the remote from the table and activated one of the large view screens on the wall. She also activated the holographic projector in the middle of the conference table. A 3D map of their sector of space appeared, revealing all the stars within fifty light years of Sol itself. “You’re all familiar with the Sol sector,” she began. “As you all know, a week ago our Falcons were tasked with locating and identifying all Jung assets within twenty light years of Sol. For now, their primary focus has been on mobile assets that can attack Earth. Because there are so many systems to search, the Falcons have started with the closest ones with the largest populations, which basically means the core systems. Unfortunately, we have already discovered some disturbing news.”

The rest of the view screens in the room lit up, displaying images of various Jung ships in various systems, fading from image to image every five seconds.

“The Jung have a strike force in each of the six core systems. Each strike force consists of at least a battleship, two cruisers, and four frigates. Some of them—for example, Tau Ceti—have an even greater number of ships. To make matters worse, each of the core systems also has a battle platform, and Tau Ceti has two of *those* as well. Altogether, there are sixty-eight Jung warships within twenty light years of Earth. Twenty-six of them are within twelve. That’s twenty-six ships that could reach Earth in just over seven months.”

“But it would take that long just to get word to them that they *needed* to come here,” Lieutenant Delaveaga pointed out. “So isn’t it more like fourteen months?”

“Probably,” Jessica agreed, “but don’t forget, we have no idea what the Jung plan originally was. For all we know, that extra battle platform was scheduled to leave tomorrow. We also don’t know if twenty times light is the top speed of a Jung comm-drone. Considering how little we know for sure about Jung military capabilities, we should always assume the worst-case scenario, and that would be that all of those ships could descend upon us at any time. For all we know, they may have fitted half their fleet with their own jump drives, and we just haven’t seen them yet.”

“Seems highly unlikely, doesn’t it,” Lieutenant Eckert argued.

“Actually, it isn’t as unlikely as one might think,” Lieutenant Telles said as he entered the room. “Apologies for my late arrival, Captain. An incident on Earth delayed my departure.”

“Quite alright, Lieutenant,” Nathan replied. “Comms notified me of the situation. You were saying?”

“Due to the amount of time required to move linear FTL assets from one theater to another, the orders to move assets toward Earth, for whatever reason, were probably issued long ago. Perhaps as much as fifty years ago, long after your people started emitting identifiable signals into

space again. While their ships were in transit to Earth, the Jung would have continued developing new technologies, or stealing them from captured worlds. That could have included a method of instantaneous interstellar transportation. Remember, just because we have not seen it, does not mean it does not exist."

"We can speculate all we want," Nathan argued, "but we can only act upon what we know, or what is reasonably probable. To do otherwise would paralyze us since no matter how much we prepared, it would never seem enough. My plan is to destroy all Jung assets within twenty light years of Sol, starting with the ones in the core systems... Including those damned battle platforms." Nathan looked back to Jessica, sitting at the far end of the table. "Given all the intelligence gathered to date, and excluding the platform currently en route, how long do you think we have until assets from core systems start showing up on our doorstep?"

"Assuming that their comm-drones have a top speed of twenty-C, *and* assuming that they launched a comm-drone toward *every* core system the day we arrived from the Pentaurus cluster, a safe estimate would be two hundred and twenty days."

"That is a *lot* of assumptions," Lieutenant Eckert said, one eyebrow raised.

"Yes, it is," Jessica admitted, "but they are all conservative assumptions."

"Ones that I would be inclined to agree with," Nathan added. "So, we have forty-two days until the Karuzara arrives, after which we will have two hundred and eight days to overhaul and upgrade our ships. And that's *if* we destroy the Centauri platform *before* it gets here. To be honest, I'd feel a lot better if we went out and destroyed all those ships as soon as possible. Preferably before they even heard about us."

"If Lieutenant Commander Nash's assumptions are indeed correct, then the nearest Jung assets will hear of us in twelve days," Lieutenant Telles said. "Even if you are successful in destroying the Centauri platform tomorrow, it is highly doubtful that you can destroy the ships in the Cygni and Ceti systems in such a short time."

"We don't even know for sure when, or even *if* a comm-drone was launched, or to which system," Cameron pointed out.

"Why don't we just send someone one hundred and ninety-six light days out and check?" Lieutenant Delaveaga suggested.

Both Cameron and Nathan looked at the lieutenant.

"I knew there was a reason we promoted you," Nathan said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Jump seven, complete," Mister Riley announced as the Aurora's jump flash faded away and the lighting on her bridge returned to its normal red-tinged state.

"Position verified," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station.

"Firing triplets on all tubes and cannons," Lieutenant Eckert began, "in three.....two.....one.....firing."

The Aurora's bridge became awash in brilliant red-orange flashes as the plasma charges left her weapons and streaked away into the black of space.

"All weapons away," the lieutenant added.

"Jump eight," Mister Riley announced right on cue, "in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Again the bridge was flooded with blue-white light as the Aurora was enveloped in her jump fields. Nathan could imagine the ship streaking past the very plasma charges that they had just sent hurtling toward the distant battle platform, the ship slipping just under the glowing red-orange balls, leaving them behind as if they were standing still.

"Jump eight, complete," Mister Riley reported as the jump flash subsided.

"Position verified," Mister Navashee reported.
"Antimatter detonation in twenty seconds."

"Firing all forward weapons in three..."

"Jump nine, plotted and ready," Mister Riley reported.

"...Two..."

"Stand by for course change, Mister Chiles," Nathan reminded.

“...One...”

“Aye, sir.”

“Firing,” Lieutenant Eckert announced. A moment later, the bridge was again flooded with red-orange light that faded quickly as their weapons charges departed. “Weapons away.”

“Three degrees, down relative,” Nathan ordered.

“Three degrees, down relative, aye,” the helmsman answered.

“Ten seconds to detonation,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Mister Riley, jump us as soon as our course change is complete. Tactical, prepare to fire as soon as Mister Chiles brings our nose back onto the target.”

“Five seconds to detonation,” Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia’s sensor station.

“Two degrees, up relative, complete,” Ensign Hunt reported from the helm.

“Snap jump, Mister Jakoby,” Cameron ordered.

“Snap jump, aye,” the navigator answered as the Celestia’s blue-white jump flash washed over them. “Jump complete.”

“Position verified,” Ensign Kono reported. “Detonation confirmed!”

“Pitch us down,” Cameron ordered. “Put our nose on the target. Mister Delaveaga, fire as soon as you have a lock on the target.”

“New contact!” Ensign Kono reported. “A Jung battle platform, just knocked out of FTL!”

“Nice to know that trick still works,” Cameron mumbled to herself.

“Fire at will,” Nathan ordered.

“Jump ten, plotted and ready,” Mister Riley reported.

“Firing triplets on all forward weapons.”

“First eight rounds will impact in three seconds,” Mister Navashee announced.

“Weapons away,” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station.

“Stand by to jump,” Nathan said.

“Weapons impact!” Mister Navashee reported. “Target’s shields are down! Forward arm!”

“You mean they already fixed the shields we brought down last time?” Nathan wondered.

“Jump ten in three...”

“No, sir. They’ve rotated so that their number two arm is now forward...”

“...Two...”

“...Their damaged arm is now facing port and aft,” Mister Navashee explained.

“...One...”

“They’re taking damage!”

“...Jumping.”

“Transmitting launch signal in three...”

Josh looked out the port side of their canopy at the KKV flying alongside them no more than one hundred meters away.

“...Two...”

“Standing by for course correction,” Josh announced.

“...One.....transmitting.”

Loki also looked out the window as the modified Takaran comm-drone began to accelerate away from them at an astonishing rate. “Damn, that thing is fast.”

The comm-drone quickly disappeared from sight.

“Comm-drone has gone to FTL,” Loki reported. “It should reach the target in twenty seconds.”

“Changing course toward the observation point,” Josh announced as he moved his flight control stick.

"Jumping in three seconds," Loki announced.

"I can't wait to see this," Josh mumbled.

"...Two...me too..." Loki agreed, "...jumping."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"Jumping in five seconds," Mister Riley reported.

"Contact!" Mister Navashee announced.

"Four..."

"Jump flash. Falcon One."

"...Three..."

"...Incoming message from Falcon One..." Naralena reported.

"...Two..."

"...KKV launched on schedule."

"...One..."

"Very well," Nathan stated.

"...Jumping."

"Estimate KKV impact in seven seconds," Mister Navashee reported as the Aurora's jump flash faded.

"Jump complete."

"Position verified. Five seconds to... What the..." Mister Navashee stopped mid-sentence. "Contact! Dead ahead! Three kilometers and closing fast! It's the platform! They're firing! Missiles and guns!"

"Helm! Evasive!" Nathan ordered as the Aurora started a hard turn to port. "ECM! Jam those missiles! Tactical! Target those missiles with our laser turrets!"

"Target is firing on the Aurora!" Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia's sensor station.

"What the hell?"

"She must have performed a micro-FTL jump," Ensign Kono declared.

"They jumped in close, just like we would," Luis commented from the tactical station.

"Aurora is hit!" Ensign Kono added. "Three missiles in her starboard side! She's venting atmosphere! Heavy debris!"

"Is she still maneuvering?" Cameron demanded.

"Yes, sir! Power, propulsion, and maneuvering are still up!"

"Where's our KKV?"

"It's already passed the target point," Ensign Kono reported. She turned her head to look at her captain. "We missed, sir."

"Helm, hard to port. Parallel the target's course and speed," Cameron ordered.

"Hard to port, aye," Ensign Hunt answered.

"Mister Jakoby, prepare to jump us alongside her forward arm. I want to be five hundred meters forward of the target and five hundred to port."

"Five hundred forward and to port, aye," Mister Jakoby answered. "Plotting jump now."

"Stand by on all plasma weapons," Cameron continued. "Triplets all around."

"Yes, sir," Luis answered.

"As soon as we jump, swing our nose to starboard and bring all tubes onto the target."

"Jump ready, Captain," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Starting yaw maneuver," Ensign Hunt added.

"Snap jump!"

"Snap jump, aye," Mister Jakoby acknowledged as blue-white light washed over them. "Jump complete."

"Firing solution in five seconds," Luis reported. "Ready on all plasma weapons."

"Fire as soon as our tubes are on them," Cameron ordered.

"Target is firing!" Ensign Kono reported.

"At us or the Aurora?" Cameron demanded.

“At us! The Aurora has jumped away! Incoming rail guns!”

The bridge of the Celestia shook violently as the battle platform’s massive rail gun rounds slammed into her hull.

“Energy spike in the target’s reactors!” Ensign Kono reported. “They’re going to FTL!”

“Firing all weapons!” Luis reported.

Red-orange balls of plasma energy leapt from the Celestia’s four forward torpedo tubes, as well as from her two port-side plasma cannons. The six charges streaked across the five hundred meters between the Celestia and the battle platform, but they were too late. The battle platform disappeared in a strange, bending of reality, leaving only empty space for the Celestia’s weapons to pass through.

“Target is gone, sir,” Ensign Kono reported.

Cameron wanted to swear, to pound the arm of her command chair, but she did not. Instead, she gathered herself and turned toward her sensor operator to her left. “Find the Aurora. If she made an emergency escape jump, she won’t be more than ten or twenty light seconds away.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Kono acknowledged.

“How the hell did they know?” Luis wondered.

“They didn’t,” Cameron surmised. “We thought we were laying a trap for them, when all the while, they were laying one for us.”

“Captain,” Ensign Souza called from the comm station at the back of the bridge. “Falcon One is reporting they have a track on the KKV.”

“Tell them to intercept, transmit the abort codes, and follow the recovery protocols,” Cameron instructed.

"I have the Aurora," Ensign Kono reported. "Fifteen light seconds, bearing one two seven, down twenty relative." Ensign Kono turned toward Cameron again. "She's in bad shape, sir."

"Helm, get us alongside the Aurora, ASAP."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Hunt acknowledged. "Coming to heading one two seven, down twenty relative."

"Plotting jump," Mister Jakoby added.

"Damage control, Captain," Cameron called over her comm-set.

"Damage control, go ahead, Captain," Master Chief Montrose answered over the comms.

"Master Chief, assemble all damage control teams in the main hangar bay."

"We don't have any damage in the main hangar bay, Captain," Master Chief Montrose said. *"We don't have any damage anywhere."*

"It's not for us, Master Chief," Cameron said. "It's for the Aurora."

"Aye, sir," Master Chief Montrose answered solemnly.

"On course," Ensign Hunt reported.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Cameron watched the main view screen as the jump flash washed over them. A small, oblong gray object appeared before them. "Magnify," she ordered.

The image on the screen suddenly became much larger, nearly filling the screen. The entire starboard side of the Aurora was full of holes big and small. Half her starboard fighter alley was open to space, and both fighter launch tubes had been blown open, leaving her plasma cannons twisted hunks of metal.

"Jesus," Luis gasped. "I'm surprised she could jump at all."

"The infamous 'Scott luck'," Cameron mumbled.

"Incoming call from the Aurora, Captain," Ensign Souza reported.

“Tell them we’re sending our damage control parties over,” Cameron instructed.

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Souza answered. “They’re also asking we send all medical personnel as well.”

Cameron sighed, a sinking feeling hitting the pit of her stomach. “Very well. Notify medical.”

* * *

Captain Roselle stepped through the port boarding hatch into the foyer. Down the lateral corridor, he could see personnel moving about briskly. Several men in fire-fighting gear, discolored from contact with burning gases, went by as well.

The captain charged down the corridor, determined to discover what had happened. He reached the end of the corridor and paused to look both directions. In the distance to his left, he spotted Captain Poc and Captain Nash walking away from him on their way forward. “Poc!” he hollered as he broke into a jog toward them. “What happened?” he called as he neared the two captains. “What’s going on?”

“Aurora took damage during their attack on the battle platform,” Captain Poc answered.

“How bad?”

“Pretty bad,” Captain Poc replied.

“Their entire starboard side is shot to hell,” Captain Nash explained as the three of them turned the corner and headed up the ramp to the next deck. “Their starboard fighter alley is open to space, and their starboard plasma cannons are a mess.”

“How do you know?”

“Wellsy scanned them as they approached,” Captain Nash answered.

“Did they destroy the platform this time?”

“God, I hope so,” Captain Poc said as they came to the top of the ramp and stepped onto B deck.

The wide central corridor that led from the main entrance to the hangar deck forward was busy as damage control teams and technicians scurried about. The three captains looked through the massive double doors that led into the main hangar bay as damage control teams that had just disembarked from the Celestia's second wave of shuttles made their way across the hangar deck toward the transfer airlocks on the starboard side. They could hear chiefs and deck bosses yelling orders to the arriving rescue workers. It was chaos, but the controlled chaos that one expected from a well-trained crew during an emergency aboard a warship.

"Come on," Captain Poc said, "Let's get to the command deck and see what happened."

The three captains turned and headed up the ramp, only to stop abruptly as they saw Captain Scott coming down the ramp, followed by Lieutenant Commander Nash and Sergeant Weatherly.

"Captain," Captain Poc said. "What happened?"

"Did you destroy that thing?" Captain Roselle demanded.

"The platform performed a micro-FTL jump, came out two kilometers in front of us with all weapons firing," Nathan explained as he descended the ramp toward them. "We took four missiles and a barrage of heavy rail gun fire before we could jump clear."

"What about the battle platform," Captain Roselle demanded a second time. "Did you hit it with the KKV?"

"The KKV missed," Nathan said as he passed them by. "The platform went back into FTL."

"So now what, hot shot?" Captain Roselle challenged. "Is that three times or four times you've failed to bring that thing down?"

Nathan stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of the ramp.

"What's your plan now?" Captain Roselle taunted.

Nathan turned around slowly and walked back up the ramp toward Captain Roselle. Jessica and the sergeant both stepped aside, as did Captains Poc and Nash as Nathan approached.

“My plan is to see to the rescue of the twenty-seven men still trapped in the starboard fighter alley. After that, I’m going to medical to make sure that the sixty-two wounded crewmen are getting proper medical attention, and that the twenty-three dead crewmen are respectfully tended to.”

“Don’t you have subordinates to do that, Scott?” Captain Roselle said, continuing to berate him, “or are you one of those captains who thinks he needs to hold everyone’s hand and tell them everything is going to be alright?”

Nathan took a step closer to Captain Roselle, his face only centimeters away. “How many times have you flown into combat, Captain? How many men and women have died bravely following your orders?”

“Oh, don’t give me that shit...”

“I asked you a question!” Nathan yelled directly into Captain Roselle’s face. “How many!”

Captain Roselle glanced to Nathan’s right, his eyes meeting those of Sergeant Weatherly’s. He then glanced to Nathan’s left, locking eyes with Lieutenant Commander Nash as she winked at him and blew him a kiss. He could see it in her eyes, clear as day. The look he had always heard of.

Nathan watched Captain Roselle’s face from centimeters distance as his expression suddenly changed. “Help out, or go back to your ship, Captain. Either way, stay the fuck out of my way, because I have work to do.” Nathan turned to look at Captain Poc and Captain Nash. “Captains,” he said before he turned and continued down the ramp with Lieutenant Commander Nash and Sergeant Weatherly following close behind.

"Jesus," Captain Roselle said.

"What?" Captain Poc asked.

"You saw it. Both of you. That little asshole is out of control. He's on a power trip, and he's got his crew and the Ghatazhak backing him."

"All I saw was you being an ass, Roselle," Captain Poc said as he turned to head back down the ramp.

"Are you kidding me?"

Captain Poc stopped and looked back at Roselle. "The kid was right, Roselle. None of us has seen combat. He has... And plenty of it. You might want to show him a little respect, at least for repeatedly charging back into the lion's mouth."

Captain Roselle watched, his mouth agape as Captain Poc turned and headed down the ramp. "Where are you going, Poc?"

"To see how I can be of help."

Captain Roselle turned to look at Captain Nash, who himself was turning to follow Captain Poc down the ramp. "I suppose you agree with Poc, right?"

"Yup," Captain Nash answered. "Especially the part about you being an ass."

* * *

Nathan stood staring at the Scout ship that all but filled the Aurora's massive hangar bay. Before him was a piece of history... One of the first space faring ships built by post-plague Terrans. It was also the first post-plague ship with faster-than-light capabilities. They had been built for a noble reason, to reestablish contact with the original six core colonies of Earth.

"I would've bet my pension that this thing wouldn't fit in here."

Nathan turned to his left and saw Captain Poc walking toward him. "Nice landing, sir."

“Easy enough, really. Just floated her in and parked her above the struts your people rigged up for us. Once they started dialing up the gravity, we just settled down nice and easy.”

“I watched the whole thing from flight ops,” Nathan admitted. “It might have been easy, but it was still pretty impressive to watch. I’m surprised you were worried, about it *fitting*, I mean.”

“Well, even with your bay wide open, the clearance was pretty tight,” Captain Poc explained. “When this thing was built, nothing ever came out exactly to plan. We didn’t have any experience building spaceships at the time. Hell, we had only put people in orbit a few years before they started planning these things. We thought we could just follow the blueprints we found in the Data Ark, substituting the methods and materials we had for the ones the designs called for.”

“I expect it was a bit more exact than you’re letting on, sir,” Nathan said.

“Well, I may be exaggerating a bit. We did the best we could with what we had.”

“You talk as if you were there,” Nathan said.

“I was,” Captain Poc said. “Hell, I was the one who flew this thing into orbit for the first time. Strapped a bunch of solid rocket boosters onto her and blasted our asses into the sky.”

Nathan looked at Captain Poc, his eyes squinted, unsure whether or not to believe him. “Exactly how old are you?”

“Chronologically, sixty-eight. I was thirty-five the first time I strapped my ass into that thing. Five years of test flights, then out to Eighty-Two Eridani and back. Made the Centauri run a few times as well. Hell, I’ve got more than twenty years in stasis altogether.”

“Must’ve been hard on your wife,” Nathan commented.

“She gave up on me the moment I took the assignment. Navy life had been hard enough on her. Married her dentist.

Hardest part is looking younger than my kids. If I go to a bar with my son, everyone thinks he's *my* father."

"Still, you got to go places that no one had been to," Nathan said, "at least not for a thousand years."

"Sounds a lot more exciting than it really was," Captain Poc insisted. "You go to sleep, wake up five years later and you're there. Hell, the first trip to Eridani we couldn't even get anyone to answer us on the comms. We never even left the ship, just ran a bunch of scans, took some pictures, gathered some SIGINT and came home. Two five-year naps and a week of data collection."

"Still, it was a pretty brave journey, all things considered."

Captain Poc looked over his ship. "I can't remember the last time I looked her over from outside. You know, they built her pretty much the same way they built boats back then. At least the frame and the hull. Every piece, hand-welded... None of those laser-guided precision welding systems they used to build your ship."

"And yet they have lasted more than thirty years," Nathan said.

"Well, they over-built them a bit. Just between us, the damn thing barely made it to orbit. Tanks were bone-dry by the time we shut down." The captain continued gazing at his ship. "Yeah, a lot of light years on this old hull."

"Well, that number will be going up a lot faster than you ever dreamed," Nathan said. "The first four mini-jump drives arrived from Karuzara a couple of hours ago. In a couple weeks you'll be jumping all over the core." Nathan smiled at Captain Poc.

Captain Poc also smiled. "I'm not going to lie to you, Scott. The idea *is* pretty exciting. It just seems... well, somewhat dangerous, you know? I mean, what happens if you inadvertently try to jump through something?"

"Well," Nathan tried to explain, "as I understand things, it works pretty much the same way as linear FTL. At least in

the sense that the smaller stuff will deflect off our hulls. If an object is big enough to damage you at normal speeds, it's big enough to damage you in a jump. Actually, jumping is *safer* than linear FTL, since technically you're still traveling at speeds less than the speed of light, so the kinetic energy of the impacting object would be less."

"Not much of a comfort, I'm afraid," Captain Poc said.

"I'm not very good at explaining it," Nathan admitted. "The fact is, I don't really understand it myself. You might want to spend some time with one of the Corinairan specialists on the Karuzara. They actually understand it better than the original inventor did."

"What about your cheng, Kamenetskiy? Surely he understands it?"

"Yeah, but you don't want to get him started talking about it, trust me. The Corinairans will be far more succinct."

"I'll try to remember that," Captain Poc assured him.

"Captain?" Nathan asked. "Can I ask you something, off the record, as it were?"

"What's on your mind, Scott?"

"It's about Captain Roselle. The man seems to outright hate my ass, and I'm not sure why."

"Why do you think?" Captain Poc asked.

"Because command fell into my lap? Because I'm the son of a rich politician? Because I've made a lot of mistakes since I took command?"

"Yeah, that pretty much covers it," Captain Poc agreed. "Look, Scott, Roselle doesn't hate you. He doesn't *know* you, so how can he actually *hate* you?"

"Then why does he seize every opportunity to chew my ass?" Nathan wondered.

"Don't tell me you never had your ass chewed, Scott."

"Of course I have," Nathan assured him. "Plenty of times, in fact."

“Roselle doesn’t hate *you*, Scott. He hates that events have placed all our fates in *your* hands. Let’s face it, you’re not exactly trained for this. Hell, none of us are, really. Sure, we may have more time in service, more command training and experience, but as you pointed out the other day, we haven’t really seen combat. At least not in space. But here’s the difference between you and us. We *want* command. We’ve trained for it our whole lives. It’s what we do. By your own log entries, you never wanted to command anything, let alone the ship that is supposed to save the galaxy.”

“Trust me, sir, I would...”

“...Don’t say it, Scott,” Captain Poc warned, cutting Nathan off in mid-sentence. “Don’t you fucking say it.” Captain Poc looked Nathan straight in the eyes. “Whether you want it or not, the responsibility is yours. You have the experience, you have the trust and relationships with our allies, and you have the ability. Captain Roberts knew you had it in you, otherwise he wouldn’t have accepted Fleet’s last minute transfer of you to his ship. He had too many friends in high places to allow himself to get fucked around like that. Fact is, son, it would take any of us months to get up to speed and become better qualified than you are right now to run this ship, under the current circumstances. *That’s* what Captain Roselle hates about you.” Captain Poc turned back toward his ship. “That, and all the other things you listed. But mostly that.”

Nathan stood there, dumbfounded.

“You know, when we were first reading that synopsis of events you gave us, we thought you were making it all up. Roselle himself said ‘There’s no way a week-old lieu-ee could pull all this off.’”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that, sir,” Nathan finally replied.

“Like I said, Scott, you’ve got talent. Roberts knew it, and we know it. I’m pretty sure your crew knows it as well, which is why they’re so loyal.” Captain Poc turned and

looked at Nathan again. "You've also had some pretty good cards dealt to you along the way, though. Don't forget that. Remember, there are only so many good cards in the deck. That's why Roselle and I will be jumping your shit every time you fuck up. And you will fuck up, I promise you. Just see that you *don't* fuck up such a way that you get *my* ass killed." Captain Poc smiled. "I'm shooting for second-oldest man alive."

"Understood, sir," Nathan answered, "and thank you."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Captain, it appears my crew and I have a lot of work ahead of us."

"As do we all, sir," Nathan replied.

* * *

"You'd think with all the crap they want us to learn that they would pull us out of the rotation once in a while," Josh complained.

"Everyone else is flying the same number of hours," Loki replied as he studied the sensor displays in front of him. "Target course and speed are unchanged." Loki looked away from the sensor display, glancing at the jump-nav display. "One minute to next jump point."

"You know, you don't have to report 'target course and speed unchanged' to me at the end of each cycle. If you say nothing about the target's course and speed, I'll just assume that the platform is still headed for Earth."

"Just following procedures, Josh."

"That's another thing," Josh said, turning to look over his shoulder at Loki in the seat behind him. "You've become *way* to 'procedural' lately."

"We are going to be tested, you know." Loki glanced at the jump-nav display again. "Thirty seconds to jump."

"Yeah, I know. Why do you think I've been spending so much time in the simulators these days?"

"I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That you keep busting. Ten seconds."

"If by 'busting' you mean 'surviving', then yes."

"Jumping in three..."

"...Besides..."

"...Two..."

"...Their maneuvers are stupid..."

"...One.....Jumping." Loki pressed the button to execute the jump. "By 'stupid' you mean 'you don't agree with them'."

"No, I mean they're stupid."

"Starting scans."

"Jesus, they had me low and outside on a tight left ascending turn the other day. Neither one of us could pull it in any tighter, and the bogie knew it. Breaking right and coming around on the opposite angle got me the kill."

"And left your leader uncovered," Loki reminded him.

"That's another thing," Josh said. "If I'm tight on my leader's ass, how the hell am I protecting him? By putting myself between my leader and the guy sneaking up behind us? Seems like a better idea would be for me to hang back and let someone come in behind him, and then jump *that* fucker from behind."

"It's about everyone doing what everyone else expects them to do," Loki reminded him.

"Including the enemy."

"Josh, it's about learning *how* to do these maneuvers. It's about practicing formation flying, even in combat situations. It's about your leader *knowing* that you know how to stay tight on his wing when he needs you to. It doesn't mean he's *going* to ask you to take fire to protect him."

"He might," Josh disagreed.

"Well, maybe, but you're missing the point."

"No, I'm not," Josh disagreed. "The point is that there is no point."

"When we flew through that waterfall on Tanna, how many meters did we lose before you recovered?" Loki asked.

"I don't know. Forty, fifty, sixty?"

"Two hundred and eight-four," Loki said. "I remember, because we used up exactly half of the distance between us and the ground at the time."

"Forgive me, Loki. I didn't have any practice at reacting to suddenly have a few million liters of water dumped on us from above."

"And if you had, would we have lost less altitude?"

"Of course."

"That's my point."

"So, you're saying, that by practicing shit that I'm never going to do, I'll be better prepared to never do it? Yeah, that makes sense." Josh turned to look over his shoulder again. "Hey, I've got a crazy idea! What if, we first practice what we *will* be doing, and then practice the shit we will never do? Crazy, I know, but I think I'll suggest it to Major Prechitt when we get back. Could be no one's thought of it before."

"It gets back to that whole everyone having the same body of knowledge and training thing," Loki explained. "Just do us both a favor, Josh, and do the maneuvers the way they want you to do them. Once we graduate, then you can go back to doing your usual crazy pilot shit."

"I'm going to remember you said that," Josh declared.

"I knew that you would."

After more than a minute in silence, Josh spoke again. "So, no change in course and speed?"

"Nope. I didn't say anything, just to prove you wrong."

Josh rolled his eyes. "Hey, I heard a rumor that they're going to turn Porto Santo into a full-blown spaceport, not just a base for the Ghatazhak."

"I heard the same rumor," Loki said.

"I also heard that they were going to move all of us down there while the Aurora and the Celestia go into Rebel

Rock for overhaul. That would be nice, huh?"

"A few green hills, ocean breeze, white sandy beaches..."

"Tan girls frolicking in the waves in those skimpy bathing suits. What did they call them?"

"Bikinis," Loki replied.

"Yeah, bikinis. Tiny pieces of fabric that barely cover a girl's body. One of the Earth's finest traditions." Josh turned to look over his shoulder again when he got no response. "Loki?"

"Something is going on," Loki said in a serious tone of voice.

"What?"

"The platform's light isn't frequency shifted anymore. I mean, it is, but nowhere near as much. They must have dropped out of FTL. Accelerate to two five seven."

"Why?" Josh asked as he turned forward and entered the new speed into the Falcon's auto-flight system.

"I want to match their velocity and see if the frequency-shift goes away."

"Two five seven in one minute," Josh reported. "What do you think they're doing?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they have a problem with their FTLs?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe we should jump back and report this, Loki," Josh suggested.

"They're definitely not in FTL anymore, but they are changing course. Slowly, but definitely changing course."

"How much?"

"I don't know yet. They're still turning."

"Maybe they spotted something in their way, like a rogue asteroid or something, and they're trying to steer around it?"

"Matter goes around them when they're in FTL, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Maybe they changed their mind, and they're not going to Earth after all? Or maybe they got new orders?"

"Or maybe they're just executing a basic, random zigzag maneuver so that the captain can't knock them out of FTL at will." Loki's eyes left the sensor display and looked forward at his friend. "They just went back into FTL."

"Are they still headed toward Earth?" Josh wondered.

"Technically, no. They only changed course a few degrees, but at this distance it's enough to completely skirt the Sol system."

"Then that's good news, right?"

"Maybe," Loki agreed. "Unless they're just zigzagging, or they want to slide by and then try to surprise Earth by coming in from another angle."

"But they've got to know that we're tracking them. I mean, with all our jump flashes, we'd be kind of hard to miss. We're not that far behind them."

"Possibly," Loki replied, "but remember, when they're in FTL, they're traveling away from us faster than our light is traveling toward them. The only way they'd see us is if they spotted our flash while they are *out* of FTL."

"Either way, we should report this," Josh insisted.

"Not yet," Loki argued.

"This is important, Loki. The captain would want to know."

"You just want to cut our mission short," Loki said. "Besides, our orders are to track until relieved, until we reach bingo resources, or until directly threatened. That means we continue tracking for three more hours."

"Damn," Josh mumbled.

"Give me a moment to calculate a new track," Loki said as he turned his attention to the navigation computer. "Look at it this way, Josh. At least you won't be flying a straight line anymore."

"Oh, whee. Three degree course changes," Josh said. "How exciting."

* * *

"Permission to come aboard?" Jessica called from the main salon hatch.

"You forgot the sir, Lieutenant Commander," Captain Nash answered.

"Put some golden eagles on a guy's shirt and he gets all full of himself," she replied as she entered the compartment. "Where is everyone?"

"Two of them are down on the surface, hooking up with family your captain's sister found for them. My cheng is crawling around in the services spaces aft, making sure everything is ready for the jump drive install, and to be honest, I'm not sure where the rest of them are. I think they're in your mess hall. Apparently the food is better there."

"Not by much," Jessica said as she sat down across the table from her brother. "At least they finally ran out of molo."

"The mushroom-tofu-like crap?"

"Yup. Nasty shit."

"Agreed."

"What's all this?" she asked, pointing at the various data pads lying about.

"I've been studying up on the jump drive. Operational parameters, tactics, limitations. The damned thing is pretty amazing. It's also a bit frightening."

"How so?"

"Limitations are a good thing, little one."

"Please, don't call me that," she protested.

"Sorry, but you'll always be 'little one' to me."

"Fine, but if that catches on, I will kick your ass, golden eagles notwithstanding."

"Duly noted."

"You were saying something about limitations?"

“Limitations are often what keeps us from getting ourselves in over our heads. This jump drive—especially the minis that can jump repeatedly without recharging—it changes everything, and I mean everything.”

“Well, obviously...”

“No, I don’t think you get it,” Captain Nash said. “I’m not just talking about interstellar travel. I’m talking everything.”

“Such as?”

“Well, take this ship, for example. Built on the ground then blasted up into orbit, at great additional trouble and expense. With a jump drive, you could build it on the ground, on a track... A track that runs downhill just enough to go up a bit at the end just before you jump to orbit. No propellant, no rocket boosters. You could crank ships out on a production line at a fraction of the cost. Same thing applies to building larger ships. In fact, you could probably build an Explorer-class ship on the ground the same way... Again, a hell of a lot cheaper. Even intercontinental travel would change. Jump up, jump over, jump down, and land. Hell, you want to eat Italian for dinner, go to Italy. You’d still be able to sleep in your own bed that night.”

“The ship thing is pretty cool, I have to admit,” Jessica said.

“There’s more,” Captain Nash continued. “Resources. More wars have been fought over resources than anything else, except maybe religion. That’s all a thing of the past, now, as is the destruction of the world you’re living on due to the harvesting of resources. Too much garbage building up around you, jump it away to a system with no planets, and send that garbage toward the star to be incinerated. Everything you can think of, every industry, every facet of human existence, will be changed by this technology.”

“Come on, Bobby,” Jessica said, “don’t you think you’re stretching it a bit?”

“Pick something.”

“Okay... The movie industry.”

“The biggest expense for them is transportation. Equipment, actors, crew. The cost of moving all of that around to different locations is enormous. Reduce that cost, and movies can be made more cheaply. Cheaper production costs, more new movies, more ticket sales...”

“Okay. Sports.”

“Everyone always roots for the home team, because *that’s* the team that they can go and see live. Same thing as the Italian food analogy. Jump over and see your favorite team, anywhere in the world, and be back in your own bed that night.”

“I get your point.”

“The cost of life itself is all tied up in the cost of moving people, goods, and resources from place to place. Cost is the number one thing that stifles development. The reason we didn’t have *more* warships is because it costs so much to get the materials and people to orbit to build them. It’s all in the cost of transportation. All of it.”

“I didn’t realize you were such an expert in economics.”

“It doesn’t take one to figure this stuff out, Jess.”

“So you’re on board with Nathan’s plans?”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far.”

“You too?” Jessica asked, shaking her head. “Jesus, what is it going to take to get you three meatheads to realize what a great leader he is? You saw the logs, you read about all the things he did. Hell, Bobby, the guy saved my ass more than once. He’s saved all our asses more than once. He’s saved the Earth... Twice!”

“He’s had a lot of lucky breaks, Jess...”

“Luck is worthless unless you’re able to recognize the opportunity and be willing to take advantage of it.”

“Dad?”

“Dad.”

“The guy was holding himself up as a savior, for crying out loud. Surely that’s got to set off some warning bells in

you?"

"That wasn't his doing," Jessica argued, "that was that bitch, Jalea."

"That's another thing that scares us," Bobby said. "That your captain is more likely to think with his dick. She played him from..."

"Jesus, Bobby!" Jessica yelled. "You're dumber than I thought. Nathan played her. He may not have known entirely what she was up to, but he knew she was trying to play him and he flipped it on her. Who the fuck do you think gave me the order to terminate her once we finished our mission on Takara?"

"Seriously?"

"Hell, yes! Nathan Scott knows how to work the angles. He may not be a spit and polish, chewing and spitting nails, sea-dog captain like you and your buddies, Poc and Roselle, but he knows people, and he knows how to read a situation and come up with a quick solution."

"But some of his solutions are pretty far outside the norm."

"I'd say they kind of had to be, wouldn't you? It's not like any of them have been *normal* situations to begin with."

Captain Nash leaned back in his chair and sighed. "You like him, don't you?"

"He's my friend, so yeah, I do like him. But he's also my commanding officer, and I respect him. Granted, I didn't before, but I didn't have much choice. None of us did, not even Nathan. So you see, you all might want to give him a chance, because he may surprise you."

"Surprise is exactly what we're afraid of," Bobby said. "Look, Jess, none of us are out to get him, and none of us are out to take his command away. As far as I can tell, he's earned that chair. But we have a duty, as officers, to ensure that he is able to do his best. He may be a great leader, and able to think on his feet, but he sucks at running a ship. Not because he's an idiot, but because he lacks training, *and* he

lacks exposure to proper role models. He doesn't know how to *be* a good captain because he hasn't watched a good captain in action."

"Maybe that's *why* he is able to do the things he does," Jessica argued. "Did you ever think of that?"

"The old, 'this isn't the sea, this is outer space' argument," Bobby said. "Yeah, I've heard that one. Admittedly, there may be some truth to that. But, since we don't have much else to build from, we have to start somewhere, don't we?"

"So, you three want to 'whip him into shape', make him into a 'proper CO'? Is that it?"

"Something like that, yes," Bobby replied, leaning back in his chair again. "More than anything, we want to build his confidence. You can see it in his eyes, Jess. The man is constantly second-guessing himself, always looking to subordinates for answers."

"I thought that was called good resource management."

"The captain of a warship has to be almighty and all-knowing. He has to have the right answer every time, and he must show no doubt in his decisions. He must be all these things, because his crew has to believe in him, and be willing to follow him into battle without hesitation. You people have been following him all this time because you had no other choice. Now you have three other choices. Us."

"I thought you said you weren't trying to..."

"...We aren't. But because we're here now, Scott has to be bigger, bolder, and more confident than any of us. You saw Roselle, that's a tall order right there."

"So all that crap on the ramp the other day, that was all part of your 'master plan'?"

"Well, partly. Mostly it was just Roselle being an ass. A damned good CO, but an ass nonetheless."

"God, I hate this shit," Jessica said, shaking her head as it hung down. "I have to admit, though, it does make sense. Maybe you're not as dumb as I thought," she added in jest.

“Not to sound condescending or anything, Jess, but you guys are a bunch of kids who think you’re all grown up because you’re driving daddy’s truck. I admit, you’ve done pretty damn well so far, but you’ve all got a lot to learn. A lot. Truth is, without the Corinari, I doubt you would’ve gotten this far. Prechitt, McCullum, Montrose, Taggart... Those are the guys that are keeping your crews motivated and following orders.”

“Taggart? Are you kidding me?” Jessica exclaimed. “He’s not Corinari. He’s a fucking ring-miner from Haven. A slave driver, in fact.”

“Maybe, but I’ll bet he was in the service at some point in his life.”

“Doubtful.”

“You’re the Aurora’s chief of security, aren’t you? Shouldn’t you know?”

“How was I supposed to do a background on the guy?” Jessica objected. “He’s from a world over a thousand light years away that’s run by an organized crime family of some type. Hell, Taggart is probably not even his real name. He’s used three last names that I know of since he came on board.”

“How the hell did he end up as chief of the boat, then?” Bobby wondered.

“Captain likes him.”

“Seems to be doing a pretty good job so far, from what I’ve read.”

“Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it, the old coot has done pretty well,” Jessica admitted.

“Anyway, enough about all this. Tell me how you ended up a badass spec-ops bitch.”

“Watch your tongue, Bobert. I’d hate for you to have to explain to your crew how your baby sister beat the snot out of you. Probably ruin that whole ‘almighty, all-knowing’ thing you’ve got going with them.”

* * *

"They've got to be burning a lot of damned propellant," Captain Roselle said.

"Agreed," Nathan replied from his chair at the head of the conference table in the command briefing room.

"That might mean that they will have limited maneuverability when they arrive," Cameron suggested.

"We have no idea what their propellant storage capacity actually is," Captain Poc replied, "therefore we cannot make that assumption."

"Well, another strike en route is out of the question," Nathan said. "The way they've been executing random course changes over the last two weeks makes it near impossible to set the mines to knock them out of FTL at a position of our choosing."

"We've still got eight antimatter cores left," Cameron said. "Maybe if we wait until we have at least four KKV's ready, we could spread the mines further apart, knock them out of FTL and then launch a spread of all four KKV's. We might get lucky. Even if we miss, we can still recover the KKV's and use them again."

"But we can't recover the antimatter mines," Captain Poc pointed out. "Such a plan has very low odds of success. Better that we save the antimatter cores for use when the platform arrives."

"What are you suggesting, Captain?" Nathan wondered.

"Your cheng had some good ideas," Captain Poc said, looking at Cameron. "Perhaps we can create a few jump torpedoes with antimatter warheads. That would at least get the weapons past the platform's point-defenses."

"But not past their shields," Captain Nash argued.

"You don't think a couple of antimatter blasts will bring down their shields?" Captain Roselle wondered.

"One of the previous mines did detonate slightly late on the last attempt," Cameron explained, "so the energy from

its detonation occurred a split second after the target came out of FTL. The platform's forward shields took the full force without failing. It did drain their shields by more than fifty percent, but they held."

"Then you hit them with three at once to bring down their shields, then the rest to take them out," Captain Roselle insisted.

"You're suggesting that we set off up to eight antimatter warheads, all within our own system, and most likely within close proximity of Earth?" The expression on Cameron's face clearly communicated her opinion of Captain Roselle's reckless plan.

"Obviously we don't wait for them to get *close* to Earth," Captain Roselle responded.

"We have no way of knowing how close they will come out of FTL," Captain Poc said. "If I were that platform's CO, I would come out of FTL as close to Earth as possible. Once close in, it will be too risky to use KKV's against them."

"Less risky to detonate antimatter warheads in low orbit than a KKV," Captain Roselle insisted, still defending his original idea.

"Not by much," Nathan replied. "Then we agree that we should try and make ready all possible attack strategies?"

"Hell, yes," Captain Roselle said. "The more we have to hit them with, the better."

"To that end," Captain Poc began, "What are the chances of arming our ships prior to the platform's arrival?"

"I don't think it will be a problem," Nathan answered. "The Karuzara has been making plasma cannons to install in defense turrets on her surface for weeks now. We could easily attach them to your hulls. However, you yourself said that the hulls of your ships could not withstand even a single rail gun shot. Without shields, you would be extremely vulnerable."

"Then get us shields," Captain Poc replied.

"It is unlikely that we can get jump drives, shields, *and* weapons installed in your ships in such a short time," Nathan insisted, "even if you were already sitting in the Karuzara. Remember, we only have a month until the platform arrives. Besides, even with weapons and shields, the amount of damage that you would be capable of inflicting on such a target is minimal. It's simply not worth the risk. A better use for your ships would be the deployment of KKV's and jump torpedoes. Those can easily be attached to your hull. That would give us the ability to better position the KKV's according to the target's actual position rather than its expected position."

Captain Roselle looked at Captain Poc, his eyebrows raised. He looked back at Nathan. "Apparently you've actually thought this one through, Scott. For once."

"*Captain, Comms,*" Naralena called over the open intercom built into the conference table.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"*A Corinairan cargo ship just jumped into the system, sir. They're requesting permission to make orbit alongside us.*"

"Is it another boxcar?" Nathan asked.

"*Captain, Navashee here. It's an old Corinairan interplanetary cargo ship. The Glendanon, sir. One hundred times the cargo capacity of a boxcar, sir. About eight hundred meters long. They've been fitting them with jump drives since we've been gone. I read about them in one of the news reports that come in regularly via the comm-jumpers.*"

Captain Poc looked at Nathan, a concerned look on his face. "You were not expecting this ship?"

"No, sir, I was not," Nathan answered. "Mister Navashee, how sure are you of this ship?"

"*I've seen plenty of them, Captain. And I'm not picking up any abnormal readings that would indicate a hostile intent. No abnormal power signatures, no warheads, and*

she is fully loaded. I'm also detecting more than three hundred active stasis pods."

"Captain, Comms, the cargo ship has transmitted another message. It's a video message... From Prince Casimir, sir."

"Transfer it here."

"Aye, sir."

Nathan and the other captains watched the view screens on the walls of the command briefing room as they came to life, revealing the image of Prince Casimir of Takara. Although still wearing the more formal attire of his position, his attire was slightly more reminiscent of the man Nathan and Cameron had known for months as 'Tug'.

"Greetings Captain Scott. The ship requesting clearance to make orbit above your world is on temporary loan from the Darvano Shipping Company. It carries volunteers from Corinair, Ancot, Takara... Even from Haven and Palee. For whatever reasons, they have all volunteered their time and efforts to aid the people of Earth in their recovery. Distribute them and the resources carried with them as your leaders see fit. A full manifest is included with this transmission. In this ship's cargo bays you will find food, sanitation equipment, water purification systems, medical equipment and supplies, everything that the people of the Pentaurus cluster could muster on short notice that might aid your people. It is not much, considering the scope of your emergency, but it is a start. My hope is that the nobles of my world will realize that desire to help the birthplace of humanity in its survival cannot be stopped, and that it would be in their own best interests to join the effort. I regret that this is the last provision of support that I can offer you, but alas I have depleted my family's holdings, and used my influences to their fullest extent. I suspect, that before long, my family shall lose its position under the laws of Takaran nobility, at which point my ability to support you

will come to an end. While I will do all that I can to postpone that outcome, I suspect that it is only a matter of time."

Casimir held his head down for a moment before looking at the camera again. "I urge you all to follow Commander Dumar's advice. I know of no man better qualified to lead the war against the Jung. Furthermore, there is no one I trust more than him. Good luck to you all."

"There's more than that," Cameron said as the view screens clicked off. She studied her data pad for a moment. "I'm reading the manifest now," she explained. "They've got fabricators, large-scale radiation cleanup equipment, portable medical facilities, miniature comm-sats. Christ, this manifest reads like a colonization package. Medical personnel, engineers, communications specialists. Holy..." Cameron looked at Nathan. "They're carrying more than five hundred billion nanites per container, and it shows fifty containers."

"How many nanites in a therapeutic dose?" Captain Poc wondered.

"Around ten thousand, I think," Nathan answered.

"Some need more than others, depending on the level of injury," Cameron explained. "I was getting more than ten thousand per day back on Corinair. But that's still enough for at least a few doses per person on Earth."

"It seems your allies in the Pentaurus cluster are proving valuable in more ways than one, Captain Scott," Captain Poc congratulated.

"So it does," Nathan agreed, a smile on his face. "How many boxcars are currently in the system?" Nathan asked Cameron.

"Two right now. They just delivered two more platoons of Ghatazhak. The other four boxcars are on runs between Tanna and Earth."

"We should probably retask all the boxcars to begin unloading that ship," Captain Nash suggested.

"Agreed," Nathan replied. "I'll see to it that Porto Santo operations knows."

"How many Ghatazhak does that bring us up to, Captain," Captain Poc wondered.

"Just over eight hundred, I believe," Nathan answered. "Telles has been setting up quick response stations on each of the major continents using the Ghatazhak deployment pods as makeshift command posts. There are six of them so far, not including Porto Santo. Unfortunately, that stretches his fourteen combat jumpers pretty thin. He does report a significant reduction in the number of riots or armed assaults on government security forces in the past few weeks, so at least they are finally starting to get things under control on the surface."

"I'm sure the arrival of additional aid will only help matters," Captain Poc insisted.

"I'm sure you're right," Nathan agreed.

"Don't get too comfortable yet, Scott," Captain Roselle warned. "We've still got that battle platform to deal with."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

"You wanted to see me, Skipper?" Jessica said as she closed the ready room hatch behind her.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander, I did," Nathan answered.

Jessica looked at Nathan, noticing the grin on his face. "What?" she said, her eyes squinting in suspicion.

"I got a message from my sister, Miri," Nathan said.

"So?"

"As you know, Nash is a pretty common name in the NAU."

"So is Scott."

"She found them, Jess," Nathan finally admitted. "Your parents, your brothers, everyone. They're all alive and well, living in a refugee camp on the coast of Texas."

Jessica's mouth fell open. "You're shittin' me."

"I've got a jump shuttle on standby, if you and your brother want to go and see them."

Jessica's face lit up. "Are you kidding me? Hell, yes!" she exclaimed, turning back toward the exit. She stopped abruptly and ran back around Nathan's desk, throwing her arms around him. "Thanks, Nathan."

"My pleasure, Jess."

She stepped back, straightening her stance. "Request permission to disembark, sir," she said, raising her hand in salute.

"Permission granted," Nathan replied, returning her salute as she turned and ran out of the compartment.

* * *

"Captain," Commander Willard said as he led their guest into the captain's mess, "may I present Edom Gullen, captain of the Glendanon."

"An honor to meet you, Captain," Nathan said politely, offering his hand in friendship.

"The honor is mostly on myself," Captain Gullen responded in an unusually heavy Corinairan brogue.

"I hope you do not mind that I sent my first officer as your guide. I thought since Commander Willard spoke your language, it might be easier for you."

"It was for the best, indeed," Captain Gullen agreed. "My Angla is not often used, I fear."

"If you prefer, Captain, Commander Willard can act as your interpreter this evening."

"Possibly, yes. I will try as best to speak your language, Captain," Captain Gullen said.

"Captain," Nathan began, "This is Captain Taylor, commanding officer of the Celestia, and this is Captain Poc, commanding officer of one of our Scout ships."

Both captains exchanged greetings and handshakes with the Corinairan captain.

"If everyone would like to take their seats, I believe dinner is already waiting for us," Nathan said, gesturing to the table.

"You have a most amazing ship, Captain," Captain Gullen began, struggling with each word. "However, its outward appearance deceives."

"How so?" Nathan wondered as he took his seat.

"So big from outside is your ship, but so small from within."

"Most of the Aurora's interior space is filled with the many systems that make her function. Less than a third of her is made up of habitable crew spaces."

"Not to mention the Explorer-class ships have a three-meter thick hull," Cameron added.

"But you have windows," Captain Gullen said, pointing at the large window on the port bulkhead.

"View screens made to look like windows," Nathan explained. "They are linked to external cameras embedded in the ship's outer hull." He picked up the remote from the side table behind him and changed the view from its default setting that matched the orientation of the screen in relation to the ship, to one of the starboard cameras pointed at Earth. "We can even choose a scene from Earth if we like."

The view screen changed again, revealing a sunset on a tropical beach.

"Most disorienting," Captain Gullen said.

Nathan changed the view back to the default port camera, causing the image on the screen to return to the black field of stars that had been displayed when the captain had first entered the compartment.

"On the Glendanon, we simply have windows."

"The Aurora's designers felt it best to have its crew deep inside the vessel. This is, after all, a warship at heart."

"A wise precaution," Captain Gullen agreed. "But it appears not to have served you proper. I saw the holes in your ship on our arrival."

"Yes, the result of our last engagement with the Jung, I'm afraid," Nathan explained.

"I was told that there are no more Jung in your system. This is not true?"

"No, there are no Jung in the Sol system," Nathan assured him. "The recent engagement occurred more than two light years away."

"I trust you were victorious?"

"Unfortunately, we were not," Nathan admitted.

"Then the aggressor is still coming?" Captain Gullen wondered, concern on his face.

"Yes. They should arrive in approximately one month."

"And you will be ready for them next time?"

"Yes, we shall," Nathan said, glancing at Captain Poc.

"We were not expecting your ship," Captain Poc said. "It was a pleasant surprise."

"Prince Casimir likes surprises, I expect," Captain Gullen said. "He is very clever man... Very clever indeed. He was to secure volunteers and resources for your world first. Then, when he goes to my company and request ships, they have no choice. If they do not help, it was to bring shame upon them. Very bad for their image. Very bad."

"I see," Nathan replied. "Nevertheless, as Captain Poc said, it was a pleasant surprise. We were beginning to think the people of the Pentaurus cluster had abandoned us."

"This food is very good," Captain Gullen said. "What are these little curly things?"

"Shrimp," Nathan replied. "They come from the Earth's oceans."

"Very good indeed."

"I'll pass your regards on to my chef."

"The people of the Pentaurus cluster have not abandoned us, Captain," Commander Willard explained. "It

is their leaders that have failed to meet their responsibilities. Prince Casimir knew this as well, which is why he rallied the people of Corinair to pressure their leaders to do more. Unfortunately, such tactics do not work as well in Takaran society. Takaran nobles believe that by putting their own lands first, they are protecting the people who live on their lands."

"Yes, I have been reading about Takaran social structure lately," Nathan said. "It's an odd type of representative government in that the representatives are not elected, but instead attain their position through birthright."

"It is not actually through birthright alone, Captain," Mister Willard explained. "It is also through the power of the noble family itself. The greater the family's holdings, the more power they have in the court of nobles. From the court, the richest and most powerful members are the ones who serve at the parliamentary level."

"So, the richest noble rules?" Cameron wondered.

"Precisely," Commander Willard said. "This is why it is so distressing that Prince Casimir has depleted his family's holdings. The Ta'Akar family has been the ruling family since the Takar system was first colonized, hence the name."

"But he converted them to a parliamentary government," Nathan said. "So there is no more 'ruling family' as I understand it."

"That is also true," Mister Willard agreed. "However, it was undoubtedly the Ta'Akar family's influence that kept the parliament bound to the Alliance charter. Remember, none of the nobles wanted the empire of Caius to disband. They were all doing quite well under that system."

"So, you're saying it might become an imperial government again?" Cameron asked.

"A small one, perhaps."

"What happens to their warships if it does?" Captain Poc wondered.

“Technically, when a nobleman takes command of a vessel, that vessel becomes the property of his family. In exchange for the resources needed to operate the ship, the family promises to use that ship to protect the empire. In essence, the empire leases its warships from the nobles. If a noble captain serves his empire well, he will be promoted to commodore, perhaps even admiral, and is given additional ships.”

“What an odd system,” Captain Poc commented.

“Yes, but it has worked for them for several centuries now,” Commander Willard said.

“Captain Gullen,” Nathan said, turning his attention to the Corinairan captain. “May I inquire as to how long you’ll be with us?”

“I am to depart in two weeks’ time,” Captain Gullen replied.

“That would be eighteen Terran days,” Commander Willard explained.

“Why two weeks?” Cameron wondered.

“Prince Casimir requested that Corinairan news media document what has become of your world,” Captain Gullen explained. “He is to show this to the people of Corinair, and the people of Takara, to make them want to help.”

“He’s trying to scare the crap out of them, that’s what he’s trying to do,” Captain Poc said. “I rather like this friend of yours, Scott.”

“Captain Gullen,” Nathan said, “might I convince you to make a few runs between Tanna and Earth while you are here?”

Captain Gullen looked at Nathan. “Tanna?” He turned to Commander Willard, speaking in their native tongue. “Ah,” he said, understanding the commander’s translation. “This Tanna, there are Jung there?”

“No, there are not,” Nathan assured him.

“Might there become Jung there?” the captain inquired.

“Anything is possible,” Nathan admitted.

"And if these Jung should become there when the Glendanon is there... What am I to do?"

"We can provide an escort," Cameron suggested. "A Falcon or two? They could jump ahead and check that the area is clear before the Glendanon jumps in."

"I suppose we could spare a couple," Nathan agreed. "But only a couple. We've only got six of them, remember." Nathan turned back to Captain Gullen. "Tanna is another of our allies, Captain. We have been moving thousands of our people there to help in building up their industrial base, so that they can also provide aid to Earth. In addition, the relocation of Terrans to Tanna reduces the burden on Earth to support her population. However, we have been using boxcars, and occasionally the Celestia, to move immigrants and aid between our worlds. As you can imagine, this is a slow process."

"With boxcars, yes, yes, it would be slow," Captain Gullen agreed. "You would have the Glendanon do this, instead of boxcars, yes?"

"Yes, if possible."

"This will require propellant, Captain."

"Propellant will not be a problem, Captain. Tanna has ample supplies. In fact, when you return to Darvano, we can send you back loaded with propellant, as payment for your services."

A twinkle came into Captain Gullen's eye. "How much propellant can you provide, Captain?"

"How much propellant can you carry?"

Captain Gullen laughed. "The Glendanon is a very large ship, Captain Scott. Although I must return to the Darvano system on schedule, should I do so loaded with propellant, I believe we could solve many problems for us all."

"Such as?"

"The owners of the Glendanon would be willing to continue to ship goods from the Pentaurus cluster to Sol, if they knew that their ship would be returning with a full load

of propellant. Many ships still use propellant as their only means of propulsion. The change to jump drives is far from completed.”

“What is the propellant worth in the Pentaurus markets?” Nathan asked.

“Enough to buy your people more assistance,” Captain Gullen promised, “and still provide a handsome profit for the Glendanon’s owners. It may even be enough to replace Prince Casimir’s lost family holdings before he loses his position of leadership on the Takaran Parliament.”

“Mister Willard, are you familiar with Pentaurus markets and valuation systems?”

“Somewhat, sir. However, I’m sure I can obtain additional information using the comm-jumpers.”

“Good idea. You might want to talk this over with Prince Casimir as well,” Nathan said.

“Aye, sir.”

“Captain Gullen,” Nathan said, turning his attention back to the Corinairan captain, “it seems that you are going to make your employers quite happy.”

* * *

“Jesus, this place is a fucking nightmare,” Jessica said as they made their way through the dimly lit refugee camp.

“Mom’s probably trying to clean every tent around her,” Bobby said.

“This is one of the better camps,” Lieutenant Telles stated as they followed the camp security guards down the main path between the rows of tents.

“You didn’t have to come, Telles. We can handle ourselves, you know.”

“You are both very important to the Alliance, and to Captain Scott, therefore I am compelled to protect you both.”

Jessica glanced behind them at the squad of Ghatazhak following the lieutenant. "You think you brought enough guys?"

"These men are new," Lieutenant Telles explained. "It is their first opportunity to see a Terran refugee camp up close, at night."

Jessica looked about as they continued deeper into the camp. There was garbage everywhere, people sleeping out in the open in the dirt, stray pets running about unrestrained, and the foul stench of bodily excrement everywhere. "Why the hell does it stink like shit? Don't they have toilets?"

"There are shared facilities located all over the camp," the guard closest to them explained, "however, people are afraid to walk from their tents to the restrooms at night, so they go in buckets and leave it outside their tents, then haul it to the restrooms in the morning. Makes for a pretty long line at sunrise."

"We can't leave them here, Bobby," Jessica said.

"Agreed, but where are we going to move them?"

"Porto Santo, that's where," Jessica said, looking at Lieutenant Telles. "Right, Lieutenant?"

"While I sympathize with your family's situation, Porto Santo is not a refugee camp, Lieutenant Commander."

"Then give them jobs," Jessica suggested.

"Doing what?"

"Drew is a welder, right?" Jessica said.

"He was last time I talked with him. Alek is an electrician, but I don't know what Nick and Tommy do."

"Last I checked, they were doing roofing part-time, just enough to keep them in beer and burgers while they surfed."

"Still, huh?"

"Doesn't matter," Jessica said. "They can all contribute, somehow."

"There's a beach there, right? They should fit right in."

“Lieutenant Commander...”

“It’s a done deal, Telles,” Jessica ordered. “The entire Nash family is moving to Porto Santo.”

“Exactly how many people are you talking about?” Lieutenant Telles wondered.

Jessica stopped in her tracks, looking at her brother. “Drew has two kids, Alek has three, Nick has one.”

“Sixteen, maybe?” Bobby guessed.

“Just call it twenty, just to be safe,” Jessica said as she turned and continued following the guards. “How much further?”

“We’re almost there, sir,” the guard answered.

“Jumper One, Telles,” the lieutenant said over his helmet comms.

“*Go for Jumper One,*” the copilot answered.

“Contact ops, have them send a cargo jumper.”

“*Yes, sir.*”

The guards came to a stop, spreading out to either side of the intersection between the tents.

“Is this it?” Jessica asked.

“Yes, sir,” the guard answered.

“Which one?” Bobby wondered.

“All of four of them,” the guard replied. “They insisted on staying together.”

Jessica and Bobby looked at each other. “Mom.”

Bobby turned to the guard. “Which one is Richard and Laura Nash?”

The guard looked down at his data pad, then pointed to the one next to Captain Nash. “That one, behind you.”

Jessica spun around and stepped up to the wooden door. “Ma! Open up! It’s Jess and Bobby!” Jessica heard sounds of movement from inside the tent, as a light came on inside. “Come on, Ma! Open up!” she repeated as she knocked again.

The door to one of the other tents behind them swung open, and a tall, lanky man with blond hair came bursting

out. Lieutenant Telles spun around instantly, his hand resting on the butt of his holstered sidearm.

"Jess!" the blond man yelled as he ran toward them, his arms wide. "Bobby! Holy crap, I can't believe it!" He threw his arms around Jessica and hugged her. "I thought you were dead," he said as he reached out with his left arm to embrace his older brother as well. "Both of you!"

"Jessica!" the mother called from inside their tent. A moment later her door also swung open and she began to yell out her daughter's name. Less than a minute later, the entire Nash clan was in the middle of the intersection, hugging one another and making enough noise to wake the dead.

"Lieutenant Commander!" the guard yelled over the joyous sounds of the reunion. "I hate to ruin your party, but you guys are waking up the entire section."

"Of course," Jessica replied. "Of course. I'm sorry." She turned back toward her parents and her brothers. "How long will it take you guys to pack up your stuff?"

"What stuff?" her mother wondered. "We've barely got anything."

"Why?" her brother Drew asked. "Where are we going?"

Jessica turned to Lieutenant Telles. "What's the ETA on the cargo jumper?" she wondered. The moment the words left her lips, she noticed a brilliant blue-white flash in the distance back the way they had come. "Never mind," she said, turning back to her family. "Everyone, you've got five minutes to grab your stuff and move out."

"To where?" Drew repeated.

"Porto Santo," she declared happily.

Jessica's youngest brother, Nick, looked confused. "Where the hell is Porto Santo?"

CHAPTER NINE

All across the North American Union, people waited outside in the evening twilight in breathless anticipation. They had been through so much the past eight months; the Jung occupation, the battle for liberation, and the ruthless bombardments of their world. Although the sudden influx of assistance and aid from first Tanna, and then from the Pentaurs cluster had helped, it was only a small bandage over a gaping wound. It eased the pain, but provided very little in the way of hope, and hope is what they needed the most. For despite the wonder of the jump drive, and the devastating firepower brought forth by the Aurora and the Celestia, they were but two ships against a vast armada. Two ships with barely enough personnel to properly crew them, and barely held together by the dwindling resources of Earth. They needed more than just bandages, food, and fabricators. They needed strength. They needed numbers. They needed... To believe.

For this reason they were gathered, instead of preparing to huddle in their tents for the night. For if the rumors were true, they would witness a sign... Proof that they had a reason to believe. Proof that there was, in fact, hope.

"Ten seconds," someone yelled. Many of them checked their own watches as the hour approached. Finally, at exactly zero hundred hours, Earth Mean Time, the sign came. A blue-white flash revealing a small, rocky object traveling across the evening sky. The crowd erupted in cheers as a close-up shot fed from a high-powered digital camera tracking the object appeared on every information

display screen in the refugee camp. People hugged one another, crying in joyous celebration as the rumor became reality. Help had arrived.

"The Karuzara asteroid is now in stable orbit over the Earth," Mister Navashee announced from the Aurora's sensor station.

"Unbelievable," Lieutenant Eckert mumbled.

"I have Commander Dumar on comms," Naralena announced.

Nathan sat in his command chair, staring at the image of the Karuzara asteroid in orbit over the Earth directly ahead of them. "Amazing," he gasped. "Put him on."

Commander Dumar's image appeared on the main view screen, standing proudly in the control center of the Karuzara asteroid base. *"It is good to see you again, Captain Scott."*

"You don't know how good, Commander," Nathan answered.

"Your ships may begin docking procedures whenever they are ready," Commander Dumar told him. *"I will have our flight operations center transmit procedures and frequencies to your people. We shall begin repairs and upgrades to your ships as soon as you are safely docked within our main bay."*

"You have more than one bay now?" Nathan wondered.

"A lot has changed on the Karuzara since last you saw her, Captain."

"Indeed? I look forward to learning of the changes, Commander. Perhaps you can tell me all about them over dinner?"

"I would be honored if you and your staff were to join me," Dumar insisted.

"We shall be there, Commander."

"Excellent. Dumar out."

"He wasn't kidding, Captain," Mister Navashee said. "I've detected at least ten plasma turrets as well as a few dozen laser turrets. I'm also picking up entrances that were not there before, several of them big enough for a boxcar to fit through. Comm and sensor arrays, weapons-tracking systems; I'm pretty sure I'm picking up the trace signature of a ZPED, although it's difficult to tell through all that rock. It's even got less mass than before."

Nathan smiled. "This is going to be an interesting dinner."

* * *

"Captain Scott," Commander Dumar greeted, his arms open wide as Nathan and his entourage approached. "I am so pleased that you could join me for dinner."

Nathan accepted the commander's vigorous, two-handed handshake. "The pleasure is all mine, Commander."

"Commander... My apologies, *Captain* Taylor. It is good to see you as well," Commander Dumar said as he shook Cameron's hand. "I see the nanites have done their job quite nicely."

"Indeed they have," Cameron stated. "I'm just glad the little buggers are no longer crawling around inside me."

"Of that I am sure," Dumar agreed as he turned to Vladimir. "Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy. I trust you have been keeping up with the damage inflicted on to your vessel by our good captain here?"

"I have done my best," Vladimir answered. "However, Captain Scott does make it difficult at times."

"Well, now that you have access to our facilities, I'm sure you will be able to do far more in less time."

"I should expect so," Vladimir agreed, shaking Dumar's hand.

"We have new faces, I see," Commander Dumar said.

Nathan turned and gestured toward the two Scout ship captains. "Allow me to introduce Captain Poc, and Captain Roselle."

"Ah yes, the commanding officers of the Scout ships," Dumar said as he shook hands with Captain Poc.

"A pleasure, Commander."

"Mine as well." Dumar shook Captain Roselle's hand next. "Captain Roselle, I assume."

"A pleasure to meet you, Commander."

Commander Dumar looked confused. "I was under the impression that there were three Scout ship captains."

"Captain Nash was unable to attend," Nathan explained. "He begins jump drive testing tomorrow and is overseeing some last-minute preparations."

"And what of his sister, the lieutenant commander?"

"She is on Earth, helping her family get settled on Porto Santo."

"Well, nevertheless, I'm sure that we shall all benefit greatly from all of their years of experience. We are lucky to have found them."

"Lucky indeed," Nathan agreed.

Dumar turned and gestured toward the large dining table in the middle of the room. "Please, everyone, be seated." Dumar turned and headed toward his own seat at the head of the table. "The chef has prepared a mixture of Takaran, Corinairan, and Ancotan delicacies for us tonight. It will be a special treat for me as well, as we have all been dining on quite simple fare since our departure from the Darvano system."

"Why is that?" Nathan asked. "Surely you have enough food with you."

"A simple precaution," Dumar explained. "A bit overzealous, perhaps, but without the opportunity to test our jump drive arrays prior to departure, we had no way of being certain how long the journey might take, or where exactly we might end up."

"I assume your people had computer-modeled the performance of the system prior to departure," Cameron said.

"Of course, of course. As I said, it was a bit overzealous to be sure. As we became more assured as to the actual performance of the system, and as we grew closer to Earth, we did loosen up some of the restrictions and began to include a bit more variety. However, with all that has happened on Earth, it still seemed prudent to save as much as possible for those who really needed it."

Nathan smiled. "Commander, no offense intended, but I don't remember you being such a... Well, a *happy* person."

Dumar also laughed. "No offense taken, Captain. Perhaps it was the times in which we met, or possibly it is just that I am so very glad to have successfully delivered this base to your people, where it is needed most. I promise, my serious side shall return tomorrow."

"Maybe you can keep just a little of the *happy* Dumar with you," Nathan said. "I rather like it."

"I shall endeavor to do so," Commander Dumar replied as the waiters delivered the first course of the evening's meal. "I trust that you were able to interface your ships with our automated systems?"

"The Aurora had no difficulties, as all of her computers were replaced with Takaran systems," Nathan explained.

"And the Celestia?" Dumar wondered.

"It was a bit more of a challenge," Cameron admitted. "I noticed that you have widened the entry corridor."

"And added additional airlocks as well," Dumar explained.

"Airlocks?" Nathan wondered. "I hadn't noticed any."

"The entire corridor is now made up of a series of airlocks that open and close automatically as you traverse its length," the commander explained. "You start at a vacuum, and work your way up to normal pressure by the time you reach the innermost airlock."

“A rather elaborate system, don’t you think?” Captain Poc commented.

“Perhaps, but it allows us to forego the normal delay of waiting for a single, massive airlock to go from zero to normal pressure—which we can still do if necessary. This allows us to have several vessels in transition at once, each without having to waste time and propellant, stopping and starting along the way.”

“How many ships did you think you could fit in here?” Captain Roselle wondered. “From the looks of your main bay, it is barely big enough for the few ships we have.”

“As we have been mining the interior of this asteroid for resources to feed our fabricators, we have been concentrating on connecting the network of smaller caverns, combining them into larger ones to be used as service bays. We have created a separate operational hangar for the Falcons, complete with their own access tunnels. Our plan is to eventually convert the main hangar into a hub to which many other hangars connect.”

“I thought this asteroid had already been hollowed out and was waiting to be transferred to Corinair,” Nathan said.

“Actually, the process had only been half completed on this asteroid,” Commander Dumar explained. “As with most asteroids in the Darvano system, the core was where the most concentrated deposits of valuable ores had been located. After the core had been excavated to a size large enough to accommodate the cargo ships used to haul away the ores, they started hollowing out smaller caverns, creating a honeycomb-like structure that would help to maintain the asteroid’s structural integrity, while still decreasing its mass. However, as with many such projects, it was abandoned early on by the holders of the original mining rights due to its lack of the more valuable, sought-after materials of the time. It is for this very reason that the Karuzari had selected it as the location for their secret base.

Since no one thought it valuable, no one would be coming to claim it and finish the job of extraction.”

“But it does have the materials we need, right?” Vladimir asked.

“Mostly, yes. There are a few rare-ores that we shall have to find elsewhere,” Dumar admitted, “but even if we have to import them all the way back from Darvano, it should not be a problem.”

Captain Poc shook his head.

“Something wrong, Captain?” Commander Dumar wondered, noticing the captain’s body language.

“Sorry, no,” Captain Poc said. “It’s just that it’s still difficult to get used to... The idea that importing something from one thousand light years away would ‘not be a problem.’”

“Yes, I quite agree,” Commander Dumar assured him. “Trust me, Captain, I still find it unbelievable at times, and I just jumped an asteroid across a thousand light years!”

“Captain Roselle’s ship has just made its first jump,” Nathan said, “and Captain Poc’s ship will be ready for jump testing in a few days.”

“Excellent, then you will be starting your reconnaissance missions in short order?”

“We were hoping that we could get their weapons and shields installed first,” Nathan said, “however, I suspect that there is not enough time.”

“Yes, with only two weeks until the Centauri platform arrives, it is highly improbable. We can probably get their laser turrets installed, but no more than that, I’m afraid. Surely, you do not plan on having them participate in the attack on the approaching platform, Captain.”

“No, we do not. However, I am concerned that this facility might be damaged or even destroyed by the platform, in which case it would be longer still before they could receive the remainder of their upgrades.”

“Do not concern yourself with the safety of this station, Captain. We are rapidly building up our own defenses, and our size and density makes us a difficult target to destroy. Besides, we can always jump away to protect ourselves. My people have already calculated every possible jump point along our orbit that would put us on a trajectory to eventually intercept another object whose gravity well we could utilize to alter our trajectory to come about and return.”

“Of course,” Nathan agreed.

Captain Poc tasted his appetizer. “An interesting flavor and texture. What do you call this?”

“That, Captain, is molo,” Nathan explained.

“Ah. The main staple of Haven,” Captain Poc realized. “I remember reading about it in your reports.”

“I’m afraid I have to agree with Lieutenant Commander Nash on this one,” Captain Roselle said, pushing his plate of molo aside.

“A cross between mushrooms and tofu, don’t you think?” Cameron said.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Captain Roselle agreed, “neither have been on my list of favorite foods.”

“Many consider it an acquired taste,” Commander Dumar commented.

“I’m surprised that you brought it along,” Nathan said.

“Despite its pungent taste, it is quite nutritious, keeps well, and grows rapidly.”

“You’re planning an agricultural bay as well?” Nathan wondered.

“No, nothing like that, Captain,” Dumar replied. “Actually, it was Prince Casimir who suggested it, as a way to help feed the people of Earth in this time of crisis.”

Vladimir smiled. “Oh, please, let me be the one to tell Jessica,” he said to Nathan.

* * *

"Keesh, Tweety. How's it looking," Captain Nash asked as he entered the lower flight deck of Scout Three and made his way forward.

"All systems show ready, Captain," Sergeant Ravi reported.

"Same here," his cohort Sergeant Poteet added.

"Wellsy?" the captain asked as he paused at the forward ladder.

"Karuzara ops has given us a green light to depart, sir."

"Very well." Captain Nash turned aft and looked at his crew. "Anyone need a bandage or an aspirin before we depart?"

"Funny," Sergeant Frisch replied as he sat in his seat with nothing to do.

"Don't worry, Fritz," Captain Nash teased, patting the young sergeant on the shoulder. "As soon as we get some weapons for you to shoot, you'll feel like a full-fledged, contributing member of the crew, worthy of sucking up our air and stinking up our head."

"Stinking things up is Toosh's job," Sergeant Frisch reminded him.

"So it is," the captain said as he climbed up the ladder to the main flight deck. "Gentlemen, are we ready for this?" he asked as he topped the ladder and stepped onto the flight deck.

"All reactors are at full power and the emitter array is green across the board," Lieutenant Scalotti reported. "Jump drive is ready."

"Sensors are also ready," Ensign Agari added.

"Excellent," Captain Nash said as he moved between the two men and twisted himself around to slip into the left hand flight seat at the front of the flight deck. "Glad you could join us, Commander Eckert," the captain said.

"Thank you, Captain," Commander Eckert said from the right seat. "I never pictured myself as an executive officer, but I'll certainly do my best."

"Don't worry, son. On a Scout ship, being XO just means you help me fly the ship, do the things I don't want to do, and take over if I kick the bucket."

"I think I can handle that, sir."

"I'm sure you can," Captain Nash agreed. "Otherwise Captain Scott wouldn't have recommended you." Captain Nash reached down to the aft end of the center pedestal and pressed a button. Large doors covering their forward windows slid down into the hull, revealing the dimly lit interior of the Karuzara asteroid's main bay. "There's something you don't see every day," he said, looking out the window to his left.

Commander Eckert looked out as well, spotting the Aurora directly outside of them, with the Celestia inverted above her, and both of them moored to the massive docking platform that ran alongside them. "No, sir. You surely don't."

Captain Nash put on his comm-set and tapped the earpiece to activate it. "Wellsy, tell ops we're about to disconnect and head out."

"*Aye, sir,*" the ensign answered over the comms from the lower flight deck.

"All flight systems show ready, and we're running on internal power and life support," Commander Eckert announced.

"*Ops confirms we're clear to depart,*" Ensign Wells announced.

"Very well," Captain Nash said. "Disconnect all umbilicals."

"*Umbilicals disconnected,*" Sergeant Poteet reported over the comms.

"*Ops reports positive retraction on all umbilicals,*" Ensign Wells reported. "*Clear to release mooring clamps.*"

"Release all mooring clamps," Captain Nash ordered.

"*Releasing mooring clamps, aye,*" Sergeant Ravi acknowledged.

"Ops reports all mooring arms are retracted," Ensign Wells reported. *"We are free-floating and clear to maneuver."*

"Thrusting to starboard," Captain Nash announced as he slid his maneuvering joystick slightly to the right. The sound of the gas jets reverberated faintly through the ship's hull and into the cabin, providing them with audible confirmation that the thrusters had fired. Captain Nash looked out the window to his left again as the Aurora and the Celestia appeared to drift away from them.

"Five meters," Commander Eckert reported as they continued to drift.

"Do you have a nickname?" Captain Nash wondered.

"Sir?" the commander asked.

"A nickname. Everyone on this ship has a nickname. Toosh, Donny, Wellsy, Keesh, Tweety. You need a nickname. Didn't they give you a call sign during your flight training?"

"Yes, sir. Skeeched," Commander Eckert answered. "Ten meters."

"Thrusting upward," the captain reported. "Why Skeeched?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"Skeeched it is, then," Captain Nash insisted.

"Rate of climb is two meters per second," the commander reported. "What's your nickname, sir?"

"I'm 'Captain'," he answered with a smile. "Privileges of being the CO."

"Of course."

"Just don't call me 'Skipper.' My sister loves that name, and I hate it."

"So does Captain Scott." The commander looked at his displays again. "Twenty meters to departure altitude. Eight seconds."

"Thrusting forward," the captain announced as their ship rose above the bottom edge of the massive departure tunnel.

“Four seconds.”

Captain Nash added more forward thrust, increasing the rate at which they approached the entrance to the departure tunnel.

“We’re clear of the tunnel bottom and rising,” Eckert reported. He looked out the windows and upward. “Doors are closing.”

“I guess they want us to hurry it along, huh?” Captain Nash said as he increased their forward thrust. “Must have been pretty intense flying the Aurora through these tunnels.”

“Definitely something to remember,” Commander Eckert agreed. “Chiles made it look easy, though. Next doors in three minutes.”

Captain Nash and his crew went calmly about their business as the Scout ship traversed the first airlock section of the Karuzara’s main departure tunnel. The captain divided his attention equally between the displays on the console before him and the view outside the ship. As the tunnels were designed to accommodate ships the size of the Aurora, there was ample space for the significantly smaller Scout ships.

“Seems like a lot of effort to increase and decrease the pressure of all the bays along this tunnel just for our little ship,” Commander Eckert said.

“A lot easier to work on a ship in a shirt sleeve environment,” Captain Nash commented.

“Entering the second airlock,” Eckert reported.

“You been through a lot of jumps, Commander?” Ensign Agari asked from the seat behind Eckert.

“Lost count, to be honest.”

“What does it feel like?”

“You don’t feel anything,” Eckert told him. “Just a bright flash on the view screen and it’s over.”

“I heard the Aurora’s COB feels it in his teeth or something,” Agari said.

"Yeah, I heard that too," Eckert confirmed. "I never asked him if it was true, though." Eckert looked down at his displays. "Coming up on max transit speed, sir."

"Killing forward thrust," the captain acknowledged.

"Third airlock in ten seconds."

Captain Nash looked forward, noticing that the third set of airlock doors had only been opened about a quarter of the way. "I guess they figured they only needed to crack the doors open a bit for us to fit through."

"I'm showing at least fifty meters clearance above and below, sir," the commander reported.

"Launching will be a lot quicker and easier once our bays are operational," Captain Nash commented.

Ten minutes later, the Scout ship had cleared the last section of the departure tunnel and was climbing up out of the departure trench that ran along the surface of the Karuzara asteroid. Captain Nash looked outside as the top edges of the trench fell below them. "We're out."

"Fifty meters and climbing," Commander Eckert reported.

"Increasing forward thrust," the captain announced.

"One hundred meters, three fifty separation. Two hundred. Four hundred. Six hundred. One kilometer, three separation and increasing. We're clear to maneuver at will."

"Activating flight computers, manual controls are offline," Captain Nash said. He punched keys on the flight control computer and called up their first waypoint. "Selecting the first jump point and activating auto-flight systems."

"Jump point in thirty seconds," Commander Eckert reported.

"Jump emitter arrays are all green," Lieutenant Scalotti announced. "Jump field generators also show ready. Reactors are all running at one hundred percent. We're ready to jump, Captain."

"Fifteen seconds to jump point," Commander Eckert reported. "You might want to close the blast doors, Captain."

"And miss our first jump?"

"Then I strongly advise everyone to close their eyes tightly and turn your heads away at the moment we jump, or you'll be seeing a blue haze for the rest of the day."

"You heard him, gentlemen," Captain Nash said.

"Five seconds to jump point," Commander Eckert reported. "Three.....two.....one..."

Captain Nash closed his eyes and tilted his head downward.

"...Jumping."

Blue-white light spilled out across the Scout ship's hull from a dozen strategically placed emitters. The light engulfed the hull like a wave of blue-white water in a split second, then immediately flashed in a brilliant ball of blue-white light. When the flash subsided, the Scout ship was gone.

"Jump complete," Commander Eckert reported as the flash subsided.

"Verifying position," Ensign Agari announced. "Contact. Two hundred kilometers ahead, five to starboard and two up relative. Contact is a Falcon."

"Incoming call from Falcon One, Captain," Wellsy called over the comms.

"Put them through."

"Scout Three, Falcon One."

"Falcon One, Scout Three. Go ahead."

"Congratulations, Captain," Loki's voice said over the comms. *"We picked up no fluctuations when you came out of your jump. You should be good to continue the rest of*

your test jumps. We'll lead the way. Jump two in one minute."

The cabin of Scout Three exploded in cheers.

"Falcon One, Scout Three. We copy. We'll be right behind you. Scout Three out." Captain Nash looked at Commander Eckert. "Now *that* was something."

"Yes, sir. It was."

"Falcon One has jumped away, Captain," Ensign Agari reported.

"Jump drive shows ready, all emitters are green, and all reactors at full power," Lieutenant Scalotti added.

"Ten seconds to next jump point," Commander Eckert reported.

Captain Nash turned and looked aft at his crew, a big smile on his face. "*Now* the fun begins."

* * *

Nathan sat in the middle of one of the many unfinished caverns in the Karuzara asteroid, looking at the dome overhead. The portion of it that was completed was polished and stained a perfect white. All about him were planters filled with flowers, trees, and shrubs from the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster, all being fed artificial sunlight from portable lights suspended over them.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" Jessica asked as she approached from the entrance to the cavern. She looked around as she walked toward Nathan. "What the hell is this place?"

"It's going to be a low-gravity garden," Nathan told her.

"I thought I felt a little light," Jessica said as she looked at the floor panels. "Is the artificial gravity built into these floor plates or something?"

"Yup. Their artificial gravity systems are far more advanced than ours." Nathan pointed up at the ceiling. "They're going to polish the entire dome smooth and stain it

white, all the way down to the floors, so they can project an artificial sky. All these plants here will eventually be planted into a soil base about three meters thick."

"Why?"

"To make a nice place to relax, get some fresh air," Nathan explained.

"It's not fresh air, Nathan," Jessica disagreed. "It's still being circulated by the same environmental system as the rest of the facility."

"Yes and no. The plants and trees will add oxygen to it. And it will smell nice."

"Couldn't they just go down to Earth if they want to smell plants?"

"I'm pretty sure that most of Earth doesn't smell that good these days."

"Good point," Jessica said, sitting down next to him. "Do they really have time for all this? I mean, that platform is going to be here in a week."

"It's mostly being done by volunteers in what little off time they have. I think it helps them unwind a bit," Nathan said.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea."

"How is your family doing?" Nathan wondered.

"Good. My brothers are helping with construction of base facilities. My mom is working in the base mess, and my father is yelling at everyone. So it's all good."

"I'm glad you were able to get them someplace safe."

"Yeah." Jessica was silent for a moment, as she looked at all the plants around them. "You know, I had pretty much stopped thinking about them," she admitted. "Figured it wasn't much use, that either they were alive or not... That sooner or later, I'd find out. Kind of made it easier, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Nathan said. "I did the same thing. With the first platform, it was so hard to give the order to retreat, knowing that my family was still alive, and that they would

probably die when we left. At that moment, I really wished that I didn't know." He looked at Jessica. "I hope to God that I don't have to make that call again. I don't know if I can."

"You can," Jessica said quietly. "You know," she said, changing the subject, "the Corinairan medical teams have started treating the worst cases of radiation poisoning on Earth with nanites."

"I thought it caused pain to non-Corinairans?" Nathan wondered.

"It does, but what would you prefer? A few weeks of nanite pain or slow death from radiation poisoning?"

"Good point."

"It will take a while, but eventually they hope to get the nanite therapy distributed to everyone in the fallout zones."

"They sure as hell brought enough," Nathan said. "Hey, I struck up a deal with the captain of the Glendanon. He's taking back a full load of propellant from Tanna to sell on the Pentaurus markets. It should buy us another load of relief aid for Earth. At the very least, it will pique the financial interests of the ship's owners and get them to commit the Glendanon to regular runs between the Pentaurus and Sol sectors. We're probably going to have to provide them with escorts through the Sol sector, however."

"Probably a good idea," Jessica agreed.

"They're filling up at Tanna now, and will be heading back to the PC. It will take them a few months to get back, though."

"Better than nothing."

"I tried to talk him into staying and doing runs between Earth and Tanna. We could've moved a lot of immigrants to Tanna and relief back to Earth with that ship."

"I guess you'll just have to make do with the boxcars for now," Jessica said.

"How is Eckert working out on Scout Three?" Nathan wondered.

"Bobby says he's doing fine. XO on a Scout ship is a pretty easy gig, for the most part."

"How is he enjoying his new jump drive?"

"What do you think?" she said. "He's been jumping all over the system."

"Well, he's going to be grounded for a few days so we can put the hard points on his ship, so he can ferry KKV's into position."

"Who did you move into Eckert's spot at tactical?" Jessica wondered.

"I figured I'd let you handle it for now," Nathan said. "You can do that and run security, can't you?"

"I did before, didn't I?"

"You mean, when we were boarded twice?"

"That was not my fault," Jessica objected, putting her hand up.

* * *

"You could have chosen a less conspicuous outfit," Josh told the lieutenant as they walked along the streets of Edinburgh.

"The mere presence of the Ghatazhak in itself serves as a deterrence," Lieutenant Telles replied. "I see no reason to hide our identity or our purpose."

"Well, everyone is scared of you guys. How do you expect them to interact with us?"

"I was not aware that you were here to interact with the local population."

"We might want to buy something to eat, or ask directions or something," Josh said.

"Your data pad is not working?"

Josh shook his head. "Just don't crowd us, alright?"

"As you wish," the lieutenant replied. He turned to his sergeant. "Spread out. Maintain visual contact at all times."

"Yes, sir."

Josh walked quickly to catch up to the rest of the group.

"Why are we here, again?" Loki wondered.

"We have a day off, and these guys were already coming down here to check out their *heritage*, so to speak. So why not tag along? It might be fun. Besides, it's better than sitting on the ship watching old videos."

"You mean it's better than sitting on the ship studying," Loki replied.

"That too."

"I think it was a great idea," Lieutenant Yosef said. "Fresh air, sunshine... I can't remember the last time I felt the sun on my face."

Josh looked up at the cloudy sky. "What sun?"

"There was a little," Kayla argued, "when we landed."

They continued to follow the others down the street, turning into an open market to the right.

"I'm getting hungry," Josh complained, his comment directed at Master Chief Montrose.

The master chief turned to look back at Josh. "We've only been here an hour, Josh."

"I had a light lunch."

"I could eat," Mister Chiles said.

"Very well." The master chief looked about, spotting a friendly-looking young woman working in a small produce stand. "Excuse me, miss, but we're not from around here..."

"Really?" the woman answered dryly.

Master Chief Montrose smiled.

"I like her already," Josh whispered to Loki.

"That obvious, huh?" the master chief responded.

"The men with guns sort of gave it away," the woman said in a thick Scottish accent.

"Holy crap," Josh exclaimed. "She talks just like you guys. Same accent and everything."

"Josh," Kayla scolded.

"What? She does."

Master Chief Montrose ignored Josh's outburst and continued. "We were wondering if you might recommend an eating establishment where my friends and I could sample some of your local cuisine."

"Eating establishment?" Josh exclaimed. "Local cuisine. Who the hell talks like that?"

"I agree with your loud friend, there," the woman responded. "It's still a bit early for supper, but if you're needin' a bite, there's a pub round the corner up ahead, to your right. Can't miss it. Simple food it is, but quite tasty."

"Thank you," Master Chief Montrose said. "We shall head there directly. Good day to you."

"Good day to you as well." She watched the master chief leave, along with Mister Chiles and Mister Riley. "If you don't mind my asking," she said to Josh as they passed by, "where are you all from?"

"A planet far, far away," Josh answered.

The woman watched them head for the corner, a quizzical look on her face.

"Ma'am," Lieutenant Telles said with a polite nod as he, too, passed.

* * *

"Jump complete," Commander Eckert reported.

"Position verified," Ensign Agari added. "We are at the launch point."

"Very well," Captain Nash stated. "Any contacts?"

"No, sir," Ensign Agari answered. "The area is clear."

"Prepare to deploy the KKV."

"Powering up the KKV now," Commander Eckert said as he typed in the commands. "Transmitting targeting instructions."

"Whose idea was it to put an antimatter core in the tip of that thing, anyway?" Captain Nash wondered.

"I believe it was one of the Celestia's engineers," Commander Eckert said. "Tillardi, I think."

"Seems like overkill, considering the amount of kinetic energy that thing will be carrying at impact," Ensign Agari said.

"Is there such a thing as 'overkill' when it comes to a Jung battle platform?" Captain Nash wondered.

"KKV is ready for deployment," Commander Eckert announced.

"Release the KKV."

"Releasing." Commander Eckert pressed the button and released the clamps holding the KKV securely to the underside of the ship. "KKV is away."

"Thrusting upward," Captain Nash announced as he activated the Scout ship's translation thrusters.

"Three meters from the KKV and increasing," Commander Eckert reported. "KKV is fully powered, and has received and verified the targeting instructions. It is ready to launch."

"Set the strike clock and stand by to launch," Captain Nash ordered.

"Strike clock is set," Ensign Agari acknowledged.

"Launch KKV in three.....two.....one.....launch."

"Launch signal transmitted," Commander Eckert reported. "KKVs main drive is firing. KKV is moving away."

Captain Nash looked out the window as the KKV came out from under their nose and accelerated away from them, its main drive glowing a yellowish-white.

"KKV is at full forward thrust," Commander Eckert reported, "picking up speed nicely. Twenty seconds until she goes to FTL."

"Coming to port for separation," Captain Nash announced as he turned the Scout ship slightly to port. "On jump course."

"Jump to target area entered and ready," Commander Eckert reported. "KKV goes FTL in five seconds."

Captain Nash instinctively looked out the front window, knowing that the KKV was already too far ahead of them to be seen.

“KKV has gone to FTL,” Commander Eckert reported.

“Right on schedule,” Ensign Agari from his sensor station behind the commander. “Impact in one minute.”

“I hope this works,” Captain Nash said. “I would really like to be the guy that pulls the trigger and brings that fucker down.”

Commander Eckert smiled. “Trust me, sir, I know from experience... It feels pretty damned good.”

“Forty seconds to impact,” Ensign Agari reported.

“Twenty seconds to jump point,” the commander added.

“It just seems like such an impossible task,” Captain Nash said. “To hit a fast moving target, with another fast moving target, from so damned far away.”

“Well, we’ve got four chances,” Eckert said. “We’re bound to get lucky with one of them. Besides, they are quite precise. If the target is where it was predicted to be, the KKV will hit it.”

“I hope you’re right, Skeeched,” Captain Nash said, “and so do a lot of people back on Earth.”

“Five seconds to jump point.”

“Twenty-three seconds to impact.”

“Jumping in three.....two...”

“Let’s go see the show,” Captain Nash said as he closed his eyes and tilted his head down.

“...Jumping.”

The jump flash washed over the flight deck.

“Jump complete,” Commander Eckert reported.

“Position verified,” Ensign Agari added. “Ten seconds to KKV impact.”

Captain Nash waited patiently as the last few seconds before impact ticked away. The KKV’s were the Earth’s last line of defense against the Jung battle platform that was hurtling toward them. If they failed to destroy it with the

KKVs, the Earth was doomed. His parents, his family, everything he knew... Everything they all knew would be gone. The Jung would wipe the planet clean and rebuild it in whatever way they saw fit. All that would be left of his people would be the few hundred thousand who had emigrated to Tanna.

It suddenly occurred to Captain Nash just how difficult some of the decisions Captain Scott had been forced to make had actually been.

"Impact in three.....two.....one..."

The kid deserves more respect than we've been giving him, he thought.

"...Impact."

There was a dead silence on the flight deck.

"Intercept confirmed," Ensign Agari reported happily.

"Yes!" Captain Nash exclaimed. Cheers erupted from the lower flight deck aft of them.

"The KKV dropped out of FTL at the moment of simulated impact," Ensign Agari added above the cheers. "It was right on the money, Captain."

"KKV is pitching over," Commander Eckert reported. "It's firing its main to decelerate."

"Safe its warhead and prepare to recover," Captain Nash said.

"KKV warhead is safe," Commander Eckert acknowledged. "She'll be down to safe recovery speed in three minutes."

Captain Nash sighed. "Now let's just hope it works as well two days from now when we fire it at the real thing."

* * *

"So, what did you think?" Nathan asked his father as they entered his ready room.

"You know, I've read the reports, seen the designs, hell, I know everything there is to know about both the Aurora

and the Karuzara, but it still doesn't do either of them justice." President Scott sat down on the couch against the forward bulkhead and made himself comfortable. "There is just no way to fully appreciate the magnitude of them without seeing them in person, walking their decks, meeting their people, breathing their air."

"Surely, you've seen such things before?" Nathan wondered. "You were on the appropriations committee for at least a decade."

"Longer," his father admitted, "but I never took the time to see them up close and personal. It just never seemed necessary. I suppose I may have been wrong about that."

"God, I never get tired of hearing that."

"What? That I was wrong?"

"Yup."

"I'm wrong more often than you realize, son."

"Perhaps, but I don't remember you admitting it," Nathan said, "at least not very often."

"It's a hard thing to do, at times," his father explained. "As a father, your children look up to you, expect you to have all the answers. Same thing holds true as a politician. Everyone expects you to know the right thing to do, and to do it. But the world is never black and white, right or wrong. Most of the time, you're choosing the lesser of two evils. That's what your brother hated the most about politics."

"I'd rather not talk about Eli, if you don't mind," Nathan said as he took his seat behind his desk.

"You're going to have to eventually, Nathan."

"He sold us out, Pop. His entire world. What the hell is there to talk about?"

"He must have had his reasons, Nathan. He must have thought..."

"Not right now, okay?" Nathan objected. "Not the night before we go toe-to-toe with that damned platform."

"Alright," his father acquiesced. They both sat there in silence for several seconds. "You know, the people have

stopped making an effort these last few weeks.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked.

“The volunteers have all but disappeared. The markets are empty. People that have jobs aren’t showing up for them.”

“Why?”

“They’ve given up hope.”

“I thought the arrival of the Karuzara served as an inspiration?”

“It did, to some extent,” his father said. “But the Karuzara, as impressive a facility as it may be, is still just a rock with some guns on it. The platform headed our way is designed to destroy worlds, and the people know it.”

“So what are they doing?”

“Those who are out are hoarding whatever they can get their hands on.”

“Yeah, Telles warned me about that.”

“He was wise to not try and stop it,” his father said. “Those who aren’t out scrounging up what’s left are either hunkered down in whatever safe place they could come up with, or they’re out whooping it up, having as much fun as possible before they die at the hands of the Jung.”

“Kind of pathetic, don’t you think?”

“Can you blame them?” the president said. “They’ve been pounded three times now, and they’re barely surviving down there.”

“But they are *surviving*,” Nathan said. “That’s the key word.”

“Millions of people have lost everything, Nathan. How do you deal with that? How do you carry on without a purpose in life?”

“You just do,” Nathan insisted. “Life isn’t about a purpose. Life is about living. It’s about being alive. It’s as simple as that. There is no grand scheme that is being played out.”

"Not everyone feels that way. Some people need more. You know as well as anyone... Hope is a powerful motivator, just as hopelessness is as destructive as any weapon."

"I will defeat that platform this time," Nathan promised.

His father looked at him, hearing the conviction in his son's tone. "You truly believe that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I will not turn and run this time, and I will not leave the Earth to be wiped clean from orbit. I retreated once. I will not do so again. I can't."

"And suppose you don't. Suppose you stand and fight, and win. What then?" his father asked. "The Earth will again suffer. Again we will try to recover and rebuild. The Jung will come again."

"Not this time," Nathan swore. "We will defeat this platform. Then we will seek out and destroy every Jung asset within twenty light years of Earth. That will buy us the time we need to recover and rebuild... To become stronger. We will liberate the other core worlds as well, and they will stand with us, making us stronger still. Together, we will stand as one against the Jung. We will continue our attacks, spreading destruction outward until all Jung forces have been eliminated, and the Jung threat is no more."

"And how many people will die in the process, Nathan?"

"Not people," Nathan objected. "Jung."

"Are they not people?"

"Not people worthy of mercy," Nathan said.

"And what about the innocent people who will die as well?"

"I don't like collateral damage any more than the next guy," Nathan said, "but this is war, and we both know that fewer innocent people will suffer if we defeat the Jung now, rather than later."

"They will still number in the millions, Nathan," his father warned. "Especially if you carry this campaign to the core worlds of Earth as well."

"It cannot be helped, Pop, and you know it. As long as the Jung have strongholds spread out across the Sol sector, they shall be a threat to us all. You said so yourself, just before we took down the previous platform, when you told me not to sacrifice my ship to save the Earth."

"You *do* realize that you just made an argument *not* to stand and fight to the death to save the Earth?"

Nathan said nothing, only stared at his father.

Dayton Scott sighed. "Your life was not supposed to turn out this way, Nathan."

"You're wrong about that as well," Nathan told him. "I admit, when I first took command, I wanted nothing more than to get back home and hand off the responsibility to someone else. But now I know... This is who I am. This is what I was born to do. Call it fate; call it destiny; call it the will of God if you want, but this is exactly how my life was supposed to turn out."

His father shook his head, sighing yet again. "I'm glad you feel that way, Nathan."

"Heck, you should be happy," Nathan explained. "You always wanted me to go into politics, didn't you? Isn't war just a continuation of politics by other means?"

His father smiled. "Who said that?"

"Carl Von-something. A couple thousand years ago, I think," Nathan said. "You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"I'll have the chef whip up some molo dishes," Nathan told him. "I have a feeling you're going to be eating a lot of it in the future."

CHAPTER TEN

The starry, black background of space began to warp slightly, the stars themselves shifting and stretching in abnormal fashion at an increasing rate until suddenly, a Jung battle platform with one of its six arms heavily damaged, appeared as if from nowhere. Within seconds, more than two dozen missiles, tiny by comparison to the massive platform, left its core and headed toward Earth.

“Multiple contacts!” Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia’s sensor station. “Just past the orbit of Jupiter. Jung battle platform...”

“They’ve launched missiles,” Lieutenant Delaveaga reported from the tactical station. “Thirty of them.”

“Target?” Cameron asked.

“They’re headed for Earth, sir.”

“Odd. Why launch from so far out? It will take more than two hours for those missiles to reach Earth.”

“Closer to three, sir,” Ensign Kono corrected.

“Maybe they’re trying to draw us out, away from Earth?” Luis suggested.

“Possibly.” Cameron turned aft. “Comms, notify the Aurora and the Karuzara.”

“Already done, sir,” Ensign Souza answered.

“Celestia reports the battle platform has entered the system on the expected course, just past the orbit of

Jupiter," Naralena reported as Nathan stepped onto the bridge from his ready room.

"Sound general quarters," Nathan ordered as he passed Jessica at the tactical station and headed for his command chair.

"Celestia also reports thirty missiles inbound, fired the moment the target came out of FTL," Naralena added.

"What?" Nathan exclaimed. "From out there, it will take hours for those missiles to reach Earth."

"They probably just want to leave us something to remember them by after we kick their asses," Jessica commented.

"Where's the Celestia?"

"Just inside the orbit of Mars, on an intercept course," Jessica reported.

"Comms, tell them to hold course and speed for now. Do not intercept."

"Aye, sir," Naralena acknowledged.

Captain Nash stood behind his sensor operator, Ensign Agari, looking at the display screen. "Are you sure Toosh?"

"Yes, sir," Ensign Agari assured him, "straight and true. They burned for a while after launch, but they're coasting now. At their current speed, it will take them five and a half hours to reach Earth."

"Why would they block their own path to Earth?" Commander Eckert wondered. "With those missiles in their way, they can't go to FTL and transition in closer."

"They're taunting us," Captain Nash said, "trying to get us to come out to them. That's why the missiles aren't accelerating. They're hoping we'll come out to destroy those missiles before they reach their targets," the captain explained. "Keep an eye on those missiles, Toosh. I'm betting something is going to change."

"Like what?" Toosh wondered.

"They're either going to accelerate, or they're going to change course."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't fall for it, Scott," the captain said under his breath.

"Flight, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set. "Launch all Falcons. Task to intercept and destroy the inbound missiles. Make sure they wait until those missiles are out of range of the platform's point-defenses."

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Chiles, ten degrees port, five up relative," Nathan ordered.

"Ten to port, five up relative, aye."

"Mister Riley," Nathan continued, "Our first jump will be to the orbit of Jupiter, about a light minute abeam of the target, I suspect."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley answered. "Plotting jump."

"We'll jump as soon as the Falcons are away," Nathan added.

"Aye, sir."

"Ready those antimatter mines."

"They're already in the port cargo airlock, ready to jettison," Jessica reported.

"Very well."

"Message from the Aurora, Captain," Ensign Souza announced. "We're to hold course and speed, do not engage."

"Very well," Cameron answered.

"The Aurora has jumped," Ensign Kono reported. "She launched Falcons before she jumped, though. They're jumping as well."

"He'll send the Falcons to deal with the missiles," Cameron commented.

"Why not just wait and deal with them later?" Luis wondered.

"He wants them to think that their tactic is working, that we're going to fight a defensive battle."

"Jump complete," Loki announced as their jump flash subsided.

"Coming to starboard," Josh said as he started a lazy turn.

"Thirty seconds until their missiles are beyond the range of their point-defenses."

"Their big guns will still be able to reach us, if they get lucky," Josh insisted.

"Uh, oh," Loki said. "Their missiles are changing course. They're spreading out."

"So? We just jump a little shorter, right? They're still easy pickings, aren't they?"

"Yeah, but why are they spreading out? That's what I want to know."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"Attack jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"Port-side cargo airlock reports ejection mechanism is armed, and the outer doors are open. The antimatter mines are ready for deployment," Jessica announced.

"Jump when ready, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Nathan kept his eyes glued to the main view screen as the jump flash washed over them.

"Jump complete."

“Contact,” Mister Navashee reported. “Platform is two kilometers ahead, two to port, closing fast.”

“Five seconds to deployment point,” Jessica announced.

“Stand by to execute escape jump. Five light seconds forward.”

“Three...”

“Escape jump, five light seconds forward, aye,” Mister Riley answered.

“...Two.....one.....mines away,” Jessica announced.

“Tactical, transmit detonation signal,” Nathan ordered.

“Transmitting detonation signal.”

“Snap jump!”

“Jumping,” Mister Riley answered as the jump flash washed over them. “Jump complete.”

“Scan the target area,” Nathan ordered.

“Already on it, sir,” Mister Navashee replied.

“Helm, come about.”

“Coming about, aye.”

“I have four antimatter events,” Mister Navashee reported, “but no battle platform, and no debris.”

“New contact!” Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia’s sensor station. “It’s the battle platform, sir! They must have gone to FTL just before the antimatter mines detonated.”

“What’s their new position?” Cameron asked.

“Dead even with their missiles, sir.”

“That’s two!” Josh yelled.

“Fuck!” Loki exclaimed. “The platform FTL’d it forward! They’re fifty kilometers out and firing! Break left and down! Now, now, now!”

Josh didn’t hesitate, pushing the Falcon into a tight, diving left turn and pushing their throttles to full power. “Get us the fuck outta here!”

“Jumping!” Loki announced as the jump flash washed over them.

“Where are we at, Lok?” Josh asked as the jump flash subsided.

“I only jumped us one light second, stand by.”

“Okay, I got them,” Josh said, looking at his sensor display. “Aft of us and to starboard, about four hundred kilometers.”

“Oh, shit, Falcon Three is hit!” Loki exclaimed, “And I’m not finding Falcon Five anywhere!”

“Maybe they jumped further out?” Josh suggested as he brought the ship around in preparation for another jump. “Where’s the Aurora?”

“I’m looking.”

“The Aurora’s antimatter mines were unsuccessful, Commander,” the Karuzara’s tactical officer reported. “The target went to FTL before the mines detonated. She is currently slightly behind her own missiles, same course and speed as before.”

“They FTL’d forward just enough to be in range of whomever was sent to deal with the missiles,” Commander Dumar surmised. “How many Falcons?”

“Four,” the tactical officer reported. “Falcons Three and Five are missing. I have debris at Falcon Three’s last known position as well. It could have been worse, sir.”

“Yes, it could have,” Commander Dumar agreed. “If the Celestia had gone after those missiles, she might be missing instead.”

“Damn it,” Nathan cursed. “Is the platform still holding course and speed?”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Navashee reported.

"Comms, message to the Celestia," Nathan ordered. "Tell them to join us and engage the target. Alternate-X across their bow from ten kilometers out, and fire everything. We've got the first pass."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Set up for your first pass, Mister Riley," Nathan added.

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Navashee. Are our Scouts in position?"

"Yes, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "Either side of the engagement zone, just out of range of the platform's big guns."

"Comms, tell Scout Three to adjust targeting instructions based on target's current course and speed and be ready to launch in three minutes."

"Retarget current track, launch in three, aye, sir." Naralena answered.

"What happens if they go to FTL right when we jump in front of them?" Jessica wondered.

"Hopefully we'll get spit back out the other side, like everything else," Nathan replied.

"New targeting instructions," Wellsy called over the comms. "Retarget current track, launch at thirteen twenty-two plus thirty."

"That's just under two minutes from now," Commander Eckert said.

"Stand by to jump us out to the first KKV," Captain Nash ordered.

"Already plotting the jump, sir," the commander replied.

"Tell me the jump board is green," the captain added.

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Scalotti replied. "Emitters, field generators, and reactors... All good to go."

"Clearing jump, plotted and locked," the commander announced. "Come to one two seven, down two relative, and maintain speed."

"One two seven, down two relative, same speed," the captain answered as he altered the Scout ship's course.

"Ninety seconds to launch," Ensign Agari announced. "We're clear ahead."

"One two seven, down two," the captain said.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping." The blue-white jump flash washed over the flight deck. "Jump complete. Stand by for new course."

"Eighty seconds to launch," Ensign Agari reported.

"New course, two four seven, up twelve relative, same speed," Commander Eckert advised.

"Coming to two four seven, up twelve relative, same speed," the captain answered as he turned the ship again.

"Seventy seconds," Ensign Agari reported.

"You're starting to annoy me, Toosh," Captain Nash said as he continued his course change.

"Just keeping you honest, Captain," Toosh answered. "One minute."

"On course two four seven, up twelve relative, same speed. Ready to jump," the captain announced.

"One moment," Commander Eckert said as he made the last few entries into the jump computer.

"Fifty seconds."

"Any time, Skeechee."

"Got it. Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Where's it at?" Captain Nash asked as the jump flash subsided.

"Scanning," Toosh answered from the sensor station.

"Got it. Off our starboard side. One hundred kilometers, give or take."

"Could have put us a little closer, Skeechee," Captain Nash said.

"Sorry, sir. Transmitting updated targeting data."

"Twenty seconds to launch," Toosh added.

"Waiting for confirmation of the targeting update," Commander Eckert said.

"No pressure, Skeeched," Captain Nash said. "It's only the fate of the world."

"Confirmation received. KKV is powered up, targeted, and ready to launch."

"Eight seconds."

"Plenty of time," Captain Nash told them.

"Three.....two.....one.....launch."

Commander Eckert pressed the launch button on the KKV control interface. "KKV is moving out at full thrust. She's altering course."

"KKV is steering to the new target heading," Toosh reported. "Continuing to accelerate."

"All KKV systems reporting normal," Lieutenant Scalotti reported. "FTL field generators are charging up. She'll go FTL in..."

"KKV has gone to FTL," Toosh reported.

"...Now?" Lieutenant Scalotti finished.

"Damn," Captain Nash exclaimed, "that was stressful, and we're not even under fire."

Commander Eckert exchanged glances with his captain.

"Hey, Wellsy. When we get back, ask Aurora comms to give us an extra minute next time, just in case, huh?"

"Aye, sir."

"Plotting return jump," the commander said.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the Aurora's jump flash subsided.

"Target, one zero kilometers to starboard, twenty ahead," Mister Navashee reported.

"Bring tubes to bear," Mister Chiles announced.

"Firing solution in five seconds," Jessica reported.

"Celestia is firing," Mister Navashee reported. "Direct hits to target's forward shields, number four arm."

"Target the same," Nathan ordered.

"Targeting number four arm," Jessica reported.

“Target’s shields on number four arm are at ninety-three percent,” Mister Navashee reported. “Celestia is firing again.”

“Yaw complete.”

“Target lock. Firing,” Jessica announced as she pressed the firing button on the tactical console. A preprogrammed firing pattern of triple-plasma shots from all forward torpedo tubes, as well as from the Aurora’s two port plasma cannons sent fourteen balls of plasma streaking toward the target. “Weapons away.”

“Celestia has jumped away,” Mister Navashee announced.

“Continue your yaw, Mister Chiles,” Nathan ordered. “Keep our nose on the target.”

“Continuing yaw, aye.”

“New contact. Jump flash. Scout Three.”

“Fire at will,” Nathan ordered.

“Firing at will, aye,” Jessica acknowledged as she began firing triple shots from each of the forward plasma torpedo cannons.

“Target’s shields are down to eighty-seven percent,” Mister Navashee reported. “Target is bringing her guns on to us. Target is firing guns. Five seconds to first impacts.”

“All hands brace for incoming,” Nathan ordered. “Time to KKV impact?”

“Ten seconds,” Mister Navashee answered.

“Escape jump, one light second, now!” Nathan ordered.

“Jumping,” Mister Riley answered as the first few enemy rail gun rounds struck their starboard side. “Jump complete.”

“Five seconds to KKV impact,” Mister Navashee reported. “Three.....two.....Target has gone to FTL!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir! The KKV missed! I’ve got its red-shifted light ahead and to starboard. Searching for the... Got ‘em! Five hundred kilometers further along their original course.”

“Comms, tell Scout Three to go retrieve that KKV and move it to position five.”

“Aye, sir,” Naralena acknowledged. “Retrieve KKV and move to position five.”

“Message to Celestia; continue attack. Box pattern, range twenty kilometers. They have the first pass.”

“Box pattern, twenty klicks, Celestia has first pass,” Naralena repeated.

“Mister Riley, get us into position for our first pass, in approximately two minutes.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Comms, message to Scout Two; retarget KKV Two, current track. Launch at one three three two.”

“Scout Two, retarget current track, launch at one three three two, aye,” Naralena acknowledged.

“That’s a full five minutes from now, sir,” Jessica warned.

“He jumped in five last time,” Nathan replied. “I’m betting he won’t use the same intervals every time.”

“It was a clean miss, sir,” the Karuzara’s tactical officer reported. “Scout Three is on their way to recover the KKV and move it to position five according to plan.”

Commander Dumar looked unshaken. “And what of the incoming missiles?”

“Now that the platform has jumped ahead several hundred kilometers, she is again within range of her missiles. Our remaining Falcons cannot engage them without risk of being destroyed.”

“How long until we have a firing angle on those missiles?”

“We’ll be over the horizon and have a clear shot in ten minutes, sir.”

“Tell the Falcons to hang back out of the platform’s weapons range. As soon as it goes into FTL again, they are

to jump in and take out as many missiles as they can, but they must jump away as soon as the platform comes out of FTL."

"Sir, we can handle the missiles when..."

"The enemy must continue to believe that we are concerned about the incoming missiles," Dumar explained patiently. "If he thinks we are not, he will wonder why we are not. He will then become more cautious, and a cautious enemy can be even more dangerous than a careless one."

"Yes, sir."

"They are using their ability to make short, precise, FTL hops in the same way that our ships use their jump drives," Mister Bryant said.

"Yes, the commander of this platform is no fool," Dumar said. "He will vary his intervals in order to thwart our KKV attacks, all the way to Earth. Then he will park his ship in as low an orbit as he can possibly maintain so that we cannot risk launching KKV's at him for fear of hitting the Earth herself."

"Why did he not simply come out of FTL much closer?"

"He could not risk coming out of FTL any closer than say, the lunar orbit, and still have time to make last-minute course corrections. Then it would take five, maybe ten minutes for him to move in close." Dumar looked at Mister Bryant. "What would you do if you were in command, and that platform suddenly appeared three hundred kilometers from Earth?"

"I'd launch everything," Mister Bryant answered. "The KKV's, the antimatter mines, the works. I'd have no choice."

"Exactly," Dumar agreed. "No, he is no fool, this one."

"Firing all weapons," Luis reported from the Celestia's tactical station.

"Aurora has jumped in on the opposite side of the box," Ensign Kono announced. "They're firing."

"Time to KKV impact?"

"One minute," Ensign Kono reported.

"Continuing yaw," Ensign Hunt advised.

"Continue firing, Lieutenant," Cameron ordered.

"Aye, sir. Continuing to fire all forward plasma weapons."

"Multiple contacts!" Ensign Kono reported. "Twelve ships departing the platform's bays."

"They're gunships," Luis reported as he continued firing.

"Can we target them?" Cameron asked.

"No, sir," Luis answered. "They're still inside the platform's shields, staying close to her hull."

"More contacts!" Ensign Kono reported. "Six of them. Larger."

"Troop carriers," Luis added.

"All new contacts are going to full thrust!" Ensign Kono reported. "They're headed for Earth!"

"Comms, contact the Aurora and the Karuzara and make sure they see them as well. And make sure the Ghatazhak know too."

"Aye, sir."

"Celestia reports the platform has launched gunships and troop carriers," Mister Bryant reported.

Commander Dumar rubbed his chin. "I assume they are headed this way?"

"Indeed, sir, however we cannot yet ascertain if their target is the Earth, or us."

"The Earth is not a threat to them, we are. Assume we are the target. Lock down all exterior access points, airlocks, maintenance passageways. Put security on full alert, and have them open the weapons lockers and arm everyone."

"Yes, sir."

"How many ships?"

"Eighteen in total. Twelve gunships and six troop carriers," Mister Bryant replied. "Perhaps they mean to

bombard the Earth from orbit as they did in the last attack?"

"No, those gunships are serving as escorts. They are still too distant to use fighters. They would not have enough fuel to operate in the atmosphere."

"We can attack them with our weapons," Mister Bryant said.

"They will approach from the opposite side where we are unable to reach them."

"Time to KKV impact?" Nathan asked.

"Thirty seconds," Mister Navashee replied.

"Yaw maneuver complete," Mister Chiles reported from the Aurora's helm.

"I have a firing solution," Jessica announced. "Firing all weapons."

"Direct impacts, same shield section," Mister Navashee reported. "Shield is down to eighty percent."

"Are they still launching ships?"

"No, sir. Twenty seconds."

Nathan watched the tactical displays along the bottom edge of the main view screen. "They're not even rotating to keep fresh shields towards us... Why?"

"Target has gone to FTL!" Mister Navashee reported. "The KKV will miss!"

Nathan bit his tongue to avoid cursing. He took a deep breath. "He knows... Somehow, he knows." He turned to his left. "Where is he at now?"

"Target just came out of FTL again," Mister Navashee reported. "He is now inside the orbit of Mars, continuing on same course and speed."

"Comms, message to Scout Two. Recover KKV two and reposition to position six. Message to Celestia. Tell them to switch to triangular pattern and continue the attack. They have first pass."

"Aye, sir," Naralena acknowledged.

"Tactical, are the remaining missiles in range?"

"Yes, sir," Jessica replied. "We can hit them with lasers; no problem."

"Let's get rid of them before we continue chasing that damned platform."

"Yes, sir."

"Jump complete," Mister Jakoby reported.

"Target dead ahead, twenty klicks to starboard, five off, two down," Ensign Kono reported from the Celestia's sensor station.

"Locking all weapons on target," Luis announced. "Firing all weapons."

"Scout One has jumped away," Ensign Kono reported.

"They must be headed out to launch the next KKV," Cameron said.

"Target is firing rail guns," Ensign Kono reported. "Impact in five seconds!"

"Escape jump, Mister Jakoby," Cameron ordered.

"Escape jump, aye," her navigator answered as the Celestia's blue-white jump flash washed over them. "Jump complete."

"Hard about, set up for the next pass," Cameron ordered.

"Hard about, aye," Ensign Hunt acknowledged.

"Plotting next jump."

"Target is launching more ships," Ensign Kono reported. "Same as before. Twelve gunships and six troop carriers."

"Where's the Aurora?"

"She just jumped in for her attack run," Ensign Kono replied.

"And the missiles?"

"All destroyed. The four remaining Falcons are now attacking the first wave of gunships."

“New target,” Loki announced as the Falcon’s jump flash subsided, “one o’clock, ten down. Range, eight hundred meters. Locking turret on target.”

“Turning in,” Josh replied.

“Firing turret,” Loki reported as red-orange streaks of energy raced toward the fast approaching gunship from the Falcon’s nose turret. “Locking missile onto target.”

Josh snapped rolled the ship to the right to avoid incoming rail gun fire displayed on his threat screen. “Hurry up, Lok.”

“Missile lock. Level off so I can deploy.”

“Make it quick,” Josh told him as he stopped his roll.

“Firing,” Loki announced. “Missile away. Pitch up.”

“Gladly,” Josh answered as he pulled the Falcon’s nose up sharply.

“Jumping in three...”

“Wham!” Josh cried out as their missile slammed into the side of the Jung gunship as they were about to pass overhead.

“...Two...”

The missile penetrated the gunship’s hull and buried itself deep in its midship before detonating. The explosion lit up the inside of the Falcon’s cockpit as they passed overhead.

“Boom!” Josh added with excitement, as if he were back home on Haven, playing a video game.

“...One...”

Several pieces of debris slammed into the underside of the Falcon’s tail.

“...Jumping.”

Their helmet visors went opaque for a split second, clearing up again as the jump flash subsided.

“Maybe a little more pitch next time, huh, Josh?” Loki asked.

“Sorry,” Josh said. “Next target?”

"I want all cargo jumpers loaded with as many men as possible," said Lieutenant Telles. "Full level three gear."

"Are we fighting a ground battle, or a space battle?" his sergeant wondered.

"That depends on where those troop ships go," the lieutenant said. "I'd prefer to keep our options open."

"Understood," the sergeant replied.

"What about boxcars?"

"There are two of them still on the deck," the sergeant answered. "Both are empty."

"We'll use those as troop transports as well."

"Time to firing solution?" Commander Dumar asked.

"One minute, and we'll have a direct line of sight on the target," Mister Bryant replied. "But at this distance, sir, our weapons will have only half their charge by the time they reach the target."

"Target has gone to FTL," Mister Navashee reported.

"Damn it; that was only three minutes."

"Scout One's targeting solution is no longer valid," Jessica warned.

"What have we got on deck that can jump?" Nathan asked.

"Multiple contacts, coming from the platform!" Mister Navashee reported.

"Flight reports two jump shuttles," Naralena replied.

"They're launching fighters," Jessica reported. "Dozens of them... Make that at least a hundred."

"Flight! Captain!" Nathan called over his comm-set. "Launch a jump shuttle, now! I need them to relay a new firing solution to Scout One!"

"Aye, sir," Major Prechitt responded over his comm-set.
"They'll be off the deck in one minute."

"Comms. Notify the Celestia; high low, thirty out, we have first pass high."

"High low, thirty out, we have first pass high, aye," Naralena answered.

"They're still pouring out fighters, Captain," Jessica warned.

"Mister Riley, set us up for our first pass."

Commander Dumar watched the view screen on the far wall of the Karuzara's control room. The asteroid's track around the Earth was displayed, as was the track of the incoming battle platform as well as the Terran ships that were attacking the intruder. Numerous other tracks represented the gunboats, troop shuttles, and fighters currently on their way to Earth via the side opposite the Karuzara itself.

"We'll have clear line of sight in ten seconds," Mister Bryant reported.

"Have the Aurora and the Celestia been warned?" Dumar inquired.

"Yes, sir," Mister Bryant replied. "Both ships are aware that we are going to open fire with our plasma cannons. They will attack from outside of our targeting zone."

"Very well," the commander said as the angle displayed on the screen turned green to indicate that the Karuzara's main guns now had a clear line of sight to the target. "You may fire when ready."

On the surface of the Karuzara asteroid, four massive, double-barreled plasma cannons raised and adjusted their barrels to take careful aim at the distant Jung battle platform. One by one, the barrels took turns firing at ten-

second intervals, hurling massive bolts of high-intensity plasma energy streaking toward their target. It would take nearly twenty seconds for their rounds to reach their intended victim, during which time the intensity of the charges would diminish by nearly half. It would not be enough to bring down the enemy battle platform's shields, but if they could maintain the barrage long enough, it might diminish the platform's shield strength to the point that the attacks by the Aurora and the Celestia might be enough. If they were lucky, it would prevent the enemy from making yet another FTL jump that would move it even closer to Earth.

"The Karuzara's plasma shots are reaching the target," Mister Navashee reported, "however, the drain on the platform's shields is negligible. They're just too far away from them."

"Time to KKV impact?" Nathan asked.

"One minute."

"Turn complete," Mister Chiles reported.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping," Mister Riley said.

The blue-white jump flash washed over the Aurora's bridge yet again, as the ship shifted from their point more than two light seconds distant to only thirty kilometers away from the target.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported as the bridge shook.

"Incoming rail gun fire," Mister Navashee reported.

"They must have been firing before we even jumped in," Nathan observed.

"Our nose is on the target, continuing yaw to track," Mister Chiles announced.

"Firing all forward tubes," Jessica followed. "Firing plasma cannons."

"Continue firing," Nathan ordered.

"Target is fanning her main rail guns in all directions," Mister Navashee reported.

"They're shooting blindly because their main guns can't track fast enough to keep up with us," Nathan said. "They're going to make us earn every shot."

"Target's forward shields are down to fifty percent," Mister Navashee reported. "Thirty seconds to KKV im... Damn it!"

"FTL?" Nathan asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, sir. Target is now eight hundred thousand kilometers from Earth and continuing on same course and speed."

"We've only got one more chance at this," Nathan said. "Mister Riley. I want to be directly in that platform's path of travel, ten kilometers out."

"Confirming *ten* kilometers, sir?" Mister Riley asked.

"You heard correctly."

"Aye, sir. Ten kilometers, dead directly in front of them."

"Comms. Message to Scout Two. Transfer targeting information for current track to KKV four and launch as soon as possible."

"Transfer targeting for current track and launch ASAP, aye," Naralena answered.

"They'll jump right past us," Jessica said in a low tone. "We'll get spit out the back just like those antimatter mines were."

"Maybe we will, maybe we won't," Nathan said. "And maybe we'll give them just enough pause to buy us time to finally hit them. Just be ready with all plasma weapons."

Commander Dumar looked at the tactical display on one of the large view screens on the far wall of the Karuzara control center, noticing that the Aurora had jumped again. His eyes squinted as he examined the Aurora's new

position... Along the battle platform's course; two light minutes downrange and a few hundred kilometers higher than the platform relative to the system's ecliptic plane. He glanced at the screen that showed their current position along their orbit around the Earth, from a polar view, and the angle between them and the battle platform. "Mister Bryant, new jump."

"What?"

"New jump, quickly. We only have seconds."

"I'm not even sure how much charge we currently have in the..."

"Do we have enough to jump eight hundred thousand kilometers?"

Mister Bryant looked at the officer in charge of the jump drive, who until now had nothing to do. The man nodded. "Yes, sir," Mister Bryant replied.

"An eight hundred kilometer jump, then," Commander Dumar said as he looked at the orbit tracking display again, "in twenty seconds."

Mister Bryant noticed where the commander had been looking and glanced there himself. "Commander, the platform is only seven hundred and..."

"I gave you an order, Mister Bryant!" Dumar yelled. "Jump now!"

"Jump control!" Mister Bryant bellowed. "Emergency jump! Eight hundred kilometers! Snap jump! Now, now, now!"

"Snap jump! Eight hundred kilometers! Aye!"

Technicians scrambled as they quickly fired up the asteroid's array of jump field generators and prepared to charge the array. Although they had simulated a snap jump in case they had come out in an inopportune position during their journey to Sol, they had never actually executed one.

"What's the delay, Mister Bryant?" Commander Dumar demanded.

“Jumping now!” the officer in charge of the jump drive reported.

A pale blue wave of light emanating from the Karuzara’s hundreds of emitters spilled out across the rugged, uneven surface of the sixty-five kilometer diameter asteroid. The waves quickly joined together to surround the asteroid, after which they rapidly grew in intensity until the enveloping field became a brilliant bluish-white. The field flashed a brilliant white a split second later, and the entire asteroid disappeared.

The battle platform began to shimmer, its features becoming slightly distorted as its FTL fields began to fold the space ahead of it in preparation to transition into FTL travel one more time. The distortions increased, and the platform began to fade from view at an increasing rate.

A brilliant blue-white flash of light appeared only a few hundred meters before the platform, and slightly to starboard of its forward arm. A moment later, when the flash of light subsided, the Karuzara asteroid appeared. The fading image of the Jung battle platform reversed, becoming normal once again as the platform plowed into the side of the massive asteroid in a glancing blow. Two of the platform’s arms tore away from its main body, the arms sent tumbling over the surface of the asteroid. The platform began to rotate, as if rolling across the surface of the asteroid, spinning slow from the force of the impact, as did the asteroid itself. Debris was thrown in all directions, as were huge sections of rock blown from the surface of the asteroid by the force of the impact.

“Jumping in three...”

“Contact,” Mister Navashee announced.

“...Two...”

“Jump flash.”

“...One...”

“CAPTAIN!” Mister Navashee yelled.

“Hold your jump!” Nathan ordered.

“Oh, my God!” the Aurora’s normally calm sensor operator continued.

“Jump aborted,” Mister Riley acknowledged.

“The Karuzara, sir! They just collided with the battle platform!”

“What?” Nathan exclaimed, rising to his feet.

“They jumped in right in front of them. Maybe a few hundred meters at the most, sir,” Mister Navashee explained.

“A head-on collision?” Nathan wondered as he moved quickly over to Mister Navashee to see the sensor displays for himself. “Is there anything even left?”

“It wasn’t head-on, sir. They were just to starboard of the platform when they came out of the jump. It was a glancing blow, but a bad one, I’m sure.”

“Mister Riley,” Nathan called out, “Jump us in. One hundred kilometers downrange and a few above relative to the target.”

“One hundred downrange and a few above the target, aye,” Mister Riley answered.

“Comms. Tell the Celestia to hold position.”

“Aye, sir.”

“How bad is it, Mister Navashee?” Nathan asked as he turned back toward his sensor operator.

“Two whole arms have been torn off of the platform. She’s also suffered extensive damage to her central structure, but she’s still got power and weapons.”

“Shields... What about her shields?”

“She’s lost all shields on her impact side, but she’s still got them on her remaining three arms on her outboard side.”

"We should attack now, while she's still shaken up," Jessica suggested from the tactical station.

"They just collided with an asteroid three times their size," Nathan said. "Trust me, they're not going to become 'unshaken' any time soon. Besides, they're still too close together. With half her side opened up, our weapons could easily breach her antimatter containment fields and take out the Karuzara as well, and we *need* the Karuzara."

"Jump plotted and ready, Captain," Mister Riley announced.

"Jump us in," Nathan ordered.

"Target is launching more ships," Mister Navashee reported.

"Jumping in three..."

"You're kidding," Nathan replied in shock.

"...Two..."

"Gunships," Jessica added, "and troop shuttles. I count six each."

"...One..."

"Where are they headed?" Nathan asked, already knowing the answer.

"...Jumping."

"For the Karuzara, sir," Jessica said as the jump flash washed across the bridge.

"Jump complete."

Nathan turned forward again as the jump flash subsided. "Forward ventral cameras. Zoom in on the target."

The main view screen changed, revealing the battered battle platform and the Karuzara asteroid.

"Oh, my God," Nathan said under his breath.

The Jung battle platform was missing two of its six arms, presumably where the Karuzara asteroid had impacted them. The entire side of the platform's main central structure was open to space in several sections, with obvious hull damage nearly to its peak. Fields of debris

glistened in the light of the distant sun as the pieces of the platform spun away in all directions.

“What about the Karuzara?” Nathan wondered, noticing debris that looked more like chunks of rock than pieces of hull.

“Limited power readings. No emissions. Lots of dust and rock floating about. Slight reduction in the asteroid’s overall mass.” Mister Navashee turned and looked at the captain. “She looks dead, sir.”

Nathan continued staring at the view of the heavily damaged battle platform, noticing the tiny black and red ships as they disappeared into the Karuzara’s main transit tunnel. “Well, that explains why they aren’t firing.”

Warning sirens wailed in the distance, alerting all of Porto Santo Island of the approaching danger. Automated defensive turrets swung into action, guided by tracking systems situated on the highest hill on the island. The turrets located on the small, rocky islands that lay just off either end of the island were the first to open fire even before the approaching Jung fighters could be seen by the naked eye.

Civilians all over the island scrambled for the underground bunkers that had been excavated and prepared for just such an attack. The Ghatazhak had known full well that such an attack was possible, and had chosen to provide at least some manner of shelter for the locals who had shared their island with them.

The first wave of black and red Jung fighters dove straight down at the main airfield, firing energy weapons in rapid succession. The balls of energy slammed into the tarmac, leaving craters everywhere. They slammed into buildings, collapsing their roofs and setting them ablaze. The incredible heat melted the steel beams, and caused the concrete floors to explode, sending out showers of rubble in

all directions. By all appearances, the attack was devastating, except for one thing... None of their aircraft or equipment was there to be targeted.

Once the Porto Santo air defenses had been destroyed, two Jung troop shuttles were next to descend from the skies. They came in low over the ocean, approaching from the beach side of the island, coming to a hover over the middle of the devastated tarmac of the airfield. Amid the smoke of the burning buildings, the two shuttles set down to allow the Jung troops within to begin off-loading. That's when they struck.

Four combat jumpers appeared in flashes of blue-white light, hovering a few meters above the tarmac on all four sides of the two troop shuttles. The Jung soldiers already in the open immediately raised their weapons to return fire, but it was too late. The double-barreled energy weapons on either side of each combat jump shuttle tore them and the shuttles that sought to deliver them to pieces, while the turrets on top opened fire on the fighters flying cover above. The engagement lasted only a few seconds before the four combat shuttles flashed again and were gone, leaving nothing but two burning troop shuttles surrounded by the bodies of dead Jung soldiers.

The Jung fighters overhead had broken formation in their desperate attempt to avoid the sudden fire that had caught them all by surprise from below. They had lost eleven of their flight of sixteen, and the remaining five quickly tried to reform into a cohesive unit.

The combat jumpers reappeared again, this time coming out of their brilliant white flashes from above and to the east, the sun at their backs. Although the Jung fighters detected them on their sensors, they did not see them until it was too late. The combat jumpers swooped down from above at high speed, blasting away with both their side-mounted twin energy cannons and their topside turrets. A minute later, Jung fighters were falling from the sky on to

the island below, exploding in fiery crashes as they slammed into the ground.

The combat shuttles split into two pairs, each pair headed up and away in opposite directions. They flashed again as they climbed away, disappearing once more. They left behind relative silence, punctuated only by the ocean waves and the sound of burning buildings and Jung wreckage.

“Well, that wasn’t much of a challenge,” Sergeant Jahal stated as he watched the tactical displays from the safety of Porto Santo’s underground command bunker.

“I believe those pilots were not properly briefed about possible jump drive tactics,” Lieutenant Telles replied. “We should not depend too heavily on such oversights in the future.”

“Lieutenant,” the communications officer called. “We are getting reports from our outposts of similar attacks, on all the major continents.”

“Advise all outposts to hold their position if possible. If faced with overwhelming forces, they are to abandon their outposts and use the combat jumpers.”

“Ghatazhak do not like to withdraw,” Sergeant Jahal commented.

“This war will not be fought on the ground,” Lieutenant Telles told his sergeant. “The Jung will send their forces down to the surface to try and keep us busy, to keep us unaware of their true objectives. We must remain mobile. We must stay one step ahead of our enemy. Only then can we respond properly once the Jung’s true objective is revealed.” He turned to look at his sergeant. “I trust that our assets are safe?”

“Still tucked away in the caverns on the far side of the island,” the sergeant answered, grinning from ear to ear.

Lieutenant Telles looked at his sergeant with an odd expression. "You smile way too much for a Ghatazhak, Sergeant."

"Perhaps that is why I shall always remain a sergeant, sir."

Commander Dumar opened his eyes. His head hurt, his body ached. Something wet was running down the side of his face. The room was dark, punctuated by occasional flashes of light from shorting circuits. The flashes revealed a haze that filled the control room. He could hear people making sounds, calling out to one another. He was in a sitting position, leaning against something... A wall, or the back of a console.

"Commander!" a voice shouted.

Dumar recognized the voice. "Over here!" A body moved toward him in the flashes of light, coming to kneel by his side a moment later. "Mister Bryant, what is our status?"

"Unknown. Are you injured, Commander?"

"Nothing serious, I suspect." He reached for his head and felt a wet, open wound. "Maybe a laceration or two. We need power, Mister Bryant. Get us power."

"Yes, sir." Mister Bryant stood in the darkness. "Power! Are you still with us, Mister McKinney?"

"Yes, sir," a voice called out. "I'm on it, sir."

"Everyone, find your stations and wait for power to be restored. Help will be here soon."

"Mister Bryant," Commander Dumar called. "The emergency doors. Did they close?"

"I believe so," Mister Bryant replied as he searched the darkness, using the flashes of light to try and see the main entrance to the control room. "Yes, yes, they are closed."

"Very good, then we are sealed in for now. Backup power and life support should come on automatically in a few moments."

Lights began to flicker along the edges of the room, as if commanded to do so by the commander's very thoughts.

"You see?" Commander Dumar said, trying to smile. He could see Mister Bryant's face more clearly now. "You are bleeding, Mister Bryant."

"As are you, Commander."

"I'll survive," Commander Dumar said, reaching up. "Help me up." Commander Dumar rose to his feet with the help of his trusted subordinate, and began to look around the dimly lit control center. The shorting circuits had died down to only the occasional spark. "We must ventilate the room of this smoke." He looked around some more, noticing a fallen overhead truss that had smashed into one of the consoles and had crushed one of the technicians. There were others injured as well, but of the thirty men in the room, at least twenty of them appeared to be no worse off than himself.

"Reactors are still online," Mister McKinney reported. "Our primary feed has been damaged. I am rerouting the power. It will only take a minute."

"At least no one appears to be shooting at us," Mister Bryant said.

"A blessing indeed," the commander agreed. "We need sensors and communications, first," he continued. "Then weapons. We also need to establish comms with our security forces. Also, contact flight operations and determine how many functioning shuttles we still have, in case we have to evacuate."

"We're working on it, sir," Mister Bryant promised. "Everyone is doing what they were trained to do. You should sit. Let me clean you up."

"Don't worry about the blood," Commander Dumar told him. "It makes me look tough. Just spray some coasep on it."

"Yes, sir," Mister Bryant answered as he reached into the med-kit and pulled out a small spray bottle. He shook it

a few times and then sprayed it onto the commander's still-oozing head laceration. The laceration bubbled for several seconds, then formed a solid, skin-colored patch over the wound, sealing it off.

Half of the overhead lights came to life, illuminating the room unevenly.

"Main power is restored," Mister McKinney reported.

"Good work, Mister McKinney," the commander said.

"It will take a few moments for all the systems to restart," Mister Bryant said as he sprayed the coasep over the cut on his left arm. He looked at his commander. "It was a bold move, Commander," he said. "How did you know it would work? If the platform had jumped a second earlier..."

"We would still have collided," Dumar assured him. "We were on a head-on course as we came around the planet. I had only seconds to act."

"But where did you..."

"The Aurora was preparing to do the same thing," the commander told him. "Only, their mass would not be enough. Only something of equal or greater mass would..."

"We have enemy ships in the main access tunnels!" one of the technicians reported. "They're blowing open the airlock doors!"

Dumar stood, turning to look toward the main view screens. "Show me!" he ordered.

The center screen came to life, revealing two gunships coming through a massive hole blown through the inner airlock door that lead into the main central bay. Immediately behind it came a Jung troop shuttle. The camera swung to follow the ships as they descended on the main docking platform. Karuzara security forces were running out onto the platform wearing pressurized Corinari combat gear, firing at the descending enemy ships. They were no match for the gunships and were cut down easily.

"They mean to board us," Mister Bryant said with surprise. "But why? They could just destroy us from

outside...”

“They mean to capture a jump drive,” Commander Dumar told him.

“Weapons are coming online,” another technician announced.

“Sensors are operational!”

“Where is the platform?” Commander Dumar demanded.

“Target is only ten kilometers away, heavily damaged and drifting away from us, toward Earth. I’ve also got multiple incoming gunships and troop shuttles coming our way from the platform.”

“Target the smaller ships with our laser turrets,” Dumar ordered. “Target the platform with our plasma cannons.” He grabbed the edge of a nearby console to steady himself. “Fire at will.”

“Anything?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir,” Naralena answered. “I’ve been hailing them on all channels, even data links. They are not responding.”

“Keep trying.”

“Aye, sir.”

“How long until they are far enough apart?”

“Assuming they have an array of antimatter reactors, all of which will breach when the first one does... Best guess is ten minutes, sir.”

“How many troop ships have entered?” Nathan asked Jessica.

“Twelve so far,” Jessica answered. “They’re about the same size as our utility shuttles, so say, twenty men in each?”

“That’s two hundred and forty men,” Nathan exclaimed.

“The Karuzara’s got at least a thousand people on board,” Jessica reminded him.

“Technicians and engineers, yes,” Nathan argued. “But how many trained combatants?”

“At least a hundred, I think.”

“Comms, contact Telles. Tell him to send everything he can to the Karuzara.”

“What about the Jung forces on Earth?” Jessica reminded Nathan.

“Let them run around and blow shit up,” Nathan said. “Our people went into shelter hours ago. They can survive another hour until this is over.”

“Weapons fire!” Mister Navashee announced with excitement. “From the Karuzara! They’re firing on the platform with their main plasma cannons!”

“Yes!” Nathan exclaimed as he spun around to see red-orange bolts of plasma energy slamming into the damaged battle platform as it continued to slowly drift away from the Karuzara asteroid. “They’re still alive!”

“Laser turrets as well,” Mister Navashee added. “They’re targeting the Jung shuttles.”

“Let’s help them out,” Nathan said. “Mister Chiles, move us closer.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Tactical, target our lasers on those ships. Target our quads on the platform’s big guns. She may not be shooting at the Karuzara, but she’ll damn well be shooting us.”

“Yes, sir,” Jessica responded with enthusiasm.

“Comms, tell the Celestia to move in as well,” Nathan added. “Same targeting instructions.”

“Jump complete,” Mister Jakoby reported as the Celestia’s jump flash subsided.

“Target, ten kilometers, port quarter, four down,” Ensign Kono reported.

“Lieutenant,” Cameron began. “Target the platform’s big guns with our quads. Target her shuttles and gunboats with

lasers.”

“Guns with quads, ships with lasers,” Luis acknowledged.

“Jump flashes,” Ensign Kono said. “Four, five... make that eight jump flashes. Eight combat jumpers.” Ensign Kono turned to look over her shoulder at Captain Taylor. “It’s the Ghatazhak, sir.”

“Tactical, give them cover fire as best you can. Concentrate on the gunboats first.”

“Aye, sir.”

Cameron stared at the image of the wounded Jung battle platform as it drifted helplessly away from the Karuzara asteroid. Pieces were flying off of her hull as the Aurora’s guns pounded the platform’s gun emplacements located on the side of the platform facing the Karuzara asteroid. “God, we could take that thing out so easily right now.”

“New contacts,” Ensign Kono reported. “More gunships and fighters coming from the platform.”

“Jesus,” Luis exclaimed, “Is that thing hollow?”

“New contacts are headed our way,” the sensor operator added.

“Tactical, change your targets. Lasers on the fighters, quads on the gunships.”

“Changing targets, aye,” Luis answered.

Cameron continued to watch as the approaching ships began to blow apart as the Celestia’s weapons tore into them. “Damn,” she exclaimed under her breath as she noticed that there seemed to be no end to the number of ships pouring out of the platform’s last remaining hangar arm. “They just don’t stop coming.”

“Gunships are accelerating,” Ensign Kono reported. “They’re on a collision course, Captain.”

“Helm, prepare for evasive...”

“Gunships are going FTL!” Ensign Kono exclaimed, cutting Cameron off in mid-sentence.

“Escape jump!” Cameron ordered. “Brace for impact!”

“Escape jump, aye!” Mister Jakoby answered as the collision alarms sounded throughout the ship.

Cameron’s eyes were fixed on the main view screen. In that instant, she could see the gunships disappear from view, just as the pale-blue light poured out of the Celestia’s jump field emitters and across her hull. At such close range, they had no more than one or two seconds before the FTL gunships would traverse the short distance between them and the Celestia and slam into her hull. At the same moment, she instinctively grabbed the arms of her command chair and braced herself, holding her breath, and waited for the jump flash that would save them from destruction.

It never came.

“The Jung have made it past the defenses in our main bay,” Dumar told Nathan over the comms. “They are trying to get to the mini-jump drives. I suspect they will load them on their shuttles and try to escape...”

“Captain!” Mister Navashee interrupted. “Four gunships! On a collision course and accelerating!”

“Snap jump, Mister Riley,” Nathan ordered.

“Gunships are going to FTL!” Mister Navashee added in a tone of well-controlled panic.

“Snap jump, aye,” Mister Riley answered.

“Sound collision alarm,” Nathan ordered as he grabbed the arms of his command chair and braced himself.

The blue-white jump flash washed over them, fading away as quickly as it had come. Nathan realized he was holding his breath, and let it out slowly. “Position?”

“Two light seconds out from the target,” Mister Riley reported. “Course of one one eight, fifteen up relative.”

“That was too close,” Jessica commented.

"Automated distress signal from the Celestia," Naralena announced.

Nathan felt a cold chill run down his spine. "Helm, come about and bring us back onto the target," he ordered. "Mister Navashee, scan the position reported by the Celestia's ADB."

"Yes, sir."

"Mister Riley, prepare to jump us back to the engagement area."

"Aye, sir," Mister Riley acknowledged.

"Oh, and Mister Riley? Continue keeping an escape jump entered and ready at all times," he encouraged.

"I always do, Captain."

"Flight, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set.

"*Captain, Flight. Go for CAG,*" Major Prechitt answered.

"Major, Jung forces have boarded the Karuzara and are trying to capture and escape with a mini-jump drive. Ghatazhak forces are trying to stop them as well, but we need the last of our Falcons to guard the exits and prevent their escape."

"*Understood, sir.*"

"Warn the Falcons that there are plenty of hostiles in the area," Nathan added. "I cannot emphasize how important it is that NO Jung ships make it back out of the Karuzara asteroid alive. Is that clear, Major?"

"*Crystal clear, sir,*" the major answered.

Nathan tapped his comm-set to end the conversation. "Comms, reestablish contact with the Karuzara as soon as we jump back in. And try to raise the Celestia."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Turn complete," the helmsman reported.

"Jump plotted and ready," Mister Riley added.

"I've got the Celestia on sensors, Captain," Mister Navashee announced. "The entire front third of her bow is gone, sir. Just aft of her launch tube doors, just forward of her secondary bulkhead...It's all gone."

“Power? Life support?”

“She’s still got power, sir, but minimal. Her antimatter reactors are cold. I’m pretty sure she ejected her cores. It’s hard to tell with so much debris floating around her, but I’m not picking up any antimatter signatures.”

“They must be running on the backup fusion reactors,” Jessica said. “If they’ve got any power, they’ve got life support.”

“Can they maneuver?”

“Doubtful, sir,” Mister Navashee answered. “She’s in a slow tumble, bow up over stern. Probably from the force of the impact.” Mister Navashee looked at Nathan. “She’s basically adrift, Captain.”

“Those gunships, are they still going after her?”

Mister Navashee turned back to his sensor displays. “No, sir. They’ve all turned back to the Karuzara.”

“They no longer see the Celestia as a threat,” Jessica said.

“Or they finally ran out of gunships, and capturing a jump drive is more important to them,” Nathan speculated. “How much distance between the Celestia and the platform?”

“Twenty kilometers and increasing slowly,” Jessica replied.

“Mister Riley, put us between the platform and the Celestia, but as close to the Celestia as possible.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Comms, make ready all search and rescue parties, and warn medical to expect incoming casualties.”

Nathan tapped his comm-set. “Cheng, Captain.”

“*Go ahead, sir,*” Vladimir answered over Nathan’s comm-set.

“The Celestia has been hit. We think she ejected her cores about a minute ago. How far out will they be, and what happens if we accidentally run into them?”

"Oh, bozhe moi," Vladimir exclaimed. "The capsule's propulsion system is designed to carry them rapidly away from the ship when ejected. If they were ejected normally, they will travel at least a few hundred kilometers within the first minute, and they will continue to accelerate until their propellant expires ten minutes later. By that time, they will be several hundred thousand kilometers away."

"And if we run into them?"

"It is a very bad idea, Nathan. Trust me."

"Understood," Nathan acknowledge, switching off his comm-set as he turned to his sensor operator. "Mister Navashee, I need you to locate those cores."

Four combat jump shuttles sped through the Karuzara's main transit tunnel headed for the main hangar at her core, Jung fighters pursuing them closely. Red and orange bolts of energy streaked back and forth as they exchanged fire, the Jung fighters from their wing-mounted cannons and the combat shuttles from the twin-barreled plasma turrets on their topsides. The Jung fighters attempted to get down below the constantly jinking combat jumpers, but the jumpers dipped down to only a meter or two above the floor of the massive tunnel.

Determined to get out of the jumpers' firing solutions, the Jung fighters dove down to skim the bottom of the tunnel as well. Just as they did so, two of the jumpers pitched up and rolled over, giving them perfect angles on their six pursuers. The turrets of the two upper jumpers lit up, tearing apart the lead two fighters. The second two Jung fighters, each of which had been following their leaders quite closely, were unable to maneuver quickly enough and plowed straight into the fighters that were coming apart directly in front of them. The last two fighters pitched up quickly, climbing away from the tunnel floor but up into the

firing solution of the lower two jumpers, who immediately opened fire, destroying them both.

With their pursuers now dispatched, the four combat jumpers continued without delay down the tunnel, diving through the massive holes blown into each airlock door along the way.

Ninety seconds later, the four shuttles were greeted with a barrage of energy weapons fire from two gunships that were waiting for them in the Karuzara's main central hangar. The lead jumper took a direct hit, spiraling out of control and slamming into the far wall. The other three shuttles immediately split apart, hugging the walls of the massive bay, flying erratically to avoid fire from the gunships hovering over the main docking platform as they circled the cavern, turrets blazing.

One of the hovering gunships took direct hits from two of the jumpers, causing it to yaw sharply to port and descend rapidly. The bow of the gunship struck the docking platform, causing the ship to tumble over and swing around out of control. Two more energy shots slammed into the underside of the falling gunship, causing it to rollover. Now completely out of control, the gunship fell to the side, bounced off the wall of the cavern, then broke in two, the aft end exploding in a ball of fire then extinguished due to the vacuum as instantly as it had ignited.

The second gunship was forced to slide abruptly to its right to avoid its partner as it fell. It swung its nose around, seeking the location of the third combat jumper, only to find the jumper coming right at it.

The combat jumper fired as it tried to pull up and avoid colliding head-on with the second gunship. Its shots plowed into the front of the gunship, blowing apart sections of its forward hull. The jumper careened off the top of the gunship and went into a flat spin. The stunned gunship dove and yawed to port, barely missing the dock. Fortunately, it was not paying attention to the other two shuttles as its pilot

fought for control. Dozens of energy bolts plowed into the side and tail of the yawing gunship, blowing it apart and sending its pieces flying out in all directions.

The pieces of the disintegrating gunship, propelled out with considerable force that had been imparted by the gunship's wild flat spin, slammed into one of the shuttles as it attempted to land on the docking platform amid energy weapons fire from Jung troops hiding in the hatchways. Six Ghatazhak soldiers in full, pressurized combat gear leapt from the damaged combat shuttle as it was pulled down by the docking platform's artificial gravity.

The Ghatazhak soldiers fired their weapons as they fell, striking Jung troops in three of the four nearest hatchways from which they were firing. They hit the dock and rolled to their sides, still firing, as the falling jumper they had been riding in crash-landed on the dock behind them. The jumper's topside gun turret still intact, it too fired on the remaining hatchway, blowing it apart and killing the Jung troops just inside.

The other two jumpers quickly came to a hover two meters above the docking platform on either side of the crashed jumper. Twelve additional Ghatazhak soldiers, six from each combat jumper, leapt from the side doors and hit the deck running. The group nearest the fallen jumper went to retrieve the flight crew. Four of them took up protective positions as the other two quickly pulled the three injured crewmen from the wreckage and helped them to the safety of the waiting jumper that had landed only a few meters behind them. Two more Ghatazhak, each of them badly wounded in the initial exchange of gunfire with the Jung in the hatchways were also placed in the jumper by their comrades before it lifted off and headed out the other transit tunnel, the one normally used to exit the Karuzara asteroid.

As the remaining troops advanced on the hatchways and disappeared inside, two more jumpers entered the main

central hangar from the entrance tunnel and came down quickly to land on the docking platform. Twelve more Ghatazhak piled out of the two jumpers, including Lieutenant Telles and Sergeant Jahal.

“Four on the hatches,” Lieutenant Telles ordered as he and Sergeant Jahal made their way quickly toward the hatches at the far end of the docking platform. “No one but Ghatazhak go in or out through here.” Telles stopped at the hatchways and turned to see the last two jumpers as they headed toward the exit tunnel. He tapped his helmet to activate his helmet comms. “All jumpers, Telles. Take up cover positions on both tunnels, and get the boxcars moving. I want this place crawling with Ghatazhak within minutes.”

“Capture!” Commander Eckert reported.

“Locking down the retaining clamps,” Lieutenant Scalotti announced. “KKV is secure.”

“That warhead is safe, right?” Captain Nash asked.

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

“Just checking,” the captain said. “Makes me nervous, jumping around with an antimatter warhead hanging under our belly.”

“Plotting return jump to the outer boundary of the engagement area,” Commander Eckert announced.

“Coming about,” Captain Nash said as he started a quick turn to port. “I didn’t think we were ever going to find the damned thing. They really need to put some sort of locating system on these things. Something that only we can trigger, you know?”

“Jump plotted and ready,” Eckert said.

“On course now.”

“Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping.”

The Scout ship’s jump flash washed over the flight deck.

“Jump complete,” Commander Eckert reported.

“Holy crap!” Ensign Agari declared.

“What is it, Toosh?” Captain Nash asked.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Toosh exclaimed as he sent his sensor feed to the captain’s display screen.

“Holy crap is right,” Captain Nash said. “Wellsy! Raise the Aurora. Tell them we’ve recovered KKV One and are awaiting orders. And ask them what the fuck is going on over there.”

Energy weapons fire ricocheted off the bulkhead directly over Lieutenant Telles’s helmet, causing him to duck down slightly as he continued advancing down the corridor, firing continuously as he moved forward. The next shot bounced across the hall, hit the floor, and went upward into the torso of one of his men, knocking him backward. Two others helped him up, checking that his belly plates had deflected the energy as designed. The group moved quickly, firing and taking fire as they progressed toward their destination, the mini-jump drive assembly room.

“Rat Five, on deck,” the copilot’s voice announced, signaling Telles that at the moment, one of his combat jumpers was dropping six more of his men onto the docking platform in the main hangar bay.

Telles and his men stopped at the intersection. Telles peeked around the corner despite the energy weapons fire still streaming down the corridor toward them. He turned back toward his men. “Blast and charge,” he told them.

One of his men carrying a much larger weapon than the rest moved to the corner. Telles and Jahal pushed their weapons out around the corner and opened fire. A moment later, the trooper with the large weapon stepped into the intersection and launched a projectile down the corridor and into the hatchway that led to the jump drive assembly room. As he stepped back around the corner, the projectile flew through the hatchway and exploded in a brilliant white flash.

The lieutenant and his men charged forward around the corner, down the corridor, and through the hatchway. A brief exchange of energy weapons fire occurred, followed by an eerie silence. The large bay was motionless, littered with the bodies of dead Jung soldiers who moments ago were trying to kill them. The lieutenant looked around, but could find no sign of anything missing. There were several jump drives, each in a different stage of the assembly process, but nothing appeared out of place.

"Telles, Dumar!" the commander's voice called from the lieutenant's helmet comms.

"Go for Telles," the lieutenant responded.

"The Jung have taken the Falcon bay. If they manage to launch in one of those ships..."

"On our way," the lieutenant promised as he turned to head out the door. "Telles to all Ghatazhak teams. Converge on the Falcon bay. Main level, section fourteen, subsection twenty-eight."

"Falcons have jumped in," Mister Navashee reported. "They're moving into position now."

"How many?"

"Only three, sir."

"Damn," Nathan mumbled to himself. "Comms. Broadcast to all units. Update recognition codes. Anything comes out of that asteroid and isn't squawking the correct codes gets taken out."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Jump flash," Mister Navashee reported.

"Message from Scout Three," Naralena announced. "They have recovered KKV One, and are awaiting redeployment instructions."

"Redeploy to position seven," Nathan ordered.

"Target's good side is coming back around," Jessica warned. "Prepare for more incoming."

"Are we still in position between the Celestia and the platform?" Nathan inquired.

"Aye, sir," Mister Chiles acknowledged. "I'm matching her drift exactly, and yawing to try and keep her covered as she's got a little bit of wobble to her as she tumbles."

"Keep our belly toward the platform," Mister Chiles.

"Aye, sir."

"Drop our quads to our underside, Jess. Target their big guns."

"Yes, sir."

"I've found one of the Celestia's cores," Mister Navashee announced. "She's at least five hundred thousand kilometers away, drifting outside the engagement area. As long as we don't maneuver any further than that, we should be alright."

"Very good, Mister Navashee," Nathan said. He turned to face aft. "Comms, warn all ships of the location of that core, and update as we find the rest of them."

"Yes, sir," Naralena acknowledged.

"Target is firing," Mister Navashee announced.

"All hands, brace for incoming fire," Nathan ordered.

Lieutenant Telles and his men made their way down the rock-walled corridor that led to the Falcon bay. Their going was slow, as the damage to the Karuzara asteroid's power grid was causing inconsistent power levels to be delivered to much of the base, which affected the artificial gravity throughout the facility. After becoming airborne several times, he had ordered his men to activate the sensor-controlled mag-locks on their boots. It made for an unusual-looking gait, but it was better than finding oneself bouncing off the ceiling without warning.

Firing constantly as they charged the main entrance to the Falcon bay, the Ghatazhak were easily able to overpower the small contingent of Jung soldiers that had

been defending the position. It seemed odd to Telles, given the importance to the Jung of capturing a jump drive. However, once he entered the bay, he realized why there had been so few men guarding its entrance.

Four Falcons were already rising up off the deck of the massive bay. All four of them rotated their nose turrets toward the lieutenant and his men.

"Take cover!" he shouted over his helmet comms, his words echoing metallic within his sealed helmet. Red-orange bolts of energy streaked silently by his head in the vacuum, slamming into the men behind him, the force of impact knocking them both backwards. Telles leapt high in the air to clear the energy bolts driving into the deck below him where he had stood only a moment ago. As he twisted in the air, out of the corner of his eye he could see his men being torn apart by the energy bolts, their pressurized suits becoming suddenly opened to the vacuum. The suits were designed to automatically reseal when possible, but the sizes of most of their wounds were far too great. Those who did not die from the energy blasts suffocated a moment later.

The first Falcon began to yaw to its left, its turret ceasing to fire once the ship had rotated beyond the turret's field of fire. The second Falcon followed next, and then the third.

The reduction in incoming fire allowed Telles and several others, all now tucked safely behind piles of damaged equipment and sections of dismantled Falcons, to return fire. It took at least six of them firing all at once to bring down the fourth Falcon, which came crashing down onto the hangar deck, breaking apart in unceremonious fashion.

"Telles to all Jumpers. Three Falcons have escaped. They will be coming out of the number six transit tunnel in less than a minute. Destroy them; maximum force. Aurora, did you copy?"

"Telles, Aurora copies," Naralena answered. "Will relay to Falcons on station."

"Telles, Dumar," Commander Dumar interrupted. "We've managed to get our security cameras back up. The Jung are moving all forces toward our position. If they capture the control room..."

"They won't need to capture a Falcon," Telles answered. "Telles to all Ghatazhak. The Jung are headed for the control center. We cannot allow them to reach it," he said as he headed for the exit. "Rat One, Telles. Do you still hold the main transit tunnels?"

"Telles, Rat One. Affirmative."

"Rat One, Telles. Relay to Porto Santo. Use the boxcars and bring me more troops. As many as they can fit, and make it quick."

"Telles, Rat One copies. On our way."

"Falcon One, Flight. Mission. Three hostiles. Type, Falcon, coming out of tunnel six in thirty seconds. Intercept and destroy with extreme prejudice. They cannot be allowed to escape. Confirm."

"Oh, shit," Josh said as he swung their nose around hard and pushed their throttles to full power. "That's on the other side."

"Flight, Falcon One," Loki began. "Copy mission. Three hostile Falcons coming out of tunnel six, in thirty. Intercept and destroy; extreme prejudice."

"Falcon One, Flight. Affirmative."

"It's gonna take us twenty just to get there," Josh warned.

"Weapons are hot, but we've only got two missiles left," Loki warned. "Flight, Falcon One. We've only got two missiles. Anyone else nearby?"

"Falcon One, Rat Three. Fifteen seconds from tunnel six. Coming from opposite direction. You take the first two, we'll

take the third one."

"Rat Three, Falcon One. We've got the first two. Third is yours."

"Coming over the ridge in five," Josh warned.

"I'm ready..."

"Oh! Fuck!" Josh yelled as two Falcons streaked directly away from the asteroid right in front of them as they came over the ridge. "They're early! Pitching up!" Josh pulled back hard on his flight control stick, pulling their ship in behind the fleeing Falcons.

"We're not going to catch them!" Rat Three's pilot warned. "Falcon One! Do you copy!"

"Fuck!" Josh exclaimed as he pulled the throttles all the way back to zero thrust and continued to pitch over one hundred and eighty more degrees.

"What the hell are you doing?" Loki demanded.

"Put a missile in the one behind us! Quick!" Josh yelled.

"Locking onto aft target!" Loki answered. "Firing! Missile away!"

The missile popped out of Falcon One's weapons bay as the ship continued to pitch back over to forward. Its propulsion system ignited, rapidly slowing the weapon so that the Falcon behind them would help close the gap. It slammed into the third escaping Falcon seconds later, exploding on impact and breaking the hijacked jump ship apart.

"One down!" Josh declared with excitement as he brought the Falcon's nose back forward again.

"The other two have a lead on us now," Loki said.

Josh pushed the throttles to full power again. "Jump us forward, quick, before they figure out how to work those jump drives!"

“Plotting,” Loki said. “Jumping.”

The blue-white jump flash washed over the cockpit, and when it subsided a split second later, the two fleeing hijacked Falcons were only fifty meters directly ahead of them.

“Holy shit, Lok! You think that’s close enough?”

“Firing missile! Firing turret!” Loki declared.

The second missile popped out from the Falcon’s weapons bay and sped off under its own propulsion. It quickly closed the gap between them and the first fleeing Falcon, flying right up its main engine and exploding. The lead Falcon burst into a brilliant yellow-orange fireball, tinged with various hues of white and pale blue as its remaining propellant and oxidizers instantly ignited and were then snuffed out by the vacuum of space.

“That’s two!” Josh exclaimed. A bright, blue-white flash suddenly appeared directly in front of them, and the second hijacked Falcon disappeared. “Oh, shit!” Josh yelled. “He fucking jumped!”

“Oh, crap.”

“How the fuck did he figure out to jump so quickly?”

“Wait! I’ve got him!” Loki declared. “Jump flash! One light second dead ahead!”

“Holy crap!” Josh exclaimed again.

“He must’ve figured out how to activate the emergency escape jump!” Loki realized. “You just push it and it jumps you ahead a fixed interval. How far depends on how fast you’re going at the...”

“I don’t give a shit how it works, Lok! Just jump us the fuck to him so we can take him out!”

“Jumping!” Loki declared as their jump flash washed over them.

The fleeing Falcon appeared even closer than before.

"God damn it, Lok! Stop jumping us so close!" Josh objected.

"Firing turret," Loki announced, ignoring his pilot's complaints.

The fleeing Falcon rolled and turned erratically as it attempted to evade the bolts of energy being fired at it by Falcon One only thirty meters behind.

"Jesus! This guy won't sit still!" Loki exclaimed as he continued firing.

Blue-white light again filled their cockpit.

"Fuck!" Loki exclaimed. "He jumped again!"

"Jump with him!" Josh yelled. "Fuck! I'm seeing blue patches in my eyes!" he added as his visor turned opaque and their own jump flash washed over them. "Is there any way we can make our visors activate when *he* jumps?"

Loki continued to ignore Josh as he began firing their nose turret again. Once again, the fleeing Falcon jumped.

"Goddamn!" Josh declared as he closed his eyes to protect his already stressed eyes from the fleeing Falcon's jump flash. "Sooner or later, he's going to figure out how to jump for real, and then we're screwed!"

"Jumping!" Loki announced as their own jump flash washed over them.

Josh's visor cleared up as their jump flash subsided, revealing the fleeing Falcon directly ahead of them once again. Only this time, the enemy Falcon's nose was pointed directly at them. "OH, SHIT! FIRE, LOKI! FIRE!"

Red-orange bolts of energy leapt from the enemy Falcon's nose turret streaking past their canopy as Josh rolled their ship wildly to the left. His snap roll quickly became a barrel roll, which he pulled out of above the enemy Falcon, inverted, and out of its field of fire. With Loki firing their own nose turret in continuous fashion, Josh rolled

over again to bring the target into their own field of fire. "Target below and forward!" Josh instructed. "Kill him before he jumps again!"

Falcon One's nose turret panned downward while firing, its bolts of red-orange energy slamming into the nose of the hijacked Falcon just as pale-blue jump energy began to pour from its emitters. The bolts of energy walked up the short nose of the fleeing Falcon, blasting through her canopy at the moment the target jumped away again. A second later, Falcon One also disappeared in a brilliant blue-white flash.

"Fuck yes!" Josh yelled. "Take that, asshole!"

Loki pressed the fire button one last time, sending several bolts of red-orange energy into the drifting Falcon, destroying it. "Aurora! Falcon One! That's three!" Loki declared.

"Ho-lee-crap, Lok," Josh exclaimed. "That has *got* to be the first fucking jump-chase in the history of the goddamned galaxy!"

"And hopefully the last," Loki added.

"Now *that* was exciting!" Josh declared as he started to bring their interceptor on a return course. "I can't wait to tell the major about this one!"

The bridge of the Aurora shook violently as rounds from the Jung battle platform's rail guns slammed into their armored underside. Nathan held onto the arms of his command chair tightly as he watched Falcon One jump-chase the last hijacked Falcon. "How far out are they now?"

"Two and a half light minutes," Mister Navashee replied.

"If they manage, just once, to turn and jump before Falcon One jumps to catch up to them, they'll lose them."

"Mister Riley, prepare an intercept jump plot," Nathan ordered calmly.

"Captain, if we leave our position..." Jessica began.

"...I know," Nathan assured her, "but we cannot let the Jung get their hands on a jump drive, even if it means losing the Celestia."

"Rat Eight reports they have destroyed transit tunnel six," Naralena announced.

"I want all tunnels except the main transit runs closed," Nathan ordered.

"I'll remind flight," Naralena promised.

"That's two jumps," Mister Navashee reported. "They're now four light minutes out."

"I've lost Falcon One's transponder signal," Jessica said. "Contacts have merged. They're dancing around one another. I can no longer tell them apart, Captain."

One of the icons on the tactical tracking display on the main view screen suddenly turned red and then disappeared. Nathan felt his entire body turn cold. "Mister Riley?"

"Plotted and ready, sir."

"Captain!" Mister Navashee called out. "Jump flash!"

"Incoming message," Naralena announced as she routed the call to the loudspeakers.

"*Aurora, Falcon One. We got all three,*" Loki announced triumphantly.

"Yes!" Nathan exclaimed as he tapped his comm-set. "Well done, gentlemen."

"*Falcon One is returning to station over the Karuzara,*" Loki added. "*Falcon One, out.*"

Jessica smiled. "You gotta love those two."

"Mister Riley," Nathan said happily, "you may delete that jump plot."

"Yes, sir!"

"Captain, I've managed to set up a relay through the Karuzara's comm arrays," Naralena reported. "I can give

you live data feeds from both the Ghatazhak's helmet cameras as well as the Karuzara's security cameras."

"Put them up," Nathan ordered.

"All of them, sir?"

"Start with Telles's helmet camera and the cameras around the Karuzara's control room."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

Seven boxes appeared on the main view screen. Five were from security cameras located both around the Karuzara's control center, as well as one within; the last one was the view from Lieutenant Telles's helmet camera.

The violent shaking of the Aurora's bridge began to die down.

"Platform's rotation is taking her guns off us again," Mister Navashee reported. "They'll be back on us in three and a half minutes."

Nathan paid little attention, barely even noticing that they were no longer being pounded by enemy rail gun fire. Instead, he was transfixed on the various camera views. The Karuzara's beleaguered security forces were doing their best to hold off an overwhelming number of Jung soldiers. Although most of the Karuzara's security forces were made up of ex-Corinari, the Jung forces were better equipped, and better trained for such action. Energy weapons fire flashed by in all directions. Men fell on both sides from their injuries. The corridors were full of lingering smoke from the burning flesh and uniforms. One thing was apparent, however... The Jung were winning.

"Captain, I have Commander Dumar for you," Naralena reported.

"Put him on."

"*Aurora, Dumar,*" the commander called. Nathan scanned the camera views, spotting the commander on one of the cameras inside the control room. He was facing away from the camera as he watched the firefight taking place on

the other side of the blast-proof windows of the control center.

"Dumar, this is Scott," Nathan replied.

"Captain, I am sure of it now. They mean to capture the entire asteroid. To jump it away. That is why the platform is not firing upon us. You must launch the KKV! You must destroy this base!"

"There's got to be another way, Commander!" Nathan objected.

"Their emitters," Mister Navashee suggested.

"Commander, maybe we can destroy your emitter arrays instead?"

"No, no," Commander Dumar argued, *"they were designed with triple redundancy. You would have to destroy literally hundreds and hundreds of them. It would take too long."*

"Surely we can try," Nathan insisted.

"Jump flash, Captain," Mister Navashee interrupted. "It's a boxcar, headed for the Karuzara's main transit tunnel.

"Commander, there are at least two hundred more Ghatazhak about to land on your main docking platform. In five minutes, they will have the advantage."

"That will be too late, I'm afraid..." Commander Dumar replied.

Nathan turned to Mister Navashee. "How long until that platform can fire on us again?"

"You must launch the KKV..."

"Three minutes," Mister Navashee replied.

"...You must destroy the Karuzara..."

"We can get into firing position in half a minute," Mister Chiles said.

"...There is no other way..."

"You've got two minutes to take out as many emitters as possible," Nathan ordered. "Jess?"

"I'm on it."

“Maneuvering toward the Karuzara,” Mister Chiles acknowledged. “Fastest speed.”

“*Nathan,*” Commander Dumar pleaded. “*You cannot let the Jung get their hands on a jump drive. You cannot. All the free worlds, both of this sector of space as well as my own, are depending on us. You cannot fail them.*”

“Goddamn it!” Nathan exclaimed. “Comms! Get me Scout Two!”

“I need to know what’s going on out there,” Cameron insisted.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Ensign Kono apologized. “Both of the forward arrays are dead. I can’t even tell if they’re still there.”

“What about the aft arrays?”

“We’re tumbling end over end,” the Celestia’s sensor operator explained. “I’m only getting short scans, and the signal from those arrays are intermittent at best. Without full power, all I can tell you is that we’re drifting *away* from the platform.”

“Well, that’s better than drifting toward it, I suppose,” Cameron agreed. She looked around the dimly lit bridge. Half the main view screen was missing, and the overhead section of it had shattered and fallen in large sections directly onto them. Her navigator, Mister Jakoby, lay dead on the deck, his head covered with blood. The navigator’s console, and most of the helm was damaged beyond repair, and was also covered with her dead navigator’s blood. Ensign Hunt, although having suffered multiple lacerations about his head and arms, was diligently trying to find a way to get what was left of the helm console to function. All three of the starboard stations were smashed by a support beam that had given way. All three of the crewmen who had been at those stations were unconscious and in obviously bad shape. “How are they?” she asked Lieutenant

Delaveaga, who was overseeing other crewmen tending to their injured comrades.

“Unconscious, heavy blood loss,” Luis replied. “Carter probably has significant head injuries. Boseman’s gut was torn open by the side of his panel when it collapsed. Both of Ulwellyn’s legs are broken, as well as her hip. I don’t know about her back. I’ve only got basic emergency medical training.”

“Do what you can, Lieutenant.”

“We are, sir.” Luis paused, looking around. “Why haven’t they finished us off, Captain?”

“My guess is either they can’t, or the Aurora is protecting us.”

“No chance the Aurora has already taken them out?”

“Maybe,” she replied, “but we were already pretty close when we were hit. If they took that platform out, we’d probably have been pounded with debris, or worse, an antimatter event. I doubt we’ve drifted far enough away to have missed it.”

“Wouldn’t their cores eject just like ours?” Mister Delaveaga wondered. “All their other ships’ did.”

“Possibly,” Cameron admitted. “The last one did, but that’s no guarantee.”

“How badly damaged do you think we are?”

“With everything down, your guess is as good as mine, Lieutenant,” Cameron said. “The last time I saw this much damage on a bridge was when the Aurora rammed the Campaglia. Mangled the front quarter of our bow and killed more than half the crew.” Cameron looked at the lieutenant, noticing the concerned look on his face. “Don’t worry, Lieutenant, they’ll come for us.”

“Firing!” Jessica announced.

Nathan watched as streams of laser fire streaked away from the Aurora toward the rotating Karuzara asteroid in

front of them.

"Minute fifty remaining," Mister Riley warned.

"Three emitters destroyed so far," Mister Navashee reported. "One minute until the platform has a firing solution on us," he added.

"At this range, those guns will hurt," Jessica warned.

"Be ready to back away toward the Celestia as we fire, Mister Chiles," Nathan said. "See if you can keep our gun side toward the Karuzara and keep us just out of the platform's firing solution as we go."

"I'll have to show them our belly at the last moment," Mister Chiles warned.

"Understood."

"Twelve emitters down."

"Come on, Jess," Nathan urged in frustration.

"I'm trying, sir," Jessica assured him. "Their wobbly rotation isn't making it easy, though."

"Fifteen down," Mister Navashee reported. "Minute thirty to abort; forty seconds to guns on us."

"How many emitters do we need to kill before we can be sure that they can't jump?" Nathan asked.

"At least two hundred," Mister Navashee replied. "Twenty-two down."

Nathan turned and looked at Jessica.

The lieutenant commander glanced up momentarily from her console, noticing her captain's eyes on her. "You could help, you know?"

Nathan charged over to her side. "What do you want me to do?"

"Auto-tracking isn't working," she explained. "One of the arrays is probably damaged. Get the asteroid's lateral wobble rate from there. Every time it changes, update it there."

"Got it," Nathan replied as he began entering in the changing numbers.

"Thirty down," Mister Navashee updated.

Nathan glanced up at the main view screen. Jung fighters were still whirling about the asteroid, chasing combat jumpers and Falcons, as well as being chased by them in return, darting about to avoid the Aurora's laser fire as well.

"Minute ten to abort. Twenty seconds to guns on us," Mister Navashee updated. "Fifty down."

"I think it's working," Jessica exclaimed.

"Sixty down. Ten seconds to guns on us."

"Start backing away, Mister Chiles," Nathan ordered.

"Backing away, keeping guns on the Karuzara, aye," Mister Chiles acknowledged.

Nathan glanced up at the view screen again as the Karuzara asteroid began to shrink in size. "If any of our ships out there have a moment, tell them they're free to take out a few emitters themselves," Nathan exclaimed.

"You're doing good," Jessica assured him.

"One hundred emitters down," Mister Navashee reported. "Fall back rate is keeping the platform's guns off us. Forty seconds."

"Jesus," Nathan said under his breath. "Your job is more stressful than I thought."

"It has its moments," Jessica replied as she continued to work frantically to continuously retarget their laser turrets.

"One twenty. Thirty seconds," Mister Navashee reported. "Jump flash, Scout Three is back."

"Incoming message from Scout Three," Naralena reported.

"Not now," Nathan told her.

"One fifty, fifteen seconds. One sixty-five. Ten. One seventy-five. Five."

"Captain?" Mister Chiles urged.

"Start your roll!"

"One eighty-five..."

"Rolling over, aye."

"Losing the angle," Jessica announced, ending the attack.

Enemy rail gun rounds again began to slam into the underside of the Aurora.

"How many?" Nathan asked as the bridge shook violently from each impact.

"One hundred and eighty-seven," Mister Navashee answered.

"Damn it!" Nathan exclaimed. "We almost had it."

"If it makes you feel any better, sir, we probably needed to kill more than two hundred emitters to be sure. Even then, they could still jump away with part of the asteroid, as long as they have the part with the jump drive field generators in it."

"No, it doesn't make me feel any better," Nathan said, "but thanks." He turned around. "Message?"

"Scout Three confirms the placement of KKV One at position seven, sir," Naralena reported as the bridge continued to shake.

Nathan sighed, turning to again witness the gruesome scenes displayed by the cameras about the Karuzara's control center, and by Lieutenant Telles's helmet camera. Again the Aurora began to shake violently as the platform's rail guns started pounding the underside of their hull once more. "How long until they lose their firing solution again?"

"Four minutes, fifteen seconds," Mister Navashee replied.

Nathan thought for a moment, looking at the feed from Lieutenant Telles's helmet camera. "Jesus, are they hand-to-hand now?"

"Looks like it," Jessica agreed, her tone somber as she clutched the sides of her console to avoid being knocked off her feet by the rail gun impacts.

"How long until the Celestia reaches a safe distance?"

"Without an antimatter breach? Two minutes. With a breach?" Mister Navashee looked at his captain. His

expression said it all.

Telles swung the knife in his left hand in a wide sweeping motion, batting the Jung soldier's weapon away from his face as it fired. His visor darkened slightly to protect his eyes from the brilliant flash of the Jung weapon as it discharged. With his opponent's face now exposed, the lieutenant raised his weapon and made a quick jab toward the man's faceplate. He could feel the tubules in his suit tense up in support of his motions as he jammed the butt of his weapon into the man's faceplate, cracking it open. The Jung soldier dropped his weapon and grabbed for his faceplate, which was now hemorrhaging air at a staggering rate. The lieutenant turned away from the man, knowing that he had only seconds of life remaining.

A glance to his left, the direction he was moving, revealed another Jung soldier not a meter away and moving toward him. The lieutenant lunged at him with his knife, his left arm extending outward. The Jung soldier instinctively leaned to his left to avoid the parry. In a smooth motion, Lieutenant Telles rotated his left hand to bring the blade of his weapon downward as he drove the blade in a slashing motion across the man's neck into the small gap between his helmet's locking ring and the collar of his suit. A hiss of air was heard, along with a gurgle of blood as his blade found the man's neck deep inside his suit.

Telles looked forward and slightly right as he stepped over the man he had just killed. The targeting reticle on his tactical visor found a valid target in the distance. A Jung soldier preoccupied with the Ghatazhak in front of him did not notice the tiny sighting dot dancing about his chest. The Ghatazhak soldier he was preparing to battle *did* notice the dot. He dropped to his left knee and leaned away as the lieutenant's shoulder mounted laser fired a single blast into

the enemy soldier's left armpit, just under his armor, nearly severing his arm from his torso.

Telles raised his weapon to his right, glancing only long enough to take quick aim before putting a blast of plasma energy into the face of another Jung soldier only two meters away. He then dropped to both knees as the next combatant directly in front of him swung the butt of his own energy weapon in a wide arc that passed above the lieutenant's helmet. He jammed his knife upward into the inner thigh of the Jung soldier's right leg where there was no armor, piercing his suit and severing his femoral artery. Telles looked up at the soldier's face, hearing no sounds through the vacuum as the man screamed in agony. Telles withdrew the knife as the man fell to his knees before him, bringing them face-to-face. The lieutenant squinted for a moment as the dying man's eyes began to bug out from lack of air pressure.

The lieutenant pushed the man away as he rose. Suddenly, he felt himself rising up from the floor. He looked about, taking note that everyone else was rising as well. The artificial gravity had been lost. Telles pushed himself away from a combatant, putting himself into a spin as he rose. He fired his weapon at targets of opportunity as he spun, wounding or killing at least three more Jung soldiers in the process. He stuck his left hand up over his head in time to touch the ceiling and push himself back down. Pools of blood floating in the air bounced off his helmet faceplate and armor as he came down. As his feet touched the ground, he touched a button on the control pad on his left forearm to activate the mag-locks on his boots again.

His feet stuck firmly to the deck once more, the lieutenant looked around. Bodies were floating about, both the living and the dead. Oddly shaped pools of blood were drifting about, splashing as they collided with objects in the air. Fields of tiny droplets formed a reddish haze in the air in places. He could see more of his men coming up the

corridor behind him, moving cautiously and with marginally more effort while using their mag-lock soles to keep their feet on the deck in the weightless environment.

Suddenly, everything fell... Hard. The force of the intense impact shattered the faceplates of the Jung soldiers who had been unlucky enough to land face first. They too would be dead in seconds. Telles himself had to struggle to stay standing. It took all his strength, as well as the muscle-assistance systems in his suit, for him to reach the control pad again and increase the assistance levels of the motion-assist systems built into his suit. A second later, movement became easier, although still more difficult than in normal gravity. He looked at the tactical information display on the inside of his visor. The environment data showed four times normal gravity.

He raised his weapon and carefully took aim, firing a single shot into every Jung soldier he could see as they struggled to rise against the increased gravity. By the time the gravity reverted to normal, he had killed fifteen more men. He didn't know if the changes in gravity were on purpose, or due to system malfunctions. At this point, he did not care. There were many more Jung soldiers still left between his forces and the Karuzara control center. He had to move quickly.

"Captain!" Naralena called out. "I have the Celestia on comms."

"Put them up," Nathan ordered as the bridge continued to shake from the impact of the platform's rail guns. Naralena nodded at him a moment later, indicating the connection was live. "Celestia, Aurora Actual, how do you copy?"

"Aurora Actual, Celestia Actual," Cameron's voice crackled over the speakers. *"A little broken, but we copy. What's the situation?"*

"No time. Brace yourself for impact in..." Nathan turned to look at Mister Navashee, both hands holding tightly onto the arms of his command chair.

"Ninety seconds."

"...A minute and a half," Nathan finished.

"*What kind of impact?*" Cameron wondered.

"Debris. We've got a KKV inbound. We'll try to shield you as best we can, but if one of their antimatter reactors doesn't eject..."

"*Understood. Celestia out.*"

"Seventy seconds until the platform rotates out of her firing solution," Mister Navashee reported.

The bridge suddenly shifted to the right and heaved upward. Nathan felt himself being lifted into the air, coming down and landing hard again in his command chair.

"Damage control reports a hull breach!" Naralena reported. "Ventral side, midship, just forward of the reactor plants! Backup fusion reactors are offline!"

"Power reduced by fifty percent!" Mister Riley reported.

"*Captain! Cheng!*" Vladimir's voice called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Go ahead," Nathan answered.

"*We have lost antimatter reactors one and three! The containment fields became unstable. Safeties initiated automatically and ejected the cores. We are down to only two antimatter reactors. Fusion reactors are offline as well. If we lose reactors two and four, we will be without power!*"

"Understood," Nathan answered, tapping his comm-set to end the call. "Time to KKV impact?" he asked Mister Navashee.

"Forty seconds! Barrage ends in thirty!"

"Commander Dumar on the line again, sir!" Naralena announced.

Nathan pointed to his headset without looking back at her.

“Captain!” Commander Dumar called over Nathan’s comm-set, “we cannot hold any longer! The Jung are preparing to blast their way into the control center. They will vent our atmosphere and kill us all. There is nothing more we can do to stop them! You must launch a KKV!”

“I already have!” Nathan replied, tapping his comm-set again to end the call.

“Thirty seconds to KKV impact,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Comms! Get me Telles!”

“Fifteen seconds until platform loses their firing solution,” Mister Navashee added.

Nathan glanced at the images streaming from Lieutenant Telles’s helmet camera. The image was shaking and moving so fast and furiously that Nathan could barely make out what was going on. One moment, Telles would be firing his weapon, the next moment he would be ducking incoming fire, a parry by a Jung with a bladed weapon, or the incoming butt of an energy rifle.

“I have Lieutenant Telles,” Naralena reported.

Nathan’s eyes widened, startled by the image from Telles’s helmet camera. A Jung soldier was faceplate-to-faceplate with Telles. The man’s eyes were wider than any Nathan had seen before, full of rage and determination. Then they changed. For a moment, Nathan was confused by the changing look in the Jung soldier’s eyes. Then he remembered the look. It was the same one he had seen in the eyes of the man Nathan had shot on Haven, standing in front of Tug’s home. It was the look of a man who knew that his life had just ended. The stillness of the moment was itself, shocking, as the men fell away from the lieutenant just as Telles’s voice came over Nathan’s comm-set.

“Captain, Telles!”

“Lieutenant,” Nathan replied. “Yes or no. Can you hold?”

The image from the lieutenant’s helmet camera began to move wildly again. As it pitched down, for a brief

moment, Nathan could see the face of the Jung soldier the lieutenant had just killed face-to-face.

"We are Ghatazhak," the lieutenant replied confidently. "The Jung shall not take this asteroid, Captain. You have my word."

Not once had Nathan ever heard the slightest hint of doubt in the lieutenant's voice. Not through all the seemingly impossible battles he had been called upon to fight, and not in the words he had just spoken.

Nathan took a deep breath to strengthen his resolve. The violent shaking and the repeated impact of enemy rail gun fire suddenly stopped, casting an eerie silence on the bridge of the Aurora. "Lieutenant, tell your men to brace for impact."

"Understood."

Nathan watched the view from Lieutenant Telles's helmet camera as the link between them ended.

"Impact in five seconds," Mister Navashee reported.

"All hands, brace for impact," Nathan ordered calmly.

"Three....."

Nathan gripped the sides of his command chair tightly as the collision alarms sounded throughout the ship, along with the automated verbal warnings that something was about to strike the ship.

"Two....."

Nathan continued to watch the images streaming from the lieutenant's battle camera as the hand-to-hand combat in the corridors just outside the Karuzara's control center raged on.

"One.....impact."

Nathan's eyes moved from the helmet camera feed to the center of the image of the Jung battle platform in their main view screen. A brilliant white light suddenly appeared in the middle of the upper half of the platform's main vertical section at its center. The back side of the central section sprayed outward as another light flashed on the

topside of one of the three remaining arms. As the arm also began to spew debris out from the other side, the center section blew apart, followed immediately by the arm directly behind it. The remaining arms, as well as tons of debris of varying sizes went spewing outward in all directions, with the majority of the debris following the path of impact out the opposite side of the exploding platform.

"Direct hit!" Jessica exclaimed.

"There's no antimatter..." Nathan began to exclaim.

"...Those last two arms!" Mister Navashee warned. "One of them is headed toward the Karuzara!"

"What about their cores?" Nathan demanded.

"I'm not reading any antimatter eve... Wait! I have them! Thirty-eight antimatter cores, moving away at twenty kilometers per second and accelerating! They're fanning out, down relative and away from the platform!"

"Incoming call from Scout One," Naralena called out.

"Scott!" Captain Roselle yelled over the comms. "Are you fucking nuts? If the Jung capture that asteroid..."

"The Ghatazhak will..."

"Ghatazhak my ass!" Roselle interrupted. "I can see the feeds too, you know. It's a fucking melee down there! And you just destroyed the wrong goddamned target!"

"I've still got one KKV left, Roselle," Nathan said.

"Then you better launch the fucking thing right the fuck now before it's too late!"

"Telles will not lose the Karuzara," Nathan insisted.

"Goddamn it, Scott! If you don't destroy that asteroid, I will, and you know it!"

"The arm will impact the Karuzara in ten seconds," Mister Navashee warned.

"Hold your fucking position, Roselle," Nathan demanded as he switched channels on his comm-set. "Telles! Scott! Impact in five!"

“Ghatazhak! Brace yourselves!” Telles called out over his helmet comms. He lunged forward, driving his knife deep into the belly of a charging Jung soldier, driving him backward. As they fell to the deck, Telles twisted their bodies in the air, landing on their sides, and pulling the dead man’s body over his own as cover.

The corridors shook violently. The lights flickered as rubble fell from the rocky walls of the corridor. Conduit along the ceiling snapped and fell, striking those still standing and knocking them down. The lights went out completely, leaving only the light of energy weapons as they continued to fire in the darkness and chaos. Telles pushed the dead soldier off of him as the shaking subsided. He rose to his feet and charged forward, firing wildly as he stepped over the bodies of the dead that littered the corridor. He could see the Jung troops up ahead, preparing charges to blast their way through the airlock door to vent the control center of all atmosphere. He fired into the group of men, killing them instantly, but in doing so drawing the fire of others.

His men rose up behind the lieutenant, following him on his charge down the corridor, stepping on the fallen, both enemy and comrade, determined to finish the battle.

Jung soldiers who had been knocked off their feet by the impact were rising from the bodies on the floor of the corridor, taking aim at the charging Ghatazhak. Men on either side of the lieutenant fell to the Jung fire as he charged forward into the hail of energy weapons fire.

A Jung energy bolt struck the lieutenant in the arm, melting the armor just forward of his elbow and shorting out the control console on his left forearm... Yet still he continued forward, firing madly. Another energy bolt glanced off the side of his helmet, while a third struck his right chest plate, nearly knocking him over... Yet still he continued forward, firing madly. The Jung weapons fire increased as more soldiers joined them.

“Down!” the lieutenant commanded as he dove to the deck, taking cover behind a pair of dead soldiers, one Jung and one Ghatazhak, stacked atop one another. He brought his weapon up onto the back of the fallen Ghatazhak behind which he sought protection, and continued firing with both his energy rifle and the laser on the right top side of his backpack. All around him, his men did the same, together sending a hailstorm of energy weapons fire toward the rallying Jung troops only a few meters away.

The images streaming from Lieutenant Telles’s helmet camera to the display on the Aurora’s main view screen flickered on and off for several seconds, then disappeared completely as the camera suddenly turned toward the deck and dropped rapidly downward.

“Call up the others!” Nathan ordered as the battle platform debris that had been striking the underside of their hull began to subside.

“I’m losing feeds right and left,” Jessica said in disbelief. “I think they’re losing, sir.”

“Comms, get me Scout Three,” Nathan ordered in hushed tones.

“Aye, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Tactical, update the targeting package for KKV One. Target the Karuzara based on current course and speed.”

“Sir...”

Nathan turned to look over his shoulder back at Jessica at the tactical console behind him.

Jessica sighed. “Updating KKV One’s targeting package. Target, Karuzara.”

“Scout Three is standing by to receive, Captain,” Naralena said.

“Target update is complete,” Jessica said.

“Transmit targeting package,” Nathan ordered.

“Transmitting,” Jessica answered.

Nathan's eyes drifted to the deck at the base of the helm's center pedestal as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The Karuzara was not just an asteroid. It was not just a base or a shipyard, it was hope. Hope for his crew, and for his world. It was also what his friends were currently fighting, and dying, to protect. "How many camera feeds are left."

"I've lost them all," Jessica answered, sadness and despair in her voice. "The Ghatazhak, the hallway cameras... All I've got left is the one inside the control center."

Nathan raised his eyes slowly, unable to bear what he was sure he was about to witness... The death of his friends. The image was dark and the camera was not at the same angle as before. He could barely make out any details, only the control room staff scurrying about, no doubt panicking in their final moments of life as the atmosphere in the compartment was about to be removed by their attackers.

"Scout Three confirms they have received the updated targeting package for KKV One, sir," Naralena reported.

"Very well," Nathan said. "Message to Scout Three. Launch..."

"Captain!" Naralena interrupted. "Incoming message from Commander Dumar!"

The overhead speakers crackled as Naralena patched through the incoming voice call for all to hear.

"...ora! Karuzara Control! The Jung have been defeated! The Jung have been defeated!"

Cheers erupted on the Aurora's bridge.

"Comms, cancel last message to Scout Three," Nathan ordered. "New message. Tell Scout Three to hold position."

"Aye, sir," Naralena answered.

"Contact the Celestia, tell them we'll be back as soon as we deal with the gunships over Earth."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"By the way, the Celestia is finally under way again," Commander Willard said.

"I'm glad we waited until we could recover and get a few of her cores reinstalled," Nathan replied from behind the desk in his ready room. "It would've taken a lot more than two weeks for them to get back to Earth."

"When will the Karuzara return?"

"It will take them thirty-seven days to jump their way out to Kuiper Four Seven, loop their way around a few of its planets, then jump back to Sol. That should give them plenty of time to clear out the main transit tunnels and repair the damage to the main docks, although it may take them awhile to get all the airlock doors working again."

"I am surprised that the commander's team was even able to find a route that would work," Commander Willard admitted.

"I'm surprised they found one that was only twenty-seven light years away," Nathan replied. "Until then, we'll have to do what we can to make repairs in orbit."

"Well, now that the scavenger teams have begun harvesting material from the battle debris, we should have all fabricators running around the clock again within a few days."

"I'm sure Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy will be happy to hear it."

Commander Willard looked back toward the hatch as Captain Roselle entered the ready room. "If there is nothing else, sir?" he asked Nathan, looking to excuse himself.

“No, Commander,” Nathan replied, “thank you.”

“Sir,” the commander nodded. He turned to face Captain Roselle. “Captain,” he said respectfully as he moved around the captain and exited the compartment, closing the hatch behind him.

“Still not sure how I feel about a mutineer as your XO,” Roselle said as he took a seat.

“It depends on why he mutinied, doesn’t it,” Nathan said.

“I guess that depends on which side of the mutiny you’re on.” Roselle leaned back in his chair, looking at Nathan. “Which brings me to my next question; how the hell did they know?”

“If you’re referring to how the Jung knew where to find the Falcons, the question has already been raised by both Lieutenant Telles and Lieutenant Commander Nash, the latter of which confronted me only minutes after the battle had concluded.”

“So, they suspect a spy as well?”

“It has to be someone on either the Aurora or the Celestia,” Nathan explained. “We were both docked inside the Karuzara for at least ten days, during which time most of our crews had access to the interior of the Karuzara.”

“But not *all* of your crews.”

“No, not all. We have narrowed the list down to about eighty possible suspects.”

“They must have transmitted the information to the Jung during the battle,” Roselle said. “Surely you can tell from your sensor logs or comm logs if someone sent a message.”

“We have been unable to find any indications of such a transmission,” Nathan admitted, “but we have not given up. We will do everything possible to discover the identity of the spy.”

“The problem with spies, Scott, is that they are usually well hidden. I trust you’re keeping this compartmentalized?”

"So far, the two of us, Lieutenant Telles, and Lieutenant Commander Nash are the only ones who know of the investigation."

"How do you know I'm not a spy?" Roselle challenged.

"Because neither you nor your crew had ever set foot on the Karuzara, so none of you knew the location of the other Falcons, or that any of them were operational."

"Just checking. You know, you might want to install some sort of anti-theft devices on those birds."

"That's the plan," Nathan assured him, "as well as self-destruct mechanisms to destroy the jump field generators in case of capture. That was Admiral Dumar's first order as the new Commander of the Alliance."

"So, I guess it's official, then."

"Yes, all the existing governments of Earth, such as they are, have signed onto the Alliance charter. As of today, we are all *officially* under the command of the Alliance."

"How do they plan on sorting out ranks and such?"

"They decided that since all the policies and procedures for the Aurora, the Celestia, and the Scout ships are all written for EDF rank structures, it would be easier to use that than to come up with some sort of a hybrid system."

"Makes sense, I guess."

"Too bad you won't be here for the ceremony," Nathan said.

"Yeah, I'm real broken up about that one," Roselle replied. "Wish we could have gotten our plasma torpedo cannons installed before we left, though."

"The Karuzara should be back and ready to finish your upgrades in a few weeks. To be honest, I'm surprised they didn't suffer more damage than they did."

"Sixty kilometer rock versus a twenty-kilometer ship... Rock wins every time," Captain Roselle said as he stood.

"Leaving already?" Nathan asked with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Roselle snickered. "I have to admit, Scott, after all that's happened in the last few weeks, I've got a bit more respect for you than before." He held up his hand, his thumb and forefinger held only a centimeter apart. "Just a bit." He turned toward the hatch. "Of course, I'm still going to jump your shit every time you fuck up. You know that."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Captain."

Roselle smiled and headed for the exit, then paused at the hatch. "You know, I was ready to do it. Jump inside that rock and set off my antimatter warhead." He turned and looked at Nathan again. "I was this close," he said, again holding up his hand with his thumb and forefinger close together. "If Telles hadn't pulled it off at the last moment..."

"That's why I asked you to take the job, Captain," Nathan said. "A failsafe isn't much good if you don't have the right man's finger on the button."

Roselle smiled again. "That's why I have more respect for you than I did before, Scott." Roselle held up the gesture with his thumb and forefinger a third time. "Just a bit."

* * *

Nathan looked out at the Porto Santo base from the vantage point of a nearby hill. The warm ocean air wafted across the hilltop, its slight chill offset by the warmth of the afternoon sun. This was what he missed the most... Fresh air, sunshine, vast open spaces. All of these things were missing from the artificial environment of a spaceship. Even the garden domes being constructed deep inside the Karuzara asteroid could not do it justice. This is what they fought and died for... The ability to stand on a spot such as this, and breathe in the air and absorb the bountiful energy of the sun. Everything else boiled down... It was just that simple.

"You were saying, Captain?" Telles said, breaking Nathan out of his daydreaming.

"I was saying that I'm amazed at how quickly your people have gotten the base fully operational again, especially in only two weeks."

"There is nothing amazing about it, really," Telles insisted. "Much like the people of Earth, we too had gone underground, along with all of our assets. The buildings that were destroyed had been baited with radiological decoys to trick the Jung's targeting computers. They destroyed only that which we wished them to destroy."

"I only wish the entire planet had fared as well," Nathan said as he continued walking the ridge line.

"Compared to the previous attacks, your world received only scratches this time around."

"I suppose you're right," Nathan agreed. "How are things coming along with the Jung ground forces?"

"The last of them were either eliminated or captured a few days ago. We have had reports of small skirmishes, but we have yet to confirm that any of them were with actual Jung soldiers. As best we can tell, there are no more organized Jung forces on this world. Of course, we shall continue to operate as if there are."

"Of course."

"I have spoken with the leaders of Earth," Telles continued. "We have agreed to provide training for their security forces, here on Porto Santo."

"Yes, I heard," Nathan replied. "Congratulations on your promotion, by the way. Lieutenant to full commander. A nice jump, and well deserved I might add."

"Thank you, sir," Commander Telles replied, "although I am not sure exactly how a commander fits within the Ghatazhak rank structure."

"Does it bother you to be under the auspices of the Alliance?"

"Not at all," Commander Telles assured him. "Admiral Dumar has had a long and distinguished career. He is well qualified for the position. However, we are still Ghatazhak

just the same. The men stationed here now are still programmed to remain loyal to yourself above all others. I cannot speak to those Ghatazhak who shall join us in the coming months, as I assume that their programming shall favor the Alliance.”

Nathan stopped walking and looked at the commander. “Why can’t they just be loyal to the Ghatazhak?”

Commander Telles looked quizzical. “That is an interesting question, Captain.”

Nathan continued walking. “So, how long do you think it will take for the security forces of Earth to be able to take over the job of policing their own areas?”

“To a significant degree? Several months at least. To completely take over and free us from our responsibilities on this world?... Perhaps years. Much of your world is still contaminated, as you know.”

“Yes, but the Corinairans have promised a continuous stream of aid, as well as technology that can be used to clean up the contamination. Of course, it will take some time. Only a few of the Earth’s fabricators survived. It will take a few months to significantly grow their numbers to the point where they can keep pace with demand.”

“Yes, but their numbers *will* grow,” Commander Telles assured Nathan. “There is one thing I have learned about Terrans. They are tenacious.”

* * *

Jessica walked the streets of Terra, the first of several settlements built by refugees from Earth on Tanna. The city was rudimentary at best, with rows of small houses of simple yet sturdy construction. Much of the walkways were no more than trails worn down in the grassy meadow alongside one of Tanna’s many lakes. However, as simple a city as it was, it was a vast improvement over the camps

that Jessica had rescued her family from more than a month ago.

The city had grown in recent weeks as more and more immigrants had come over from Earth. The city's central shopping district and government offices had grown accordingly, and many of the buildings in the district had risen several stories in height. What had started as a collection of tents had become a city complete with infrastructure, roads, shops, and public services.

She walked past one of the transportation hubs where Tannan busses picked up refugees to work in the fields and factories that produced that which the Earth needed. Men and women were disembarking from one of the afternoon busses, fanning out in all directions as they headed down the various paths that led to their homes. The lives of these people were not glamorous, and they certainly lacked the creature comforts that they had been accustomed to during their lives on Earth. But that was all before the Jung. Now, they were just happy to have a roof over their heads and the basic necessities of life. Even more so, they were happy that they were helping their homeworld to recover, despite the fact that most of them would likely never return to that world. They would build new lives here on Tanna, the world that had welcomed them with open arms. They would help shape this world, and in the process help shape a new Earth.

Jessica paused a moment, checking a hand-carved wooden street sign.

"Don't tell me we're lost," Josh said from behind her.

"We're not lost, cadet," Jessica replied with a sharp tone, "I'm simply determining our position so that we do not *become* lost."

"Sorry, sir," Josh said.

"Her place should be down this way," Jessica said as she continued walking.

They continued down a long, curving path that made its way between houses. Eventually, they left what had once been a grassy meadow and entered a forest of trees tinged with green and blue leaves. The forest had a magical quality to it, with birds the likes of which neither of them had seen, as well as small creatures that stuck their heads out of holes in the ground, then disappeared as the strange creatures approached.

Jessica finally came to stop in front of one of the small houses tucked away between two large trees. "This is it," she said, stepping up to the front door.

"I'll just wait over there," Josh said, pointing to a nearby stump. "Soak up a bit of nature, and all that."

Jessica knocked on the door. A moment later it opened.

"Jess!" Synda cried out, immediately throwing her arms around Jessica. "Oh, my God! I'm so happy to see you!"

For the second time in just as many months, Jessica's heart was warmed.

* * *

"You know, I fought for the funding for the Explorer-class ships," Nathan's father said as they entered the captain's mess.

Nathan paused to look at his father. "I thought you were against the war effort?"

"I was, publicly," he replied. "All part of the ruse. The original plan had been to build this exact same ship, but without the big four-barreled rail guns."

"The quads?"

"Yes. Many were afraid that they could be considered as 'orbital strike weapons'."

"We have used them as such," Nathan admitted. "More than once, I might add."

"Well, the original ones were even bigger. They also had them on both the top and bottom. Same thing with the mini-

rail guns.”

“Both top and bottom?” Nathan asked as he took his seat.

“Yes. We scaled down the design and instead reinforced the underside with additional armor under the guise of using it for aero-braking to save propellant while on long missions of diplomacy away from Sol.”

“I would have loved to have twice the number of rail guns, I can tell you that,” Nathan exclaimed.

“If you look at the designs, the spaces are still there.”

“That’s why we have those empty bays on either side of the main propulsion section, right? For future weapons?”

“Yes. Actually, the design had been to put energy weapons in those bays, but that was just a scam to hide the funds that were being diverted to the jump drive project.”

“You mean ‘projects’,” Nathan reminded him.

“Yeah, I still can’t believe that I didn’t know there was a shadow project,” his father admitted.

“One of the things you learn is to always have a backup plan,” Nathan said.

“They teach you that at the Academy?” his father wondered.

“School of hard knocks,” Nathan admitted.

The captain’s steward brought in their meal and placed it on the table in front of them.

“Molo, again?” his father asked.

“Sorry, but we have to conserve. You said so yourself.”

“I know,” his father agreed, “it’s just that we’re eating it at least three times per week now. The stuff grows like a weed in places a weed won’t grow.”

“That’s the beauty of molo,” Nathan said. “It grows where nothing else will.” He took his first bite. “Casimir said it would do well on Earth and help us get through the lean times as our world recovered.”

“I just hope it isn’t a staple that sticks with us forever.”

“I don’t know, I rather like it,” Nathan said.

"You always had an odd palate, son," his father said, "even as a child."

"So, how are things going with the recovery?"

"The first of the decon plants went into operation yesterday," his father said. "There will be at least a dozen more going online by the end of the month."

"That sounds pretty good."

"It will take hundreds of them," his father pointed out.

"Maybe, but considering it's only been a few weeks now..."

"Of course. Of course. I shouldn't be complaining," the president said. "It is hard to be patient when there is so much that needs to be done."

"I know the feeling," Nathan said. "You should see our repair lists."

"Pretty bad, huh?"

"We've had worse," Nathan said as he took another bite of molo. "Not as bad as the Celestia, though. She'll be in port for months, maybe a year. It depends on how quickly the Karuzara repair parties can get their own facilities fixed up."

"Have you heard from them recently?" his father wondered.

"We get daily updates by comm-jumpers," Nathan explained. "They appear to be ahead of schedule, but it will take them weeks just to get to the same condition they were in when they had first arrived, let alone what they were planning on already having done by now."

"You're not worried about another Jung attack?" his father asked.

"Not really. We've established with reasonable certainty that there are no Jung assets within ten light years of Sol. The closest ones are at Tau Ceti. So we're confident that we have at least six months of peace and quiet."

"We can certainly use it," his father said, holding up a piece of molo on his fork.

* * *

For the first time that he could remember, Nathan entered the flight briefing room not as the speaker, but as a member of the audience. No longer was everything on his shoulders, and it felt good.

It was also the first time that everyone in the room was wearing the same uniform, and a common patch on their right shoulder, that of the Alliance.

Nathan took a seat in the front row between Jessica and Vladimir. Behind them was Commander Willard, Nathan's XO, and Commander Telles of the Ghatazhak.

"This is different," Jessica whispered as Nathan took his seat.

"But nice," Nathan whispered back. Nathan glanced about the room. Cameron and her XO, Commander Kovacic were sitting to the other side of Jessica. On the far side of the aisle were all three Scout ship captains, Poc, Roselle, and Nash, as well as their XOs, all of them having just returned from recon and patrol missions.

The last two to enter the room were Majors Prechitt and McCullum, the commanders of the Aurora's two fighter wings, or what little was left of them.

"Attention on deck!" Sergeant Weatherly barked from the entrance as Admiral Dumar entered the room. All in attendance rose smartly to their feet and came to attention, eyes forward.

"As you were," Admiral Dumar ordered as he took the podium.

It was the first time that Nathan had seen Dumar in the standard EDF duty uniform that had been adopted by the Alliance due to its availability.

"As this may be one of the few times that the command personnel of all ships will be in the same room together," the admiral began, "I'd like to take the opportunity to have an open discussion about our future plans on how to deal

with the Jung threat that looms over all the worlds of this Alliance. However, first, I think I should outline the facts as we know them. Fact one; the Jung likely have near one hundred warships of varying size and strength. Fact two; the Jung have numerous fully industrialized worlds, complete with massive populations with which to support their military might. Fact three; the Jung have made it quite obvious that they wish to take the Earth as their seat of power. Fact four; the Alliance does not have the ships, manpower, or industrial base to go toe-to-toe with the Jung. Fact five; we have the jump drive. Let us all understand this one thing... As much of an advantage as the jump drive has proven itself to be, it alone is not enough to win this war. Even if all five of our ships were repaired and retrofitted with the best armaments and shields, and fully loaded with fighters, shuttles, and interceptors, we would still be no match for the Jung. Our ships, our weapons, our jump drives, are all operated and maintained by people. People need food, people need water, people need health care, people need uniforms... And the list goes on. What we need are those fully industrialized and populated worlds that the Jung have."

Admiral Dumar looked at the people in the room as he took a sip of water. "I have reviewed Captain Scott's original idea to rid space of all Jung ships within twenty light years of Earth. While this plan would give the Earth, and by extension the Alliance, at least a full year without threat of Jung attack, it leaves out a critical factor. Once you destroy all Jung ships within a system, what happens to that system? Do the Jung know who attacked them? Or do they blame the inhabitants of that system? While I suspect that the Jung will know that it was an outside force that attacked them, and not the local inhabitants, if you destroy their ships in orbit, what will the troops on the ground do?"

Admiral Dumar cleared his throat. "If we are to destroy the ships that occupy their systems, we must also destroy

the forces that control their worlds. In essence, we must liberate such worlds. Within that twenty light year sphere there are eight fully industrialized worlds. The six core worlds of Earth, and two of the secondary worlds. This has been confirmed by our Scout ships over the last few weeks. It is these worlds that we must liberate, and make our allies against the Jung."

"If the Jung forces are so superior in number and support, how are we supposed to liberate those worlds?" Commander Kovacic asked. "If you're talking about a ground war, you're talking about a lot of logistics. Even if we had the supplies, we don't have the ships to get them to the battlefield."

"In answer to your question, Commander, those logistical problems can be mostly negated by creative use of jump drive technology." Admiral Dumar looked at the faces in the room. "To all questions there are answers," he said confidently, "it is just a matter of finding them. Now that we have some time to look, we shall find them."

Thank you for reading this story.
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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