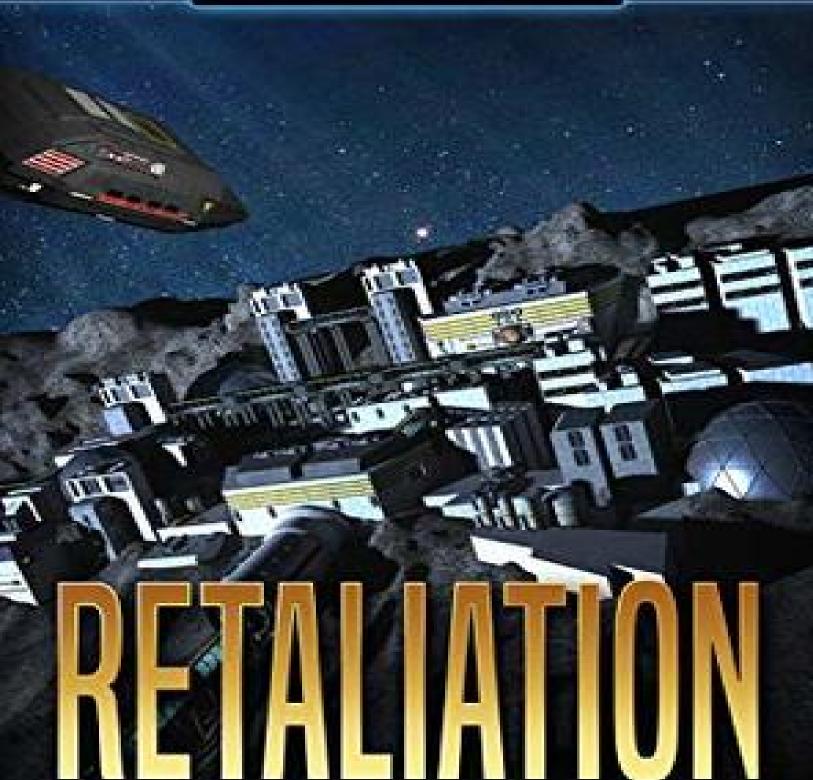
FRONTIERS SAGA PART 2: ROGUE CASTES EPISODE 10



KEIALIAIUN RYK BROWN

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## FRONTIERS SAGA PART 2: ROGUE CASTES EPISODE 10

# RETALIATION RYK BROWN

The Frontiers Saga Part 2: Rogue Castes
Episode #10: Retaliation
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#### **CHAPTER ONE**

Captain Hunt entered the Weatherly's bridge, his morning mug of coffee in hand. He looked around, a curious expression on his face. "Where's everyone at?" he asked his weapons officer, the only other person on the bridge at the moment.

"In the galley," Bonnie answered, barely glancing up from her console. "Cheng made waffles."

"And nobody told me?"

Bonnie glanced up momentarily, shrugging her shoulders.

"Anything new?" Chris asked as he walked over to the helm to check his ship's orbital profile. "Other than the waffles, that is."

"The Inman and the Gervais jumped in a few minutes ago. They're currently decelerating to make orbit."

"ETA?"

"Twenty minutes, tops."

"Nothing else out there?" the captain asked, settling into the captain's chair and placing his mug in the holder.

"Nada."

Chris closed his eyes, stretching his arms forward and tensing up his torso, forcing the last bit of sleepiness from his body. "Prechitt still on the surface?"

"Yup, since..." She suddenly stopped, her sentence interrupted by an alert signal from her console.

Chris also heard the signal and turned to look at her. "What is it?"

"Something just jumped in," she replied, studying her console more intently.

"Can you ID it?"

"Working on it... Uh-oh..." She looked up from her console directly at her captain. "It may be a raider carrier. It just launched..." Another alert sounded. "Eight Ahka raiders just jumped into low orbit! They're headed for the surface!"

Chris pressed a button on his console, sounding the alarm and activating his intercom. "General quarters, general quarters. This is not a drill." He deactivated his intercom and turned back to Bonnie. "Weapons hot; target anything in range."

"Weapons and shields are coming up now, but they've already jumped to the surface."

"Inman, Weatherly, launch your Eagles," the captain called over comms. "Repeat: launch your Eagles."

"Another carrier," Bonnie added.

"What's going on?" Denny asked as he and Michael entered the bridge in a hurry.

"Raiders," Chris replied as he switched comm-channels. "Prechitt, Hunt. You see them?"

"How could I not?" the commander replied over comms, explosions sounding in the background.

"I've scrambled all Eagles. You should have help in a minute or two."

"How many?"

"We count two carriers so far, so likely sixteen raiders."

"Copy that. Protect the Inman and the Gervais until they get their birds away, then have them jump to safe staging. Once they're away, go after those carriers."

"Understood," Chris replied. "Weatherly out."

"Eight more raiders just jumped in!" Bonnie reported. "Starboard side, about ten clicks out, eighteen degrees up relative!"

"Let 'em have it," Chris instructed. "We need to keep them away from the Inman and the Gervais."

"Aye, sir."

"Orders?" Michael asked as he settled into the pilot's chair.

"You got aft?" Bonnie asked the XO as he slid into the chair at the next console to her right.

"I'm on it," Denny replied.

"Hold your course until they pass over us," Chris told his helmsman. "I want to keep as many guns on them as possible. Then turn to port and accelerate, but keep us bow-down so we can keep all four guns on them."

"We won't be able to accelerate as quickly," the pilot reminded him.

"The Inman and the Gervais are within range, so we don't need to keep up for long," Chris replied. "They'll jump as soon as they pass them anyway. After that, we'll have time to maneuver into position to provide cover."

Commander Verbeek burst through the hatch into the Inman's cargo bay, pulling his flight suit up over his shoulders as he ran toward the Super Eagle fighters lined up, down the center of the long, narrow bay. Behind him, nine more pilots spilled through the hatch, struggling to get their gear on as they, too, made their way quickly to their ships, alarms sounding in the background.

The commander reached his fighter and expertly climbed up the side of its port air intake, using the rungs protruding from its sides. Once on top, he stepped forward and climbed into the cockpit, grabbing his helmet perched on top of the forward section of the canopy.

As expected, the systems in his Super Eagle jump fighter

were already spinning up, having been remotely activated from the Inman's bridge the moment the scramble alert sounded. With his helmet donned and a simple push of a button, his canopy slid forward, sealing him inside the cockpit.

The commander scanned his displays, noting that his systems were coming online in proper fashion. He then checked the status of the other nine fighters in his group, ensuring that they, too, were spinning up. Once he had ten green lights, he knew everyone in his fighter group was safely inside their ships and would be ready for departure in less than a minute.

"Comms check, One," he called over comms.

"Two," his wingman, Lieutenant Garmon replied.

"Three."

"Four."

The commander checked his tactical display as the remainder of his flight sounded off. He was already receiving sensor data from the Inman and could see the positions of the Ahka raiders. They were going to be launching into the middle of a fight.

"Ten."

"Inman, Eagle One. Ready for rapid depress."

"Copy that. Rapid depress in five..."

The commander double-checked his deck locks while the Inman's cargo bay chief counted down the last few seconds. He looked up just as the ceiling above them began to move, the forward-half sliding toward the bow and the aft toward the stern of the ship.

"The raiders are already attacking the Inman and the Gervais," the commander warned his other fighters. "Be ready to fight the moment we clear the hull."

"Sounds like a hell of a party," the lieutenant commented.

\_\_\_\_\_

Commander Prechitt ran across the makeshift airbase as Ahka raiders jumped in overhead, firing their downward-facing cannons at the surface as they passed. Dirt and rock exploded on either side of the commander as bolts of energy slammed into the ground, superheating it and causing it to violently erupt, spewing hot dirt and molten rock in all directions.

The commander dove for cover just as the passing raider pitched up to jump away, narrowly escaping its last few shots. He landed clumsily, slamming into a dirt berm, nearly dislocating his shoulder in the process. He quickly removed his jacket to escape the red-hot debris that was rapidly burning through it.

"Eagles are launching now," Captain Hunt reported over comms. "We're moving into position to protect our carriers until they can jump to safety."

"Get those Eagles down here!" the commander instructed as the next Ahka raider jumped in over the far side of the airbase to start its attack run. "A few more passes and they'll start landing troops, and we don't have jack to defend ourselves with!"

"Moving into position between the Inman and the Gervais now," Michael reported from the Weatherly's helm.

"All guns target the raiders," the captain ordered.

"I've got four bandits on tactical," Bonnie reported.
"They're turning toward the Inman now."

Captain Hunt quickly changed to the comm-channel used by the Eagle fighters. "Eagles One through Ten, Weatherly! Bandits are moving in to attack! Expect incoming!" He turned back toward his weapons officer. "Get those raiders to turn the fuck away!" he ordered.

"We're working on it," Denny promised.

"Eagles One through Ten, Weatherly!" Captain Hunt called over comms. "Bandits are moving in to attack! Expect incoming!"

"Launch as the roof clears you," Commander Verbeek instructed as the edge of the Inman's cargo bay roof slid past him. "Engage on your way out, and join up with your wingman as soon as..."

A bolt of energy shot over the commander's head, causing him to instinctively duck. There was an explosion to his left that rocked his ship and lit up his cockpit.

"FUCK!" one of his pilots exclaimed over comms.

The commander looked to his left. Eagle Two's entire starboard side was gone, but its nose and cockpit, although considerably askew, were still intact. "Get the hell out of there, Toby!" Commander Verbeek could already see his wingman's canopy sliding open as the commander released his deck clamps and lifted off. He quickly fired his attitude thrusters and pitched his nose upward fifty degrees, then slammed his throttle forward as his ship cleared the edge of the cargo bay wall.

The Super Eagle lunged forward, accelerating away from the ship that had been its home for the last two days. The commander felt only the slightest bit of force from the sudden movement of his ship, thanks to its inertial dampening fields.

"One away," he reported over comms as he throttled back slightly and rolled his ship into a tight left turn. He glanced at his tactical display as he turned, noting that it was now receiving data from his ship's sensors instead of from the Inman's. Two enemy targets had just appeared directly behind him and were diving toward the Inman.

"Three away!"

"Two bandits inbound!" the commander warned. "Jump clear on departure!"

"Four away!"

"Three jumping!"

The commander came out of his one-hundred-and-eightydegree turn just as two more bandits appeared on his tactical display, both of them directly behind him. He quickly dialed up a pair of intercept missiles, tapping both of the icons representing the Ahka raiders ahead of him, assigning them as targets. "Launching two!" he announced as he pressed the missile button on his flight control stick.

A panel on the underside of Eagle One split down the middle and slid open, quickly disappearing into its hull. A split second later, two one-meter-long missiles dropped out of the opening, their engines igniting and sending them racing forward.

"Ten away!"

The commander grimaced as one of the two targets he had selected jumped away before the missile reached them. Without a target to lock onto, the missile turned away from the target area and disarmed its warhead and propulsion system, heading harmlessly into space, where it would eventually self-destruct if not retrieved within the allotted time frame.

The second missile still had a good target lock and

managed to strike the other raider just as it opened fire on the Inman. The target blew apart, sending an expanding debris field toward the unsuspecting cargo ship.

"Inman! Eagle One! Jump, jump, jump!"

The pilot of the cargo ship was on his game and had activated his jump drive the moment he heard the first 'jump'. The cargo ship glowed a brilliant blue-white, then disappeared, escaping before the rapidly approaching debris impacted it.

"Two on you, Verbee!" Lieutenant Holland warned.
"Break left!"

The commander reacted instantly, pushing his nose down and rolling to port, just as a series of energy bolts streaked past his starboard side.

"Three firing two!" Lieutenant Holland reported.

The commander's instinct had been to jump, but the Gervais was also launching fighters, and he was in a good position to offer her some defense while she got them away.

"Got one! The other jumped!" the lieutenant reported.

"Stay on my wing, Ollie," the commander instructed.

"I've got your six, boss," the lieutenant replied.

"I've got two more jumping in at one two seven, ten high," the commander reported. "Turning right and jumping forward five clicks."

"I'm with you."

The commander rolled back to the right and pulled his nose up to change to the proper intercept course. He dialed his jump selector to five kilometers, and then pressed the jump button. A split second later, the two Ahka fighters about to open fire on the Gervais were half a kilometer away and directly in front of him. He moved his finger to open fire, but both targets exploded before his eyes.

"Two in one!" Ensign Tellor exclaimed with his usual glee

as he streaked across the commander's flight path a few hundred meters ahead of him.

"Nice shot, Tellor," the commander congratulated just as the Gervais jumped away. "All Eagles, pair up and find a raider to kill. Start with the surface."

"All Eagles are safely away!" Captain Hunt reported over the commander's comm-set as the next Ahka raider started its attack run. "They should be with you in seconds!"

"As soon as the Inman and Gervais are away, engage and destroy the Ahka carriers!" the commander instructed as he peered around the wall at the attacking raider.

"Understood," Captain Hunt replied.

Commander Prechitt watched helplessly as the third raider pummeled his makeshift base with energy weapons fire. Two more raiders jumped in together, less than half a click behind the one that was currently attacking. "Those will be the troop carriers!" he told Lieutenant Sandau, who was hunkered down next to him.

"What are we going to do?" the lieutenant asked.

Commander Prechitt pulled his sidearm. "Whatever we have to."

Commander Verbeek pressed his jump button, and the view from orbit suddenly changed to a close-up view of the makeshift airbase on the surface. His ship shook violently, and he was thrust forward against his shoulder restraints as his fighter suddenly found itself in the thick, lower atmosphere of Casbon. He immediately pulled out of his dive, spotting three Ahka raiders half a kilometer ahead of him as he leveled off just over the treetops.

A glance at his display told him that six other Eagle fighters had jumped in directly behind him at similar altitudes and on similar headings. "Tally three, directly ahead." He glanced at his display again to identify which Eagles had joined him. "Three and Five, take left and right targets. I've got the middle one. Everyone else, engage any targets that join the party."

"Three, tally left." "Five, tally right."

"Firing one!" the commander reported as he selected another missile and pressed the firing button on his flight control stick. A second later, a single missile streaked away from under his nose, closing the distance between him and the Ahka raider ahead of him in only a few seconds. The commander pitched up, anticipating a similar move by the raider pilot once he realized a missile was about to fly up his ass. A second later, the raider pilot did exactly as expected, pitching up sharply as he countermeasures to spoof the missile. The commander pressed his firing trigger again, this time sending staccato bursts of red-orange plasma into the path of the climbing raider. The enemy ship flew right into the stream of plasma and broke apart in an explosion of red-orange energy and black smoke. The raider flipped over, then nose-dived into the ground, exploding, yet again, on impact just as the other two raiders met similar fates, thanks to Eagles Three and Five.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Both ships have jumped away," Bonnie reported.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Are you still tracking the enemy carriers?" Chris asked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes, sir, but their position is two light minutes out, so..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Can't worry about that now," Chris decided, cutting her

off. "Mike, turn us toward those carriers and jump in close to their calculated position. Bonnie, be ready on the torpedo cannons."

"Turning now," the pilot reported.

"Torpedo cannons are charged and ready," Bonnie assured him.

The Weatherly's bridge flashed with blue-white light as she jumped to intercept the first Ahka carrier ship.

"Anything?" the captain asked his weapons officer.

"No targets... Wait... Two ships, thirty-seven degrees to port, twenty-eight down. Half a light minute."

"Quick! Jump ahead five light minutes," the captain ordered, "then recalculate and turn to new intercept course."

"Jumping," the pilot acknowledged as the bridge momentarily filled with blue-white light, again.

"Calculate a new intercept course, Bonnie."

"Give me a second."

"Come hard to port while you're waiting for a course," Chris told his pilot.

"Hard to port, aye."

A moment later, his weapons officer spoke. "New course is one nine zero, twenty-four down relative."

"Got it," Mike replied.

"Complete your turn and then jump us in close," the captain instructed. "Don't wait for my order to fire, Bonnie."

"I won't."

"Coming to new intercept heading," the pilot reported. "Jumping in.....three.....two.....one..."

The jump flash, again, washed over the Weatherly's bridge, and two Ahka cargo ships appeared directly ahead of them, less than two kilometers away.

"Firing all plasma torpedoes!" Bonnie reported.

"Locking cannons on the second target," Denny reported.

Chris watched the forward view screen as their redorange plasma torpedoes slammed into the cargo ship to the left, causing her to break apart. The ship to the right immediately disappeared behind a blue-white flash of light as secondary explosions finished off the ship to the left.

"Tell me you caught her energy signature," Chris begged.

"Come five degrees to starboard, and jump ahead two light minutes," Bonnie instructed the pilot.

"Five degrees to starboard," he acknowledged. "Jumping ahead two light minutes."

The bridge, again, filled with blue-white light, and the image of the exploding Ahka cargo ship disappeared, leaving nothing but the blackness of space before them.

"Where's the second ship?" Chris asked.

"No contacts," Bonnie reported, sounding somewhat dejected. "They must have double-jumped."

"I guess they didn't want to dance," Chris joked. "Longrange scans for one minute. If we don't spot them, we turn and jump back to Casbon."

"Two more to your starboard, Bailer!" Commander Verbeek warned just before he pressed his jump button to transition his ship two kilometers ahead, before the Ahka raider to his port side could get a lock on him. As soon as he came out of the jump, he pulled his nose up and went to full power. He pulled his ship into a tight loop and then executed a half-roll on the descent, coming level again in the opposite direction. He glanced at his tactical display, altering his course slightly to port, and then pressed his jump button again. A moment later, two more Ahka raiders

appeared as they pulled into a hover over the airbase, in preparation to deposit troops on the surface. The commander pressed the firing button on his flight control stick again, sending another barrage of plasma energy blasts toward the enemy ships. The ship to the left took the first few dozen hits, and the commander steered slightly right to catch the other ship, causing it to take damage, as well. Both ships immediately went down, slamming into the surface of Casbon and breaking apart, likely killing all aboard.

"The other ships are pulling up and jumping away," Ensign Bailer reported. "Shall we pursue?"

Commander Verbeek looked at his propellant gauges, then at his jump energy gauge. "Negative," he finally replied. "Anyone with less than half a jump charge, land on Casbon and recycle. The rest of you stay aloft and fly cover, in case they return."

"That was too easy," the ensign decided.

"It won't be next time," the commander assured him.

Commander Prechitt and Lieutenant Sandau came out from their cover as the first few Super Eagle fighters touched down nearby. The commander immediately spotted Eagle One and headed toward it as Commander Verbeek climbed out of his cockpit and jumped down to the ground.

"That sure didn't last very long," Commander Prechitt said in a congratulatory manner.

"Yeah," Commander Verbeek smiled. "Those guys sure have bad timing, don't they."

\* \* \*

"Take it easy on maneuvering and main propulsion,"

Vladimir urged over comm-sets. "They are barely holding together at the moment."

"I'm doing the best I can," Nathan assured him from the Aurora's battered helm. "We're pretty shot up. Half the helm is busted, and navigation is equally as bad."

"Of course," Vladimir replied. "How many..."

"Jess and I are alive. So is deBanco, but he's badly injured. Everyone else is dead."

"Gospadee," Vladimir replied. "Have you heard from the rest of the ship?"

"Negative. Comms is a mess, as well. Any chance you can do something about that?"

"I am afraid I am shorthanded, as well," Vladimir replied solemnly.

"Sorry. Do what you can."

"Can we make it to safe orbit?" Jessica wondered.

"I think so," Nathan replied. "But it may take a while."

"Oh, my God," Cameron exclaimed as she entered the bridge through the starboard entrance, witnessing the devastation. Several med-techs came in behind her, immediately checking on the wounded.

"deBanco is the only one," Nathan told the med-tech about to see to Lieutenant Dinev.

"Are you guys alright?" Cameron asked.

"I think these Ghatazhak getups saved us," Nathan replied. "Were you able to assess the damage on the way up?"

"A little. The lower decks seem to be in pretty good shape. Hangar bay is a mess, and you've got at least a dozen hull breaches, some of them quite large."

"It's my fault," Nathan said, frustrated with himself. "I should have seen it coming. The Jung always come in force."

"You can't blame yourself, Nathan," Cameron insisted. "These are the Dusahn, not the Jung. And the Dusahn have attacked with only a few ships before. We were ambushed, plain and simple. Just be glad we're still here to talk about it."

"Not all of us are still here," Nathan commented grimly, his eyes drifting to Marsi's lifeless body as two newly-arrived crewmen placed her in a body bag.

"All of us *chose* to be here," Cameron reminded him. "We all knew the risks, and we all felt it was a cause worth dying for."

"Is it?" Nathan wondered, looking directly into Cameron's eyes. "I mean, it's never going to stop. The Jung, the Ta'Akar, the Dusahn. Hell, even Galiardi. You defeat one, and another one steps in to take its place. History shows us...this *is* the nature of humanity."

"But it doesn't *have* to be," Cameron told him. "Of all people, *you* should know that better than most. *Your* family has fought for the betterment of us all. You just do it with this ship, instead of in politics. Humanity *needs* people like us...people like *you*. People who fight for those who cannot fight for themselves."

"But I keep losing the people I care most about," Nathan said. "My family, my friends, my crew..." His voice started to weaken. "Now even Josh and Loki," he added in a near whisper.

Cameron smiled. "You can't kill those two *that* easily," she remarked. "Josh and Loki were picked up by Rakuen Search and Rescue. I got word as we landed."

Nathan let out a chuckle that was half-laugh and half-cry. He took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Our ship is busted. We need to fix it."

"We also need to think about our defense, as well as the

defense of the Rogen system," Cameron reminded him.

"Right," Nathan agreed. "We need to recall the Weatherly."

"The Glendanon and the Mystic will be here within the hour," Cameron told him. "They can defend us."

"But they lack the firepower to bring down anything bigger than a gunship. We need at least one ship with mark fours."

"That will leave Prechitt without a warship."

"The Ahka don't have anything his Eagles can't handle for now. Besides, if we lose the Aurora, this war is over."

\* \* \*

"What about reactor one?" Vladimir asked his lead power generation tech.

"It's still unstable," he replied over comm-sets. "The best I can do at the moment is ten percent. If we push it past that, we could lose containment."

"Chort!" Vladimir cursed in frustration. "What if we pull the backup magnetic regulators from two or four? Would that help?"

"Yes, but then they would be unstable, as well."

"But we're never going to be able to fix either of them," Vladimir stated. "Not unless we go back to Earth, in which case we'll all be facing charges."

"If the antimatter in two and four can be dumped..."

"We can't *dump* the antimatter," Vladimir insisted. "It's too valuable. We'll have to find someplace to transfer it to, like a transport container." Vladimir sighed. "Do what you can. Meanwhile, concentrate on getting three back to full power."

"Aye, sir."

"Beller!" Vladimir shouted at the engineering tech running past him. "Did you find Stephenson?" "He's dead, sir," the tech said, slowing his pace and sidestepping past him. "Crushed by one of the main converters."

"What about Escanor?"

The technician shook his head, continuing on his way. Vladimir sighed, turning back to his console.

\* \* \*

"We are launching additional Gunyoki as quickly as possible. As soon as we establish a complete combat perimeter patrol, we will begin cycling your Shenza back to base for recycle."

"Understood."

"We must remain on full alert indefinitely," the controller warned. "The Aurora is badly damaged and unable to defend herself."

"Understood," Vol replied. "You heard him, people. Shenzas Two through Twenty, take up positions to protect the Aurora."

\* \* \*

Commander Prechitt followed the corporal across the airbase, toward the command post built into the side of the old quarry. All around him, Eagle fighters were being refueled and made ready for action, in case the Ahka returned sooner than expected.

Having only arrived a day ago, the base was not yet set up, and the chaos was disconcerting. It would take several days for the flight support crews to get organized and into a predictable routine. Until then, such would be the norm.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Shenza One, Rogen Command," Vol's comms squawked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Command, Shenza One."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Shenzas One through Twenty are to guard the Aurora."

<sup>&</sup>quot;We are all low on propellant, and some of us are out of missiles," Vol warned.

The commander followed the corporal into the command post, his eyes adjusting to the diminished light inside. "What's up?" he asked Lieutenant Sandau. He noticed the concerned look on the young lieutenant's face. "Uh-oh."

"Flash traffic from the Aurora," the lieutenant said, handing a data pad to the commander. "The Dusahn attacked the Rogen system. They were driven back, but the Aurora got ambushed and is badly damaged. They're ordering the Weatherly to return, best possible speed."

Commander Prechitt scanned the rest of the message. "Weapons, shields, three reactors, multiple hull breaches, half her crew injured or dead..." The commander sighed. "This is not good."

"Without the Weatherly, we have no protection," the lieutenant stated.

"We have twenty Super Eagles and a bunch of Sugali fighters on the way. All the Ahka have are armed shuttles and cargo ships converted into carriers. I'm pretty sure we'll be alright," the commander insisted, handing the data pad back to the lieutenant. He turned to the comms officer. "Patch me through to Captain Hunt on the Weatherly."

"Yes, sir."

"If the Ahka have even a single gunship that we haven't yet seen..."

"The Aurora is the only *real* warship this alliance has, Lieutenant," the commander snapped.

"Yes, sir."

"Captain Hunt on the line, Commander," the comms officer reported.

"Captain, Commander Prechitt. New orders. Return to the Rogen system, best possible speed."

"What happened?" Captain Hunt asked.

"The Rogen system was attacked, and the Aurora is badly

damaged and unable to defend herself."

"Understood," Captain Hunt replied. "We'll get underway as soon as the last of your equipment is offloaded."

"Make it quick, Chris. They need you more than we do."

"We will. Weatherly out."

"Use a jump comm-drone to get an update on the ETA for the first batch of Sugali fighters," the commander instructed his comms officer. "But do *not* say anything about the Weatherly departing *or* what has happened to the Aurora."

"Aye, sir."

"What about the men?" the lieutenant wondered.

"I'll notify Verbeek, and he can tell his men," the commander replied.

"They're not going to like the Weatherly being gone," the lieutenant said.

"The Aurora's their home," the commander reminded the lieutenant. "They'll want her protected, as well. Besides, based on that first encounter, the Ahka are about as combat-effective as a bunch of drunken cadets." The commander looked at the lieutenant. "Don't worry, Lieutenant. We'll be fine."

\* \* \*

"Holy shit!" Josh exclaimed as he and Loki set foot on the Aurora's bridge. "It looks like a bomb went off in here!"

"Are you guys alright?" Loki asked instinctively.

Jessica tapped the chest plate of her Ghatazhak armor.

"I have *got* to get me one of those outfits!" Josh exclaimed.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you two alive," Nathan said as he came up the steps from the lower level to greet them. He put his arms around them both, pulling them into him. "I thought we had lost you."

"God looks out for the drunks and the crazy people," Josh told him. "One way or another, I usually qualify."

"You two saved our asses, you know that."

"Just doing our job, Cap'n," Josh boasted.

"What can we do to help?" Loki asked.

"You are the Aurora's primary flight crew now," Nathan replied, turning to face forward again. "Helm and navigation are busted up pretty bad. I managed to get some control, and I'm using maneuvering along with a bare minimum of main propulsion to get us back to a stable orbit, but it's slow going. See what you can do with what you have."

"Any ETA from engineering on main power and propulsion?" Loki asked as he and Josh headed toward the helm.

"Vlad's working on it," Nathan replied, "but he's lost half his staff, as well."

Loki took a seat at the navigation console on the left side of the helm station, trying not to look, while two crewmen attempted to separate Ensign Bickle's corpse from the beam that had crushed him.

"Fuck," Josh said under his breath as he and Loki exchanged glances.

\* \* \*

Lord Dusahn sat quietly, his anger growing with every word, as General Hesson read the battle report aloud.

"My lord?" the general asked after he finished the report, but received no response from his leader.

Lord Dusahn looked at his general and then spoke. "Order the reserve fleet to attack immediately. I want the Aurora destroyed."

"And what of the Rogen system?" General Hesson asked.

"The Aurora first," Lord Dusahn replied. "Once she is

gone, we will be free to send as many ships as necessary to pound the Rogen system out of existence."

"My lord, perhaps..."

The look from Lord Dusahn was more than enough to stop the general mid-sentence.

"As you wish, my lord," the general promised, taking a step backward before turning to leave the room.

\* \* \*

"Jump fifteen, coming up," Ensign Lassen announced from the Falcon's right seat.

"Still nothing," Sergeant Nama reported from the back.

"Nothing is good," the lieutenant reminded them both.

All three men sat in silence as they waited for the automatic jump sequencer to take them to their next scanning point.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping," the ensign reported.

"Starting scans," the sergeant reported. "I've got something. Old light, about twenty light minutes ahead."

"Transition point?" the lieutenant asked.

"Give me a second," the sergeant replied, studying his displays more intently. "Looks like the target turned...yup, definitely a turn."

"What heading?"

"Two four seven, eleven down, then she jumped."

"Any ID?"

"Looks like the frigate," the sergeant replied. "By the strength of her flash, the system is estimating a two-lightmonth jump."

"Coming to two four seven, eleven down," the lieutenant announced as he initiated a turn.

"Deactivating auto-jump sequencer," the ensign added. "Calculating an intercept jump."

"Let's go in full stealth," the lieutenant instructed. "If it's the Dusahn, we don't want them to know we're trailing them."

"Full stealth jump," the ensign acknowledged.

"Powering down all unnecessary systems," the sergeant added.

"On course and speed," the lieutenant reported.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

"Complete shutdown, passive sensors only," Sergeant Nama reported from the back. He stared at his displays for a moment and then smiled broadly. "Bingo."

\* \* \*

"Reactor three is at full power, but we still cannot get reactor one above ten percent without risking failure of the antimatter containment fields," Vladimir explained over comm-sets.

"How long until you can get reactor one repaired?" Nathan asked.

"It cannot be repaired," Vladimir replied.

"I thought you could fix anything," Nathan replied.

"Given the proper facilities and unlimited time, yes, I could make it work again, but..."

"Recommendations?"

"I would jettison the cores of one, two, and four. Their battery packs will keep their primary containment fields active for months, which is more than enough time for them to reach safe distance before containment failure."

"We can't operate on one reactor, Vlad," Nathan reminded his engineer.

"Of this, I am well aware," Vladimir scolded, "but we also cannot fix any of the reactors while they are still loaded with antimatter."

Nathan looked at Cameron and Jessica. "Any ideas?"

"We *can* operate on a single reactor," Cameron pointed out. "We just can't run shields and weapons at the same time."

"We can run point-defenses off the backup fusion reactors," Jessica suggested. "Their range will be decreased, but it's better than just sitting around getting pounded while we wait for our shields to fail."

"How accurately can we control and track those cores once ejected?" Nathan wondered.

"The cores have their own propulsion and navigation system," Cameron explained. "We can send them into an orbit around Rogen that is far enough out that nothing would be harmed should they fail."

"Then we can retrieve them anytime we wish," Nathan surmised.

"Correct," Cameron confirmed.

"Vlad, if we eject all three cores, how sure are you that you can get at least one more reactor working?"

"Let's just say that I wouldn't bet on our chances," Vladimir admitted. "However, I also would not bet on our chances if we keep the cores where they are."

"You could've just said fifty-fifty," Nathan remarked.

"I thought I did."

"Very well, eject the cores on reactors one, two, and four, and push the backup fusion reactors to one hundred and ten percent."

"Understood."

"As long as we're stuck in orbit, we won't even need main propulsion, so that will help," Cameron commented.

"We can run life support, maneuvering, and short-range comms and sensors using just the fusion reactors. That leaves reactor three running just weapons and shields," Nathan added. He looked at Jessica. "Can you shift power between shield sections, so we aren't running them all at full power at the same time? That might give us the ability to fire our plasma cannons while still being somewhat shielded."

"I'm pretty sure I can," Jessica replied.

"I'll contact Deliza," Cameron said. "She might be able to write an algorithm to help with that."

"Just don't tell Vlad," Jessica joked, "he might take offense."

"I think he'll be happy for the extra help," Nathan commented.

"Incoming flash traffic," the Ghatazhak corporal at the comms station reported. "Looks like it's from the Falcon." The corporal looked up. "They've found four ships, three light years outside the Rogen system. The two frigates that escaped and two warships of unknown type, possibly heavy cruisers."

"That's single jump distance," Cameron warned.

"We have to attack," Nathan decided.

"With what?" Jessica exclaimed, a bit surprised by his decision.

"Strikers and Gunyoki," Nathan replied.

"They can handle the frigates, but the heavy cruisers are a stretch," Cameron insisted. "Besides, that will leave us a sitting duck."

"What if that's not the only battle group around?" Jessica pointed out.

"Then they can jump back and protect us," Nathan argued.

"I agree with Jessica," Cameron said.

Nathan thought for a moment. "How many jump missiles do we have left?"

Jessica looked down at her console. "Fifteen."

"Gunyoki can't carry jump missiles," Cameron reminded him, "and we haven't fitted out the Cobras to do so either."

"We can launch them from here," Nathan explained. "Those ships are only three light years away, and the jump missiles have a five-light-year jump range."

"Maybe, but we normally launch them from no more than a few light minutes out," Cameron argued. "How are we going to get accurate targeting from here?"

"The jump missiles can be programmed to jump to an intermediate point, adjust course, and then execute their attack jump, right?"

"Right," Cameron replied, realizing what he was planning.

"We wait until we come around to a position *reasonably* along the jump line, jump them to a few light minutes out, and have the Falcon provide their attack course. Then, a few seconds after impact, our Cobras and Gunyoki hit them hard. With any luck, their shields will be down."

"And if *another* battle group jumps in?" Jessica wondered.

"Then our forces jump back to protect *us*, and we leave the first group bloodied." Nathan looked at them both. "You said so yourself, Jess, it's better than sitting here getting pounded while we wait for our shields to fail."

"Yeah, I did say that," Jessica admitted, wishing now that she hadn't.

\* \* \*

"Shenza Leader, Rogen Command," the controller called over comms.

"Go for Shenza Leader," Vol replied.

"Shenza Leader, relief ships are departing now. They will be joining you in two minutes. You are to return to base once they have arrived."

"Finally!" Tham exclaimed.

"Thank you, Command," Vol replied. "We could use a break."

"Sorry, Shenza Leader," the controller replied. "New orders. You are to refuel, rearm, and immediately relaunch."

"Might I inquire as to our mission?" Vol asked, fighting to hide his frustration.

"New targets, three light years outside the system. Coordinated attack with Cobras and Reapers."

"And the fun never stops," Tariq laughed.

"Just think," Alayna added, "we're all going to be unbeatable at the races, once this is all over."

"You mean I'm going to be unbeatable," Tham joked.

\* \* \*

Reaper Six rolled out of the starboard transfer airlock, alongside Reaper Three. Once inside, both ships rotated their landing gear and pivoted in place, turning one hundred and eighty degrees to face the same airlock again. As they rotated, their gull-wing hatches on the sides of their cockpits cracked open and swung upward.

As soon as both ships came to a stop, deck crews ran forward, moving into position to begin the process of refitting the multipurpose combat craft for their next mission.

His helmet already off and resting on the glare screen in front of him, Lieutenant Haddix disconnected his restraints, grabbed the overhead rail, and lifted himself up out of his seat and through the open hatch. "Let's get moving," he said to his copilot. "We've got less than ten minutes to piss and throw some groceries down our necks." He pulled his legs up and over the threshold, then pushed forward and slid down the side of his Reaper's nose, landing on the deck below.

The lieutenant stood there, eyes wide and his mouth slightly agape as he took in the view. What was once a familiar view was no more. Catwalks dangled precariously along the sides of the main hangar bay. There were debris piles everywhere, especially along the sides where damage control teams and deck crews had hastily cleared the deck to enable flight operations. On the far wall, along the port side of the bay, an entire section of the bulkhead had blown open into the hangar bay, revealing the blackened destruction on the other side.

"Jesus," Ensign Weston declared as he came around the front of their Reaper to stand next to his pilot. "Is that a hull breach?"

"Probably why they have everyone landing to starboard," the lieutenant replied. "Port aft landing deck is on the other side of that compartment. Emergency outer doors probably came down when it breached."

"How many of our people do you think survived?" the ensign wondered.

"I'd like to think they all did, but..." He looked at his copilot. "No time to think about that now. We've got to get back out there," he added, heading forward.

\* \* \*

"You're serious, aren't you," Robert realized.

"I wish I wasn't," Cameron replied over comms.

"It's not the frigates I'm worried about," Captain Roselle commented. "It's those two heavies of unknown origin. We've got no idea what they're packing. We could be jumping into an absolute disaster."

"That's why we're going to soften them up with missiles, first," Cameron reminded them.

"How are the missiles going to get targeting data?" Aiden asked from Striker Three.

"The Falcon will use her last stealth comm-drone to relay updated targeting data to the missile rally point, a minute before they execute their final attack jump," Cameron explained. "That should give them enough time to adjust their course, as needed."

"Barely," Robert commented.

"It's the best we've got," Cameron reminded him.

"How's Jess?" Robert asked.

"She and the captain are fine," Cameron replied. "They were still wearing their Ghatazhak armor, which probably helped. They're getting a quick med-check now."

"Anyone else from the bridge make it?"

"deBanco, but he died a few minutes ago. Medical is completely buried, and the flight deck is barely operational. We can't transfer the wounded to the surface until we finish rearming and launch the Reapers."

"What are you fitting them with?" Gil asked.

"The last of our antimatter mines," Cameron replied.

"Mines?" Robert looked at his copilot in dismay.

"In case our missiles fail to bring down the shields on the heavies," Cameron explained. "The antimatter warheads pack the biggest punch. I'd rather put them on the jump missiles, but there isn't time to swap out the warheads."

"What if another battle group is out there?" Gil wondered. "And what if they attack the Aurora while we're away?"

"We've got limited shields and weapons, and basic maneuvering. We can hold out for a few minutes until you can jump back," Cameron told them.

"What about the Glendanon?" Robert wondered.

"We sent a comm-drone to her staging point, but they weren't there yet. Probably still completing their evasive

algorithm. We left a comm-buoy ordering them directly back, no evasive."

"This is one hell of a gamble, Cam, you know that," Gil said.

"Better odds than sitting on our collective asses and praying," she replied, a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"I always did like you," Gil laughed.

"The mission clock starts in twelve minutes and thirty seconds.....hack," Cameron told them. "Good hunting, people."

Robert sighed. "We're going to need it."

### **CHAPTER TWO**

"You're not *fine*, sir," the med-tech corrected the captain. "You've got multiple contusions, a dislocated shoulder that your suit relocated for you, and a fairly deep laceration on the left side of your head. Fortunately, your nanites should take care of all of it in a few hours."

"Then, I'm fine," Nathan repeated, smiling.

"Yes, sir," the med-tech acquiesced.

"What about Lieutenant Commander Nash?"

"She's fine, same as you."

"Thank you," Nathan said as he rose from the couch in his ready room. "I'm sure there are others in far greater need of your services."

"That's what I told Captain Taylor, sir."

"Yeah, she's a bit overprotective at times."

"That's why the crew calls her 'mom'," the med-tech smiled.

"Carry on, Specialist."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan donned his uniform shirt and headed back out onto the Aurora's bridge, such as it was. Multiple systems techs were busy working to get the primary stations back to some level of functionality, and debris was being dragged off the bridge by others, including the Ghatazhak guards.

"How's tactical?" Nathan asked Jessica as he stepped up beside her and Cameron.

"We've got most of the console working," Cameron reported, "but the majority of the auto-links with combat command are down. Damage control reports it's pretty

fried down there. Apparently, a huge power spike made it past the buffers. Combat is going to be down for a while."

"Can we run everything from here?" Nathan wondered.

"That's what we're trying to set up," Jessica replied. "It will take two of us to manage it, though."

"Looks like you have a new combat station, Captain," Nathan said to Cameron.

"The view is better up here anyway," Cameron commented as she and Jessica continued working.

"What's the word on the forward cats?"

"We have to launch everything from the starboard side. Port side took too much of a beating," Cameron explained. "I ordered all the missiles from the port locker to the starboard locker. We won't be able to launch them as quickly, but we'll get them out the door."

"How many do you plan to launch?" Jessica wondered.

"All of them," Nathan replied.

"That will leave us empty," Jessica warned.

"Not all of them will hit," Nathan replied. "We can recover the ones that miss. Besides, they're already starting to crank them out on the surface," he added, turning to continue forward. After stepping around a large piece of ducting that had yet to be removed, Nathan moved forward to the sensor station on the port side. "How's it going, Ensign?" he asked the young man at the sensor station.

"I've got short-range basics: infrared, radiometric, and visual, but to do so, I had to loop it back to myself from the tactical feeds."

"What?"

"Tactical gets the same feeds from the sensor arrays as I do, only their system compiles the data into a tactical format, just icons with headings, speeds, weapons...the

basics. We get the whole picture here, with all the little details that tactical doesn't care about."

"I didn't realize," Nathan admitted.

"Captain Taylor implemented it about a year ago, as a backup for just such a situation. It works pretty well, except there's a one-second delay."

"At least we've got something," Nathan said. "You mentioned we have visual?"

"Yes, but only the array cameras. External, fixed cameras are still down. I can point the main camera array forward and set it to its widest viewing angle, and then patch it into the main view screen, if you'd like, sir."

"That won't be necessary," Nathan assured him, moving on to the helm. "What's with all the data pads?" Nathan asked Loki, noticing there were at least a dozen of them at different locations throughout the helm and navigation stations.

"Yolken's idea," Loki replied, pointing to the technician crouched down behind the other side of the console. "We're using them in place of damaged displays and control interfaces wherever we can."

"Good thinking, Specialist," Nathan said.

"Thank you, sir," Specialist Yolken replied, looking up momentarily from his work.

"Are you able to fly this thing?" Nathan asked Josh.

"Yes, sir," Josh stated confidently. "Just don't ask me to do anything fancy, like.....turning."

"I'll try to keep it simple," Nathan promised. "How long until the launch point?" he asked no one in particular.

"We're coming up on the window in one minute," Loki replied.

"I've programmed the jump missiles to adjust their jump distances to all arrive at the same rally point, in formation,

even though they'll be launched in thirty-second intervals over seven and a half minutes."

"How long will they be at the rally point?" Nathan asked.

"The first missile will be there nine and a half minutes," Cameron replied. "The last one will be there for two minutes. They'll have about a minute and a half to adjust course before executing their attack jumps."

"How's our attitude?" Nathan asked Josh.

"Mine's great, how's yours?"

"Josh..."

"Sorry, we're basically pointed in the right direction, Captain. It's kind of hard to get her to point *exactly* where you want."

"We just need to get them on the green, so the Falcon can putt them in."

Josh turned to look at Nathan, a puzzled expression on his face. "Huh?"

"Five seconds to launch window," Loki reported.

Nathan took a deep breath and sighed. "Let's hope this works." He turned to Cameron and Jessica. "Launch all missiles."

Already on the starboard catapult, the first jump missile suddenly accelerated forward, accompanied by progressively rapid flashes of blue light from the mag-rails, which sped the weapon down the track and out the open end of the starboard flight deck.

Before the first missile had reached the end of the catapult, the next missile had already been raised up through the deck. Once the lift reached the flight deck level, the weapon slid forward, setting its nose hook in the launch track. Only twenty-two seconds after the first

missile had launched, the second missile began its eightsecond journey down the catapult.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Teison glanced at the mission clock. "One minute," he announced. "Any changes, Riko?" he called over his shoulder.

"Negative. Dusahn battle group is still holding position, course, and speed. No new arrivals or departures. Signals emissions remain the same. Best I can tell, they don't know we're here."

"Very well," the lieutenant replied. "Upload the final targeting data to the comm-drone."

"Uploading data, now," the sergeant replied. A moment later, he added, "Targeting data is uploaded."

"Launch the drone," the lieutenant ordered.

Sergeant Nama entered the destination into the stealth jump comm-drone's navigational computer and pressed the launch button. "Last drone away."

Lieutenant Teison sighed. "We're now cut off from the Aurora."

"Let's hope nothing changes over the next two minutes," Ensign Lassen commented.

\* \* \*

"This is the part I hate," Aiden complained as he monitored his console displays. "It's like....."

When he didn't continue, Kenji looked at him. "It's like what?"

"I don't know what it's like, but it sucks; I know that."

"I like it better than the part where they're shooting at us," Kenji commented.

"I'm with Kenji," Chief Benetti agreed over comm-sets.

"The shooting part is the fun part!" Ledge exclaimed.

"The rest of the time, I'm basically a passenger."

"Gunners are idiots," the chief commented.

"Hey!"

"I'm sure she wasn't talking about you, Ali," Aiden was quick to point out.

"Multiple jump flashes," Sergeant Dagata reported. "One hundred and twenty clicks off our port side, ten down."

"Striker Leader, Shenza Leader," Vol called over comms. "Sorry we're late. I hope we didn't miss anything."

"You're just in time, Shenza Leader. Glad to have you," Robert replied.

"We wouldn't start without you, Vol," Lieutenant Haddix called from Reaper Six.

"Who brought the booze?" Tham asked jokingly.

"Kill all four ships and I'm buyin'," Robert insisted.

"Deal!" Tham quickly agreed.

"You can all wait here, and we'll take care of them for you," Tariq boasted.

"Be my guest!" Lieutenant Haddix replied.

"Contact," Sergeant Dagata reported. "Stealth commdrone...just arrived. It's transmitting."

"This is it, boys and girls," Robert announced. "Get ready to jump. Remember your attack vectors and departure patterns. There's going to be a lot of us jumping in and out, so keep your heads on a swivel. That goes for pilots, copilots, sensor operators...anyone who has a window or a sensor display. We jump in thirty seconds."

"Missiles are jumping away!" Sergeant Dagata reported.

"Thank God," Aiden said with relief.

Kenji looked at his friend. "You're not normal."

\* \* \*

Captain Derrabo sat at the small desk in his ready room, studying the sensor records of the Dusahn's botched attack

on the Rogen system. "Arrogance beyond belief," he muttered.

"You *did* disable their recording devices in this room, did you not?" his first officer asked.

"Oh, they still work; they just never record anything but background noise." The captain smiled. "The Dusahn believe me to be a man of few words." He looked at the sensor logs again. "The only smart one of the bunch was Sulan. At least *he* was wise enough to get out and get word back about the capabilities of this Karuzari Alliance."

"An act he will no doubt be punished for," his first officer remarked.

"Indeed."

"Do you think they may be the ones?"

The captain leaned to one side, peering out the open hatch, checking that no one was within earshot. "Based on this battle, perhaps. But we do not have enough intel yet to make that determination. The Dusahn rarely tell us everything, even when they send us in as sacrificial horaguns."

"They did defeat three ships," his first officer said, "including a battleship. It is enough to make one wonder."

"Those of us with families back home do not have the luxury of indulging such thoughts. Cherish that you can, Stethan."

"Captain, Officer of the Deck," the voice called over the intercom.

Captain Derrabo reached over and pressed the intercom button. "Go ahead, Mister Vari."

"Urgent message from Dusahn Command. New orders directly from Lord Dusahn. We are to immediately attack the Aurora and destroy her. Maximum force, no retreat."

"On my way," the captain replied, turning off the intercom

afterward. "Like I said, *horaguns* to the slaughter." The captain rose slowly from his seat, the years of command wearing heavily on his tired, old body. "Time to serve the empire, Commander Andreola."

"Service is life," the commander stated in a near mocking tone as he, too, rose to exit.

The commander stepped aside, allowing his captain to pass and enter the Amonday's bridge before him, in accordance with protocol. As tired and jaded as the old captain was, he was a good man, and Stethan had learned much from him. Most junior officers were not fortunate enough to be able to share their discontent with the empire with their superior officer, and his ability to do so had made the last few years far more bearable than they might otherwise have been.

"Captain on the bridge!" the officer of the deck barked.

"Have you confirmed the authenticity of the orders, Mister Vari?" the captain asked as he headed toward his command chair.

"The orders are authentic, Captain."

"Mister Tolan?"

"I concur," the lieutenant replied. "The orders are authentic."

"Very well. Ensign Mayer, alert the other ships that we are preparing to jump to the Rogen system to destroy the Aurora."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Mayer replied.

"Helm, set course for the Rogen system and prepare to jump on my orders," the captain instructed.

"Turn to new course," the helmsman replied sharply. "Two one five by zero one seven. Accelerating to two triple zero."

Captain Derrabo looked at his first officer for

confirmation, knowing the commander had a knack for navigation and always seemed to know the proper course at a moment's notice. When the commander nodded his approval, the captain replied, "Execute your turn, Mister Theunis."

"Coming to two one five by zero one seven, accelerating to two thousand. Starting jump calcu..."

"Contacts!" the sensor officer interrupted. "Jump missiles! Fifteen of them!"

"Raise shields!" Commander Andreola barked.

"How far?" the captain demanded.

"Point-defenses and countermeasures!" the commander added.

"Port side! Ten seconds!" the sensor officer replied.

"Helm, full power, hard to starboard!" the captain ordered.

"Point-defenses engaging!" the weapons officer announced.

"Five seconds to impact!"

"Countermeasures away!"

"All hands, brace for impact!" Commander Andreola called over the ship's loudspeakers as he grabbed the nearby railing with both hands.

A series of explosions violently rocked the ship, the third of which tossed the young commander over the railing and onto the next level down from the command platform. The lights went out, and screams of pain were heard as men met their untimely demise. The commander suddenly felt as if the air was being pulled from his lungs. He heard the voices of his bridge staff shouting out reports of damage, but their voices seemed distant and nearly unintelligible. Acrid smoke instantly filled his lungs, and for a moment the commander felt as if he would lose consciousness.

The explosions and the shaking stopped, and the lights came back on, albeit not at their usual intensity. Fresh air rushed back in, and the commander coughed as he tried to inhale. His lungs burned, and his eyes were watering. His head hurt, as well, but his hearing was returning to normal. He pushed himself onto his hands and knees, and looked around the bridge, immediately spotting his commanding officer lying motionless on the floor not two meters away. "Captain!" he barked, scrambling to his side. He reached for the old man's neck, visibly relieved when he found a pulse. "Medical!" he barked. "The captain's injured!"

Two men appeared, as if from nowhere, one of them grabbing the commander and yanking him to his feet as the other man dropped to his knees beside the fallen captain.

Now standing, Commander Andreola looked around, quickly surveying the condition of the Amonday's bridge. She was battered, but her systems appeared to be functioning for the most part. "Damage report!" he barked. "Shields and weapons!"

"Port shields are gone!" Lieutenant Tolan replied. "All other shields are at eighty percent!"

Commander Andreola spun around, surprised to be getting the weapons report from an engineering officer. Then he spotted the lifeless corpse of his weapons officer lying on the floor a meter away from his station.

"More contacts!" the sensor officer reported. "Gunships! And fighters!"

"Helm, evasive one four, and prepare an open escape jump, just in case," Commander Andreola ordered.

"Evasive one four," the helmsman confirmed.

"How many missiles hit us?" the commander wondered, his senses still not fully returned.

"Three impacts, sir!" the sensor officer replied. "If we

hadn't been turning, we wouldn't be here right now."

"Lieutenant Tolan, engage all ion cannons and target the attacking ships, starting with their gunships," the commander barked.

\* \* \*

"Four targets," Striker One's sensor officer reported, "two heavies and two frigates."

"Scan the heavies," Robert instructed. "I want to know what they're packing."

"Take the heavy to the left," his copilot instructed. "He's turning away."

"The heavy to the left has no port shields!" the sensor officer reported.

"That's why he's turning away," the copilot surmised. "He's trying to protect his port side."

"Strikers Three and Four, abort and jump to the far side of the heavy on the left," Robert ordered over comms. "His port shields are down. Designate him as Heavy One."

"Three copies," Aiden replied from Striker Three.

"Four copies," Char acknowledged for Striker Four.

"Char, dive under and follow me across, then we'll break opposite on the far side and come in on forty-fives to the target," Aiden instructed.

"Copy."

"Firing," Robert reported as he let loose the first salvos of plasma torpedoes toward the turning warship.

"Strikers are targeting the heavy on the left," Vol called over comms. Two, Three, and Four; follow me to the frigate cutting between the two heavies. Five through Eight; dive down and jump in far under them, and come straight up from below, but keep on the frigate's midship section. We'll jump fore and aft to stay out of your lanes."

"What about the other frigate?" Dosne asked from Shenza Five. "He's a sitting duck!"

"His jump drive is down," Isa explained from Shenza One's back seat. "He's not going anywhere soon."

"We have to prevent anyone from jumping!" Vol added as he adjusted his course and opened fire with his Gunyoki's main, engine-driven plasma cannons.

"We're being targeted," Isa warned.

"By the frigate?"

"By all of them!"

As if on cue, Vol's sensor display lit up with streams of rail gun fire, crisscrossing his flight path.

"Rail guns!" Vol warned his pilots. "How many hits can we take, Isa?"

"Depends on their size and velocity, and if they're..."

The Gunyoki fighter's shields lit up as the first slugs arrived, causing the ship to bounce wildly. Vol felt as if they were being showered by waves of rocks. He had never seen their shields flashing in such a way.

"Not many!" Isa warned. "Shields are at fifty percent and falling fast!"

"Keep your attack runs short!" Vol warned as he pitched down for a clear line and jumped to safety on the far side of the engagement area. His ship again flying smoothly, he shook off the surge of adrenalin. "That was not fun!"

"Agreed!" Isa replied.

"Can you divert all available power to the forward shields on the next run?"

"Yes, but be sure you jump *before* we get too close or a few of those slugs will find their way into our hull and ruin our day!"

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"Reapers Five and Six, lay your shield busters in front of Heavy Two!" Robert ordered over comms. "They're completely intact! Our missiles somehow missed them entirely!"

"Five copies."

"Six copies," Lieutenant Haddix added.

"Six, Five. I'll drop two."

"I'll follow with another two," the lieutenant replied.

"Prepping two," Ensign Weston reported.

"I'm going to turn to port, jump ahead, then cut back and come across his bow, dropping from his port to starboard," the lieutenant announced over comms.

"Sounds good," the pilot of Reaper Five replied. "I'm going to come over the top, stern to bow, dropping as I dive through his flight path."

"Watch for rail gun fire!" someone warned over comms.

"The heavies have rail guns and ion cannons!"

Lieutenant Haddix pushed his Reaper into a left turn, then pressed his jump button, bringing the nose of his ship back hard right as soon as they came out of the jump. After a few seconds, he came out of his turn and headed back toward the target at a steep angle, nearly on an opposite heading. After a quick double-check of his intercept angles, he looked to his copilot. "Ready?"

"Ready."

The lieutenant tapped his jump button, finding themselves suddenly flying directly across the enemy ship's flight path, less than two hundred meters from its bow as it charged toward them.

"Shit!" Ensign Weston exclaimed, not expecting to be *that* close to the enemy warship.

"Release and arm!" the lieutenant ordered.

"Releasing!" the ensign replied, pressing the button to eject the first two antimatter mines. "Arming!"

The ship rocked as energy weapons fire and rail gun slugs slammed into their shields.

"Mines are confirmed hot!" the ensign barked. "Get us the fuck out of here!"

Two mines tumbled through space as the Reaper that had just released them disappeared in a blue-white flash. A split second later, Reaper Five jumped in directly above the enemy warship's midsection, quickly traversing the rest of the target's length before diving down across his bow. As he dove, he too released a pair of antimatter mines, which tumbled downward, nearly colliding with the mines released by Reaper Six.

As Reaper Five jumped away, the first of the four mines made contact with the enemy warship's forward shields, detonating in a blinding white flash of light, followed a split second later by three more antimatter detonations.

"Heavy Two's forward shields are down!" Sergeant Latimer reported excitedly.

"I've got a good angle on Heavy Two," Gil announced. "I'm changing targets." He pushed his flight control stick hard right, and pitched down slightly, turning into the approaching warship. "Anyone who can hear me, target the bow of Heavy Two!"

Gil rolled out of his turn, adjusted his jump distance dial, then jumped ahead twenty kilometers to close the distance to the target more quickly. As soon as he came out of the jump, he pressed his firing button and held it down, sending waves of triplets into the unprotected bow of the approaching vessel.

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Striker Two's plasma torpedoes tore into the enemy warship's bow, blowing open its nose and allowing the subsequent torpedoes to burrow deep within the target's forward section, setting off multiple secondary explosions. As Striker Two pitched up and jumped away, the warship's nose blew up, and the secondary explosions continued the length of the target, breaking it up completely.

"Alayna, you with me?" Tham asked as he came out of his jump.

"I'm with you," she replied over comms.

"Target is dead ahead, three kilometers," Gento reported from Shenza Three's back seat. "His port, midship shields are down to twenty percent!"

"Alayna!" Tham called. "I'll knock out his shields and you finish him off!"

"Let's do it!" Alayna replied.

Tham adjusted his jump range to one kilometer. "Jumping forward one click!" he announced, pressing his jump button immediately afterward. The barely-distinguishable frigate suddenly filled his screen, and the Gunyoki pilot pressed and held down his firing button, sending both streams of plasma energy from his engine-mounted plasma cannons, as well as a hail of snub missiles into the enemy frigates struggling midship shields. The warship's shields flashed brightly, with each impact failing altogether and allowing the last few missiles to reach its hull.

"She's all yours, Alayna!" Tham announced triumphantly as he pitched up to find a clear jump line and pressed his jump button again.

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"Let 'em have it, Alayna!" Isanu yelled from Shenza Four's back seat.

Alayna took a deep breath and held down her firing trigger, sending bolts of red-orange plasma and streams of snub missiles toward the unprotected black and crimson frigate. The first few impacts tore the outer hull open, allowing all subsequent blasts to burrow deeper and deeper into the warship, until they found something that reacted unkindly to such massive amounts of energy. The frigate blew apart from the center outward, splitting the ship in half and completely destroying its midsection, leaving only the fore and aft quarters of the ship intact and drifting harmlessly.

"Damn that felt good!" Alayna cheered as she pitched downward, passing directly under the expanding ball of gas and debris that was once the center section of the enemy frigate.

"I can get the port shields up if I funnel energy from the jump banks!" Lieutenant Tolan reported from the engineering station on the Amonday's bridge.

"More fighters to port!" the sensor officer announced.

Commander Andreola glanced at the tactical display on the overhead, noting the location of all ships currently attacking them. "Helm, down forty and hard to starboard."

"Down forty and hard to starboard," the helmsman

acknowledged as he pushed the control yoke forward and turned it to the right.

"Shall I power the shields, sir?" Lieutenant Tolan urged.

"How long until we can get our main reactor back up to full power?" the commander asked.

"Two minutes!" the lieutenant replied.

"Raise port shields, but do *not* let them drain our jump banks below fifty percent!"

"Yes, sir!" the lieutenant replied. "Raising port shields!"

"How long until we can jump?" the commander asked.

"Three minutes!" the lieutenant replied.

"Helmsman, plot an escape jump to the Rogen system."

"Sir?" the helmsman asked, confused.

"Captain!" the lieutenant began to object.

"Our orders are to attack the Aurora!" the commander explained. "These ships are attempting to prevent us from doing so. Even if we survive this, we will still have to attack the Aurora or face execution! If we are to die this day, we shall die serving the goddamned empire so that our families will be honored."

The commander couldn't believe what had just come out of his mouth. It was a blatant lie, but it was one that his crew needed to hear. He, himself, had no family who would benefit from his sacrifice, but most of his crew did, and the last thing he needed right now was a mutiny. That would surely seal their fate.

"Frigate Two at two four seven, twenty down, four clicks out," Ensign Weston reported from Reaper Six's copilot seat.

"Reaper Six, Shenza Seven! How many mines do you have left?"

"Shenza Seven, Reaper Six," the ensign replied. "We only have one remaining."

"Six, Seven, toss it at Frigate Two's aft, dorsal shields!"

"Six copies," Ensign Weston replied.

"Jumping ahead three clicks," Lieutenant Haddix announced as he pressed the jump button on his flight control stick. The moment the jump ended, he pulled the Reaper into a tight left turn, pitching down twenty degrees. "Be ready to release and arm," he warned his copilot.

"I'm ready." The ensign studied the sensor display for a moment. "They've spotted us," he warned. "They're setting up a flack field."

"Hang on," the lieutenant warned as he made the final adjustments to their course. "This is going to be rough."

Both men braced themselves as the lieutenant pressed the jump button again. The ship began to shake violently as rail gun slugs and energy weapons fire slammed into their forward shields.

"Shields at forty percent!" the ensign warned.

"Release on my mark!" the lieutenant ordered, holding his course. "NOW!" he finally barked.

"Mine away!"

"Arm it!"

"She's armed," the ensign acknowledged. "Arming confirmed!"

"Jumping!" the lieutenant announced as he pressed the jump button, yet again.

The tumbling antimatter mine struck the frigate's shields, above and slightly astern, detonating in a brilliant, white flash of light. Sparks shot out from all over the frigate's stern as shield emitters absorbed the sudden surge in

energy and failed in spectacular fashion. Seconds later, two Reapers and three Gunyoki jumped in from above and behind the doomed frigate, opening fire with everything they had.

Each impact drove through the frigate's hull, quickly finding her power plant and propellant tanks inside. The frigate's back side blew apart in a brilliant flash of yellow and red, causing her forward section to tumble forward. Seconds after that, several more Gunyoki fighters jumped in from the frigate's port side and pounded away on the target's still-intact forward section until it came apart, as well.

"Frigate Two is destroyed!" one of the Gunyoki pilots announced triumphantly.

"How are we looking, Kas?" Robert asked over his commsets.

"Heavy One is all that's left," his sensor officer reported.
"But she's gotten her port shields restored somehow."

"All ships, Striker One. Concentrate on Heavy One. Gunyoki high, Strikers low, Reapers to stern. Odds and evens on the way out."

"Gunyoki high, Strikers low, Reapers to stern. Odds and evens on the way out." Captain Nash's voice instructed over comms.

"Shenza One to Shenza Flight," Vol called over comms. "We are attacking Heavy One. Follow me in. We take the high side, odds and evens. Let's finish this, now!" he added as he turned toward the last enemy warship.

"Commander!" the Amonday's sensor officer shouted. "The Ensayon has been destroyed!" He turned to look at the commander. "We're it!"

"Jump drive is operational!" Lieutenant Tolan reported.

"Helm!" the commander barked. "Turn to starboard, heading of zero two zero by zero eight, ahead flank!"

"Zero two zero by zero eight, ahead flank, aye," the helmsman answered smartly.

"Six new targets!" the sensor officer reported. "Four above, one to port, and one to stern. The one to stern is launching some... ANTIMATTER MINE! ANTIMATTER MINE!"

"HELM!" the commander yelled. "ESCAPE JUMP!"

"Sir, we're not on..." the helmsman began to object.

"I SAID NOW!" the commander insisted.

"Target is two clicks out," Kenji reported from Striker Three's copilot's seat.

"Reaper Two is starting their attack run!" Sergeant Dagata reported over comm-sets. "They're dropping an antimatter mine toward the target's stern!"

"They're turning!" Aiden realized.

"TARGET HAS JUMPED!" Sergeant Dagata warned.

"DAMN IT!" Aiden cursed.

"Target jumped toward the Rogen system!" the sergeant added, alarm in his voice.

Aiden immediately turned to follow the enemy warship.

"Where are you going?" Kenji wondered.

"Dags!" Aiden barked. "Drop a comm-buoy and tell everyone where the target jumped to and that we're pursuing!"

"Jump comp..."

"Pull up! Pull up!" Commander Andreola ordered urgently as the planet appeared, filling their entire forward view screen.

The helmsman didn't bother acknowledging the commander's order, instead just pulling back on his flight control yoke as hard as he could and firing the upward translation thruster under their nose in an attempt to increase their pitch rate.

"Sensors! Is that Rakuen?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Find the Aurora!" the commander barked.

"Leveling off!" the helmsman reported, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I've got her, Commander!" the sensor officer reported.
"On the horizon, passing left to right!"

"Weapons!" the commander barked. "Lock all missiles on that target and fire when ready!"

"Contact!" Ensign Kagan reported from the Aurora's sensor station. "Unknown type warship! Possible heavy cruiser!"

"It's the same configuration as the ones the Falcon spotted," Cameron reported, looking over the ensign's shoulder.

"From the same battle group or a different one?" Nathan demanded, jumping to his feet.

"They're launching missiles!" the ensign exclaimed.

"Jump missiles?"

"Activating point-defenses!" Jessica reported.

"Negative!" the ensign replied. "Missiles are *not* jumping!"

"Can we run point-defenses *and* shields?" Nathan wondered.

"We can leave the starboard shields up and drop everything else," Cameron replied as she hurried over to help Jessica at the tactical station. "Let's just hope that ship is by itself!"

"Ten missiles total!" the ensign reported. "Thirty seconds to impact!"

"Are countermeasures working?" Nathan asked.

"Negative," Jessica replied. "Point-defenses are firing!"

"Another jump flash," Ensign Kagan reported. "Behind the first!"

"Helm! Turn into the target and accelerate!" Nathan ordered.

"Coming to starboard and accelerating," Josh replied, "sort of."

"I'll have to rotate shields," Cameron warned.

"Our forward shields are the strongest," Nathan insisted.

"Two down, twenty seconds!"

"We won't have as many guns head-to-head," Jessica warned.

"I'll take the stronger shields any day," Nathan replied.

"Second contact is a Cobra!" the sensor operator reported with glee. "Four down! Fifteen seconds."

"Striker! Aurora!" Nathan called over comms. "Target inbound missiles! Target inbound missiles!"

"Target inbound missiles!" Nathan ordered over comms.

"I'm pitching up to put more guns on them and jumping forward to catch up!" Aiden announced as he killed their forward thrust and pitched their nose down ninety degrees. He tapped the jump button.

"Targeting missiles," Kenji reported.

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"Six down!" Ensign Kagan reported. "Five seconds!"

"All hands, brace for impact!" Nathan warned over shipwide.

"Seven down! Eight!"

The Aurora shook violently as the last two missiles struck her forward shields and detonated.

"Forward shields down to forty-two percent but holding!" Cameron reported.

"Third jump flash!" the sensor officer announced.

"Two missiles made it through!" the Amonday's sensor officer reported. "Their forward shields are down to forty percent and falling! They have insufficient power to recharge them!"

"We're out of missiles, Sir!" Lieutenant Tolan reported.

"Ion cannons!"

"Also down!"

"Then jump us in close and we'll finish her off with rail guns!" Commander Andreola ordered.

"Another gunship just jumped in behind us!" the sensor officer warned.

"Locking all rail guns on the target!" the lieutenant announced. "Firing all rail guns!"

"Char! Target that ship!" Aiden instructed over comms.

"We're on it!" Charnelle replied, diving toward Heavy One. "Firing plasma torpedo cannons!"

Red-orange plasma torpedoes streaked out from under

their nose toward the heavy cruiser ahead of them, lighting up the target's shields with each impact.

"They're targeting us!" Sari warned from the copilot's seat.

"Our forward shields are down to twenty percent!" Sergeant Kotai reminded them. "We can't take more than a few seconds of weapons fire before they....."

"Damn it!" Char cursed, pushing forward on her flight control stick.

It was too late. The first dozen rounds of rail gun fire were charged slugs, which overwhelmed their shields and caused a cascade failure. The kinetic energy of the slugs, combined with the explosive energy they carried, overcame their shields, causing them to fail within seconds. After that, the rounds tore through their hull with impunity, shredding the now-defenseless gunship.

Striker Four broke open, just aft of its cockpit, setting off secondary explosions that ripped her open in an instant.

Aiden saw the icon for Striker Four suddenly disappear from his tactical display, and a feeling of despair washed through him. "Oh, God," he exclaimed.

"Maybe they jumped?" Kenji suggested.

"Dags!" Aiden called. "Did Four jump?"

"Negative!" the sergeant replied over comm-sets. "No jump flash!"

"NO!" Aiden exclaimed, overcome with grief.

"Striker Four is down!" Ensign Kagan reported.

"Shields are down to ten percent!" Cameron warned. "We can't take much more of this!"

"New contacts!" the sensor officer reported. "Two more Cobras!"

"Strikers, Aurora!" Nathan called over comms. "Get that heavy off of us!"

"Shields at ten percent!" Cameron warned.

"Aurora, Striker One, we're on it, Captain!"

"Five percent!" Cameron added.

"Josh, roll us onto our port side and show them our belly!" Nathan ordered.

"Rolling!" Josh replied.

"Shields are down!" Cameron reported.

The Aurora began to shake again as rail gun rounds slammed into their unshielded hull. Then, the shaking suddenly stopped.

"New contact!" the sensor officer reported gleefully. "It's the Glendanon!" he added. "She's put herself between us and them!"

"I've got three rescue transponders!" Sergeant Dagata reported.

"Any IDs?" Aiden asked, becoming hopeful.

"Negative," the sergeant replied. "Best I can tell, one from forward, two from the rear."

"The Glendanon is opening fire!" Ensign Kagan reported. "More contacts! Reapers and Gunyoki!"

Nathan watched the tactical display as the heavy warship of unknown origin was pounded by the Alliance ships now joining the fight. There was no way that ship was getting out alive.

"Target has lost shields and main power," Cameron

reported. "They have maneuvering, but cannot jump."

"Aurora Actual to all Alliance units, cease-fire, I say again, cease-fire!" He turned to look at Jessica and Cameron.

"All units have disengaged," Jessica reported.

"The ship is dead in space," the sensor operator declared.

"Dusahn vessel, this is the Captain Nathan Scott of the Alliance ship Aurora," Nathan called over comms. "Surrender, or be destroyed. You have one minute." Nathan waited half a minute but got no response. "Jess, how many Ghatazhak are aboard at the moment?"

"At least fifty," she replied.

"Cam, recall two Reapers for refit with breach pods."

"Aurora, this is the Orswellan warship Amonday, Commander Stethan Andreola commanding. Better that you kill us now so our families will not be punished."

Nathan looked at the sensor officer. "Can they fire on us?" "Negative, sir," the sensor officer assured him. "They don't have the energy."

"Can they blow themselves up?"

"All they have are fusion reactors," the sensor officer reported. "And I'm not detecting any more missiles so, unless they have a self-destruct mechanism..."

"If they did, why would they be asking us to kill them?" Cameron wondered.

"To trick us into moving closer?" Jessica suggested.

"I don't think so," Nathan decided, tapping his comm-set. "Commander Andreola, while I understand your predicament, I'd rather *not* kill you," Nathan replied over comms. "I should warn you, however, that I am about to send over an armed boarding party with authorization to use deadly force to secure your ship. Resist if you wish, but I would strongly advise against it."

"Are you crazy?" Jessica wondered. "You just tipped them

off!"

"I don't think so," Nathan argued. "If they were trying to set a trap, they'd want to draw us in closer and take our *ship* out. It does them no good to kill a handful of armed boarders."

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"Jump complete," the Mystic's helmsman announced as the ship jumped into high orbit above Rakuen.

"Multiple contacts," the sensor officer reported. "The Aurora, the Glendanon, Strikers, Gunyoki, and Reapers..." The sensor officer paused a moment, and his voice became more urgent. "And an unknown warship."

"Mister Perklin, raise shields and power all defenses," Commander Kaplan ordered. "Sound general quarters."

"General quarters, aye!" the officer of the deck replied.

"Raising shields and powering all defenses!" the weapons officer acknowledged.

"What's the warship doing?" the commander asked.

"Nothing," the sensor officer replied, sounding bewildered.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. In fact, they appear to be without main power. Signs of heavy damage on both the unknown warship *and* the Aurora."

"What about the Glendanon?" the commander wondered, a bit bewildered herself.

"Minor damage," the sensor officer replied. "Commander, two of the Reapers are approaching the unknown warship. They appear to be equipped with breach pods."

"They're boarding her," the commander surmised. "Comms, patch me through to the Aurora."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, the communications officer added, "I have the Aurora, Commander."

"Aurora, Mystic, Commander Kaplan here. How can we assist?"

"Good to hear your voice, Lara," Cameron replied over comms. "Take up position to our starboard side as protection. The Glendanon will stay to port. And be ready with medical and damage control teams. We're pretty banged up, here."

"We've got your starboard, Cam. Help is on the way. Mystic, out." The commander turned to the officer of the deck. "Lieutenant, put together a first response team. Medtechs, rescue workers, and engineers. Lead them yourself."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant replied, turning to exit in a hurry. "Comms, alert Captain Rainey."

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"They're on deck four, now," Lieutenant Tolan announced as he monitored the intruders' movements through the Amonday.

"We should have fought them," Lieutenant Commander Vari said.

"With what," the commander challenged, "blasters and guts?" He laughed. "They'd mow us down in seconds."

"But our families..."

"We fought as well as could be expected," the commander insisted. "We even attempted to carry out Lord Dusahn's orders when we were the last ship in the battle group. We will be seen as heroes."

"Until they learn that we surrendered," the lieutenant commander pointed out.

"How will they know? We lost all power, shields, and weapons."

"They will know."

"Perhaps, in time."

"Intruders are on the command deck and headed our

way," Lieutenant Tolan reported. "Security is defending... My God..."

"You see," the commander said. "Everyone, stand next to your duty stations in the position of attention. Offer no resistance."

"You're a fool," Lieutenant Commander Vari scolded, moving toward the weapons locker.

"Lieutenant Commander!" the commander barked.

The lieutenant commander ignored him, punching in the code to the locker and pulling out blasters to hand to the rest of the bridge staff.

"Put down those weapons, or you'll all be killed!" the commander warned.

"You may die a coward if you so choose, Stethan," the lieutenant commander said as he charged his weapon and turned toward the entrance.

The hatch suddenly flew open, and two small silver balls came flying in, bouncing off the deck. A split second later, the two silver balls detonated in brilliant flashes of light, accompanied by a deafening squeal that caused them all to fall to their knees, their hands over their ears.

The commander felt as if his head were about to split open. Weapons fire sounded, although none of it was theirs. It was over in a few seconds, and the commander found himself face down on the deck, a boot against his back, as another man slapped restraints on his wrists.

As the sounds of battle faded, two men picked the commander up off the deck with surprising ease, placing him on his feet again. Before him stood four soldiers, all of the same size and build, and each of them clad in flat-black body armor. They had the look of men who killed for a living and were at ease with their duties. The commander

knew from experience that such men were to be feared. The Dusahn were such men.

The visor on one of the intruders rose, revealing the wearer's face. "You are in command of this ship?"

"The captain was injured in your initial attack," the commander replied. "I am Commander Stethan Andreola of the Orswellan Guard, first officer of the Amonday. I am currently in command."

"Did you order these men to defend your bridge?" the intruder inquired.

The commander looked at the bodies of his bridge staff. "I did not," he replied. "In fact, I ordered them to stand down."

"Then, why did they not follow your orders?"

"They feared retribution by the Dusahn against their families back on Orswella."

The intruder's left eyebrow went up in a curious fashion. "And you did not?"

"I have no family," the commander replied.

"I see," the intruder replied. "I take it you have the command codes to this vessel?"

"I do."

"You will give them to me."

"I shall be happy to; however, they shall do you little good."

"Explain," the intruder demanded in surprisingly polite, yet direct, fashion.

"The Dusahn do not trust us. If this ship deviates from its assignment, it will automatically become disabled."

"Thank you for your honest response, Commander," the intruder replied politely, nodding with respect.

"May I ask your name?" the commander wondered.

"I am Lieutenant Brons of the Ghatazhak, leader of Alpha

Platoon. You and your crew are now prisoners of the Karuzari. You will order the remainder of your crew to cooperate. If any resistance is offered, it will be met with immediate deadly force. Is that understood?"

"Quite clearly, thank you," the commander replied. "The few security personnel you've already encountered are the only resistance you will meet, Lieutenant. The rest of the crew are technicians and specialists with no combat training."

"I hope you are correct, Commander," the lieutenant stated. "Please, follow these men."

"Where am I going?" the commander asked.

"To the Aurora for interrogation, Commander."

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"Aurora, Lieutenant Brons," the lieutenant called over comms.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Nathan replied.

"The Amonday is secure. You are clear to send additional Ghatazhak to secure the prisoners."

"How many prisoners are we looking at?" Nathan asked.

"Eighty-seven," the lieutenant replied, "fifteen of which are wounded and will require medical attention."

"Understood," Nathan replied. "We'll launch the shuttles right away." Nathan turned to look at Jessica and Cameron. "Where are we going to put eighty-seven prisoners?"

"There's got to be someplace on Rakuen or Neramese where we can hold them," Jessica said.

"I'll contact both worlds and ask," Cameron offered.

"That can wait for now," Nathan insisted. "We have more important matters."

"Like what?" Jessica wondered. "Repairing the ship?"

"Yes, that's one, but I was thinking more about a retaliatory attack," Nathan explained.

"Isn't that what we just did?" Jessica stated.

"What we just did was an act of defense," Nathan insisted.

"Technically, no," Cameron argued. "That battle group was *well* outside of the Rogen system and was *not* in any area known to be controlled by any world."

"The Dusahn *attacked* the Rogen system, remember?" Nathan reminded her.

"And we retaliated," Cameron continued, "against the closest Dusahn forces we could find, which just *happened* to be laying in wait to strike again."

"How can you say that?" Nathan wondered.

"I'm just stating facts, Nathan. I'm not passing any judgments. Hell, I agree *wholeheartedly* with our attack on that battle group."

"Then you shouldn't have any problem with us going one step further and attacking the Dusahn directly, *in* the Takar system."

"Don't you think we should take a moment to breathe?" Cameron suggested.

"We need to show them we are *ready* and *willing* to attack them *directly*, or else they'll be back with more ships to finish us off just as soon as they can get them here."

"I don't disagree with you, Nathan," Cameron explained. "I just disagree with launching an attack right *now*. Our forces have been through two battles, back-to-back. Our ship is badly damaged, we have many wounded, and our ability to defend the Rogen system is questionable. At the very least, stand down for twenty-four hours so our crews can recover and we can get a clearer picture of where we stand."

Jessica looked to Nathan, then at Cameron, then back to Nathan again.

"Don't look at me like that," Nathan told Jessica.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to," Nathan replied.

Sergeant Rossi looked at the three of them, dumbfounded. "You have a very odd command structure on this ship, don't you?"

"It's complicated," Jessica replied.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

Commander Prechitt, Lieutenant Sandau, and Council Member Garon watched from one side of the makeshift airbase as the first Sugali fighter came to a hover over touchdown point twenty-one. Once directly over the touchdown point, the ship began its five-meter descent, its landing gear unfolding and locking into place only centimeters before touching the surface of Casbon.

As the Sugali fighter's power plant spun down, the three spectators approached. As they grew closer, the front windshield, which wrapped down and around the center of the ship's split nose, parted midline and opened like a clamshell, revealing the pilot.

"Welcome to Casbon," Council Member Garon greeted as she and the others came around to the nose of the fighter.

The pilot walked down the bottom side of the open canopy, as if it were a boarding ramp, removing his helmet as his feet touched the compacted surface, revealing that he was not only young, but a female. "Thank you," the pilot replied as she walked toward them. "Nice little place you have, here. Did you carve all this out just for this purpose?"

"I am told it was once an aramenium quarry," Commander Prechitt replied.

"Aramenium," the pilot commented, sounding somewhat surprised. "No wonder you want so many fighters." She walked up to the commander and offered a handshake. "Talisha Sane."

"A pleasure," Commander Prechitt replied, taking her hand. "This is Council Member Garon of Casbon."

"An honor to meet you, ma'am," Talisha replied, shaking the council member's hand.

"My second in command, Lieutenant Sandau," the commander introduced.

"Lieutenant," Talisha greeted, shaking his hand, as well.

"Miss Sane," the lieutenant replied respectfully.

"Please, call me Talisha," she insisted.

"I take it you are the flight instructor we were promised?" Commander Prechitt confirmed.

"Correct," Talisha confirmed. "I have more than four thousand hours combined, in all *three* classes of Sugali fighters."

"Have you any *combat* experience?" Council Member Garon wondered.

"No, ma'am. I am predominantly a stunt pilot. I fly in air shows and the like. But I am also rated as a maintenance specialist, as well as an instructor, and I have taught *many* pilots to both fly *and* maintain Sugali fighters."

"What *kind* of pilots?" Commander Prechitt asked.

"They did not say," Talisha replied, smiling, "and I did not ask."

"I see," the commander replied. He turned to look at the fighter again. "The egress system of this model is quite different from the one our captain liberated from a group of pirates."

"This is the single-seat model," Talisha explained. "As are the majority of the ships you have purchased."

"How many of them are dual-seat trainers?" Lieutenant Sandau asked.

"I believe there are four," Talisha replied. "They were included with this first group of twenty ships."

"How many more pilots came with you?" the commander asked.

"I am the only one."

"How are the rest of them being ferried down?" Commander Prechitt wondered.

"I will use my approach logs as a navigation baseline and then transfer it to the other ships on the Baramond, giving each a different touchdown point. Then their AIs will fly them down," Talisha explained.

"These ships have AIs?" the council member questioned, concerned.

"You were not expecting this?" Talisha wondered.

"I was told the AIs would be an additional cost," she replied, "one that we did not agree upon."

"There will be no additional charges," Talisha promised her. "I insisted that they be activated on the ships in the first group, which I *assume* will be used for primary flight training. The Sugali fighter is not an easy ship to pilot, and having active AIs will dramatically increase safety during training."

"Interesting," Commander Prechitt commented.

"I take it you were not informed of the AIs, either?"

"I was not," the commander admitted.

"Are you uncomfortable with them?" Talisha asked, noticing the look on the commander's face.

"Not as far as flight training is concerned," he replied.
"I'm certain they *will* make the process safer. I just worry about any AI in an armed ship."

"I understand your concerns, Commander. The Sugali had similar ones. Therefore, the AIs are incapable of *firing* weapons. *That* responsibility is reserved for the pilot. The AI is merely an assistant to the pilot, taking much of the workload off of them."

"But, the AI *can* fly the ship, right?" the commander asked.

"Indeed," Talisha confirmed, "if instructed to do so. It can also take the controls if the pilot becomes incapacitated and can even fly the ship back to its home port, as well as communicate with others on the pilot's behalf."

"Does the two-seat version have an AI, as well?" Lieutenant Sandau wondered.

"It does not," Talisha replied. "An AI system adds additional weight. Were it installed in the dual-seat version, the ship's range and/or ordnance load would be significantly reduced."

"I would love to give her a spin," the commander said, admiring the fighter's sleek lines.

"A spin?" Talisha wondered.

"Take her up for a test flight, see what she is capable of," Commander Prechitt explained.

"Then, you are a pilot?"

"I am."

"Then, by all means, you should take her up for a *spin*," Talisha agreed, smiling. "After a brief orientation, of course."

"Of course," the commander replied, also smiling.

\* \* \*

"My lord," General Hesson greeted respectfully as he entered his leader's office.

Lord Dusahn's eyes narrowed. The look on his general's face hinted at news he did not wish to hear. "If you are here to tell me that our forces have once again failed to destroy the Aurora, it would be better if you kept your distance," he warned in seething tones.

"Our reserve forces were ambushed by the Aurora just as they were preparing to attack, as ordered. All ships, save the Amonday, were destroyed in the first few minutes of the engagement. Early reports indicate that only the Amonday was able to engage the Aurora. However, I fear that she, too, has been lost, since we have not heard from her."

Lord Dusahn stood behind his desk, his anger rapidly reaching a boiling point. Suddenly, he exploded, grabbing the crystal water pitcher from his desk and throwing it against the wall with all his might, screaming in rage as he did so.

General Hesson stood perfectly still as the crystal pitcher shattered, continuing to look straight ahead at his leader.

"How am I to build an empire," Lord Dusahn yelled, "when surrounded by inept captains and conspiring nobles!"

General Hesson's left eyebrow shot up. "Then, I take it you have read the morning intelligence reports."

"I will hang them by their genitals in the middle of the Plaza de Torano so that all will witness their disgrace!"

"And what of their assets?" General Hesson asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"We will seize them and sell them to the highest bidding house!" Lord Dusahn screamed. "And at a bargain, thus deepening their shame! Their families shall be penniless! Their wives shall become my chambermaids and their daughters my concubines!"

"Hardly a rational response to expected acts of treason," General Hesson replied.

"Do not test me, Hesson," Lord Dusahn seethed, pointing a menacing finger at the older man. "My patience for these people has neared its end."

"You cannot expect those you conquered yesterday to love you today, my lord. Such loyalty takes time, usually many decades."

"We do not have decades!" Lord Dusahn yelled. "The majority of our fleet is either outdated or of inferior

Orswellan design! Our qualified ranks continue to dwindle, so much so that, soon, our automation will no longer suffice! I *need* the support of the nobles, and now I find that they have been conspiring against me!"

"Only the original houses," General Hesson pointed out, "which was to be expected. Their pride and loyalties run deeper than those of the lesser houses. Perhaps it is *there* that we must focus our efforts."

"I care not about the noble families of this wretched society," Lord Dusahn stated dismissively. "The common man is where we will place our bets. *They* are the ones with nothing to lose and everything to gain. We will offer them the same status as those of noble lineage, as well as similar levels of wealth and power."

"Men who can be easily bought, can also be easily swayed by the opposition," General Hesson warned. "I believe those who *have* something to lose are more predictable and, therefore, more trustworthy."

"We shall see after the public executions just how *trustworthy* the so-called *nobles* of Takara will be," Lord Dusahn stated.

\* \* \*

"Where's the COB?" Nathan asked Cameron as he entered the damage control compartment.

Cameron flashed him a look, saying nothing.

Nathan sighed. "How?"

"He was leading the team on the port flight deck when the aft emergency doors gave out," Cameron explained.

"Wasn't he supposed to be in *here*?"

"They were shorthanded, and there were people trapped," Cameron replied. "No way he was going to sit on his hands in here."

After a moment's pause, Nathan asked, "How bad off are

we?"

"The entire port side of the flight deck is a twisted wreck. It will take months to repair, even in a fully-equipped shipyard. Same is true of most of our hull breaches. They're all along the port side. However, the affected compartments have all been evacuated and sealed off, so, while it reduces our crew-carrying capacity, it won't interfere with our ability to function."

"Except that we won't have enough crew," Nathan corrected.

"We can automate a lot of it," Cameron told him. "That was one of the things planned for our refit, along with replacing the antimatter reactors with ZPEDs, some weapons upgrades, and a new sensor suite."

"What about the fighter deck?" Nathan asked.

"It's wrecked, as well," she replied. "Practically took the ship's entire top off."

"Damn," Nathan cursed, placing his hands on the display table in front of him and leaning on them.

"At least the main hangar bay and the entire starboard flight deck are still operational," Cameron pointed out. "So, at least help can come and go as needed."

Nathan sighed again. "It's not like you to be optimistic."

"The reality is too depressing to even consider," she admitted. "The truth is, Nathan, the Aurora will never be the same."

"Don't give up on her so quickly," Nathan urged. "She's been through worse."

"I know, but those were different times. We had Corinair behind us. Rakuen is not *nearly* as industrialized as Corinair. They cannot support this level of repair; especially not while trying to build up their own defenses."

"We have main propulsion, and the majority of our shields

and weapons are still working," Nathan reminded her.

"Yes, but we're never going to get full power from the antimatter reactors."

"Vlad says he can..."

"I looked at the damage myself, Nathan," Cameron insisted. "I'm the first to admit that I'm no engineer, but even I can tell that those reactors are beyond repair. Vlad just doesn't want to admit it."

"Are you suggesting we abandon the Aurora?" Nathan asked.

"Of course not," Cameron replied sharply, "but I think we should be realistic about what we can fix and not let our desire to completely restore her interfere with our responsibility to prepare a defense for the Rogen system."

"What do you suggest?" Nathan wondered.

"First off, I think you're right about needing to take the fight to the Dusahn. We need to start harassing the *hell* out of them. Constant hit-and-run strikes against ships, ground forces, cargo carriers, communications, everything we can possibly target. At least daily strikes, if not multiple strikes per day."

"That's going to be hard on the crews of those ships."

"We can rotate crews and ships. Strikers and Gunyoki go after ships, and Reapers go after ground targets. One of each per day, so no crew is flying more than one sortie a day."

"Constantly keep the Dusahn guessing and worried about what they need to defend next," Nathan surmised.

"So they cannot afford to take ships *away* from asset protection and send them after *us.*" Cameron finished for him.

Nathan thought for a moment. "Sooner or later, the Dusahn are going to notice the Aurora is not moving.

Eventually, they'll find another way to get proper intelligence and then they'll learn that we're still vulnerable. Once they do, they *will* attack again."

"Which is *why* we must concentrate on our defenses, for now."

"We need to get those Orochi in service," Nathan insisted. "Only, they need to be more than just missile frigates. They need to be gunships, as well."

"Deliza is already working with Mister Yasui on some ideas in that regard," Cameron told him.

"What about the Amonday?" Nathan wondered.

"We know very little about her systems, and we've only just started interrogations of her crew. It's going to be a while before we can do anything with that ship."

Nathan sighed, yet again. "The odds are really starting to stack up against us, aren't they?"

"Don't they always?"

\* \* \*

Commander Prechitt climbed into the Sugali fighter, using the steps built into the bottom half of the cockpit surround, deployed between the split sections of the ship's nose at a sharp angle, leading up to the open-front of its cockpit. Once at the top, he turned around and sat in the pilot's seat.

Talisha came up the ramp behind him, standing between his feet, facing him. "Remember, the AI of this ship is currently imprinted with *my* personality and thought patterns, so it will not anticipate *your* needs as well as it normally would."

"Is that something that can be easily changed?" the commander wondered.

"The imprinting process takes several hours," Talisha explained while she adjusted the commander's restraints.

"However, once the process has completed, the AI's character core can be easily moved from ship to ship. Once moved, the AI can determine the idiosyncrasies of the new ship within seconds."

"Does the AI have a name?"

"I call mine 'Leta'."

"You get to *name* it yourself?"

"Why not?"

"No reason, I guess."

Talisha reached over and pressed a button, activating the ship's main power.

"Hello Talisha," a voice, sounding eerily similar to Talisha's, greeted over the cockpit speakers.

"Hello, Leta," Talisha replied as if she were talking to an old friend.

"Ship's power is currently at eighty-seven percent. I anticipate full power within three minutes. Are we preparing for departure?"

"Yes, we are," Talisha replied. "Leta, I'd like to introduce you to Commander Prechitt. He is currently sitting in the pilot's seat."

"That explains the weight difference," Leta replied. "I was afraid you had consumed a considerably large meal, and you know how a full stomach does not agree with some of the maneu..."

"Leta," Talisha interrupted, "the commander will be taking this ship for a short test flight. I am authorizing you to follow his commands during this flight and to ensure that he is returned safely to this location upon completion. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," Leta replied. "Confirmation code?"

"Torre seven, two one, blio."

"Confirmation received and acknowledged. Welcome

aboard, Commander Prechitt."

"Thank you, Leta." The commander looked at Talisha, whispering. "This is weird."

"You will become accustomed to me in a surprisingly short time," Leta assured him.

Talisha smiled. "Enjoy your flight, Commander," she told him, stepping back down.

"Shall I close up the ship and prepare for liftoff, Commander?"

"Uh, yes, please?"

The boarding ramp began to swing upward as the forward canopy window swung downward.

"While courtesy in conversation is appreciated, it is not required, Commander."

"Okay," the commander replied as the upper and lower portions of the cockpit's doors joined and sealed, plunging him into darkness. A moment later, the walls of the cockpit lit up, and he could see everything outside as if he were sitting in a glass bubble. Even the body and wings of his fighter were gone, represented only by opaque lines. "Amazing."

"I take it you have prior flight experience?"

"Yes, I do."

"Please state the nature of your flight experiences so that I may tailor this flight to your abilities," Leta asked.

"Uh, I was a fighter pilot for twenty years, have thousands of flight hours, and hundreds of hours in actual combat. Is that the information you are looking for?"

"Indeed, and quite impressive, I might add."

"Why thank you, Leta."

"Were the ships you flew capable of both atmospheric operation and flight in space?"

"They were."

"And were those ships jump-capable, as well?"

"In the later portion of my career, yes."

"Then, this should be some flight," Leta surmised, sounding almost amused.

"Uh, let's not get crazy just yet."

"As you wish, Commander," she replied, now sounding a bit disappointed. "The ship will be at full power in one minute. However, there is more than sufficient power to take off now, if you'd like."

"I'd like to take her up manually, if you don't mind."

"As you wish. What level of auto-stabilization would you like to start with?"

"Auto-stabilization?"

"I am able to assist the pilot with flight operations, so as to make the task less demanding and allow the pilot to concentrate more on the mission."

"I'd like to start with zero auto-stabilization, Leta," the commander stated.

"Are you certain?" Leta asked. "The Sugali fighter is quite sensitive and requires a deft touch to be flown correctly."

"I'll make you a deal," the commander offered, "if I'm about to crash this thing, you have my permission to take over."

"Emergency auto-stabilization only," Leta stated. "Please confirm."

"Confirmed," the commander replied.

"The ship is yours, Commander."

Commander Prechitt looked around the cockpit, remembering everything Talisha had told him during his short briefing on the Sugali fighter's control systems. After locating all of the primary flight instruments, he reached for the controls and eased the lift throttle forward.

The fighter rose quickly off the ground, almost leaping

upward. The sudden motion pushed him down into his seat, causing him to instinctively ease back on the lift throttle. The ship began to fall again, so he eased it forward once more, albeit in much smaller increments.

"There is a sensitivity setting for the lift throttle," Leta told him. "Normally, I would adjust that automatically for the pilot."

"That's alright," the commander assured her. "I need to learn."

"A commendable attitude. Might I suggest placing the palm of your hand on the console, so minute adjustments of the throttle can be more precisely made?"

"Thank you, Leta," the commander replied, doing as instructed.

Again, the ship began to rise, and the commander reached for the lateral thrust throttle, pushing *it* forward, as well, causing the ship to accelerate in a forward direction.

The movement of the ship was smooth, without the expected roar of engines spitting thrust out the back. Instead, the ship made a low humming sound that increased in pitch as the power levels were increased. "This is pretty nice," the commander commented. "How am I doing, Leta?"

"You are doing fine, Commander. I would recommend increasing your lift power to gain additional altitude in order to assure safe maneuvering. The highest elevation on this world is eight thousand five hundred and fifty-seven meters, so an altitude of ten thousand meters should be sufficient."

"I have a better idea," the commander decided. He pushed the lateral, thrust throttle all the way forward and pulled back on the flight control stick, standing the tiny

fighter almost straight up, rocketing toward space. A few seconds later, he touched the jump button, and the ship instantly transitioned to a spot three light minutes away from Casbon.

"You were not kidding when you said you had flight experience," Leta commented.

Commander Prechitt just smiled as he went into his first test maneuver.

\* \* \*

Nathan approached the briefing room on deck D, taking note of the two Ghatazhak guards at the door. "Gentlemen," he greeted.

"Captain," one of the guards replied as he tapped on the door.

"Enter!" A male voice called from within, a moment later.

The guard unlocked the door, holding it open for the captain.

Nathan stepped through the door into the small briefing room, surprised to find Jessica and Lieutenant Siddens, the Ghatazhak's chief interrogator, along with a man in an Alliance uniform whom he did not recognize. "What's going on?" Nathan wondered as the Ghatazhak guard closed and locked the door behind him.

"Captain," Jessica began, "this is Commander Stethan Andreola."

Nathan looked at the man's uniform. "Then, why is he wearing an enlisted man's uniform?" he asked. "And why don't I recognize him?"

"That's because he's not a member of the Alliance," Jessica explained.

"The uniform was my idea," Lieutenant Siddens admitted.
"I felt it was necessary for the commander's safety."

Nathan was becoming more suspicious by the second.

"Who is this man?"

"He was the acting captain of the Amonday at the time of her capture," Jessica explained. "We thought you should meet."

Nathan did not look pleased. "Lieutenant Commander...a word," he told her.

Jessica rose and came over to Nathan, pulling a sound suppression field generator out of her pocket and activating it once she was close enough to him. "This man has valuable information and is willing to cooperate," she explained. "More so than any other member of the Amonday's crew."

"Why?" Nathan asked.

"As best we can tell, he hates the Dusahn. In fact, the entire crew hates the Dusahn, but they're too scared of them to do anything but obey."

"If that's the case, then why isn't this guy afraid?"

"Apparently, the punishment for failure of an individual is often extended to the individual's family. Commander Andreola *has* no family."

"None?"

"His parents died years ago, and he never married. He's been a career officer since he was forced to enlist in the Orswellan Guard, shortly after the Dusahn invaded his world, twenty-eight years ago."

"The Orswellan Guard?"

"Orswella is the name of their world," Jessica explained. "The Dusahn kept the Orswellan Guard intact, rather than trust them aboard Dusahn ships. Nathan, this guy can tell us a *lot*. But, he doesn't trust us. I thought *you* could gain his trust."

"Why doesn't he trust you?" Nathan wondered. "I can understand why he doesn't trust Siddens. He's got that 'I

could kill you from across the room without breaking a sweat' look, like all the other Ghatazhak, but you?"

"I guess I'm too pretty," Jessica joked.

"Oh, and I'm not?" Nathan replied, also joking.

"I'm pretty sure he thinks we're going to torture him," Jessica explained. "According to others we've interrogated, the Dusahn are masters at it."

Nathan sighed. "So, what do you want me to do?"

"Just talk to him," Jessica replied. "Get to know him...do that thing you do."

"That thing I do?" Nathan wondered, looking at her.

"You know, how you make people trust you and think you're a great guy. You know, bullshit him."

Nathan sneered at her. "I am busy, you know."

"Doing what?" Jessica retorted. "Your ship's busted, and you sure as hell don't know how to fix anything."

"You're bucking for a demotion, aren't you?" Nathan sighed again. "Fine, let's get this over with," he said, moving toward the table.

Jessica deactivated the sound suppression field, turning to walk alongside Nathan as they approached the commander and the lieutenant. "Commander Andreola, I'd like to introduce Captain Nathan Scott, commanding officer of the Aurora and leader of the Karuzari Alliance. Captain, this is Commander Stethan Andreola of the Orswellan Guard, acting captain of the Amonday."

Commander Andreola rose, reaching out to shake Nathan's hand. "An honor, Captain. Please forgive the uniform. I meant no disrespect."

"You're the *acting* captain of the Amonday?" Nathan asked as he took a seat across the table from the commander.

"Captain Derrabo was injured during the initial jump-

missile strike. As first officer, I assumed command per protocol."

"And what of your captain?"

"He died a few hours after capture," Jessica stated.

"I am told your medical personnel did everything they could for him," Commander Andreola stated. "For that, I am most grateful. The captain was a good man, who served the people of Orswella for decades."

"I understand your loss," Nathan assured him. "Such is the nature of our line of work."

"Those who live by the sword," the commander quoted.

"Indeed," Nathan replied. "I have not heard of Orswella."

"It is roughly three hundred light years from here and about seven hundred light years from the Jung homeworld, or so I am told. Orswella was founded by a hastily-organized colonization mission, seeking to escape the great plague that swept through the core worlds of Earth a millennium ago. I am told *you* are *from* Earth. Is this true?"

"It is."

"Then, the Earth has recovered?"

"It has."

"And the core worlds?"

"They have recovered, as well," Nathan assured him.

"That is good to hear," the commander said, smiling. "Good indeed."

"What can you tell me about the Dusahn?" Nathan asked.

"They came to our world just over twenty-eight years ago. At the time, they had eight ships, all of them quite old. Still, they were far superior to our own meager fleet, and we were quickly defeated."

"Then, they built their current fleet using your world?"

"Correct. They did not trust our people, and rightfully so," the commander continued. "When they built their

newer ships, they incorporated our automation systems into them wherever possible, in order to reduce their crew requirements. Only those of true Dusahn lineage were permitted to serve aboard their ships. The rest of us were forced to serve either on ships of the guard, such as the Amonday, or as foot soldiers in the Dusahn Mobile Infantry."

"Did they have jump drives when they invaded your world?"

"They did not," the commander replied. "Their systems were much as ours, employing mass-canceling fields to obtain speeds beyond that of light. They developed the jump drive later, maybe, six or seven years ago. *That* is when they *really* began to build ships in earnest."

"What do you mean?" Nathan wondered.

"Prior to the invention of the jump drive, they had produced only a handful of ships, mostly the larger battleships. But *after* the jump drive, they began building gunships, frigates, and cruisers, as well as retrofitting their battleships and their older ships. Ships of the guard did not receive jump drives until perhaps a year ago."

"Are the Dusahn still in control of Orswella?"

"Of course."

"How many ships currently hold your world?"

"Only one," the commander replied, "the Jar-Razza."

"One ship?" Nathan wondered. "How many Orswellan ships are still there?"

"Four," the commander replied. "All of them similar to the Amonday."

"Then, why don't they stand up to the Dusahn?" Jessica wondered.

"It is not the Jar-Razza my people fear," the commander explained. "She is one of the Dusahn's original ships. It is

their troops on the surface whom we fear, and their patrol shuttles that constantly fly over our cities. If our ships turned against the Jar-Razza, the Dusahn would surely commit genocide against the people of Orswella, just as they did to the people of Toramund."

"Toramund?"

"A rival world twenty light years from Orswella. They were the reason the guard was created. They stood against the Dusahn and even tried to revolt after their world had been occupied, and the Dusahn glassed their planet from orbit."

"Commander Andreola says the Dusahn have a massive shipyard in orbit above Orswella," Lieutenant Siddens reported.

"Is this true?" Nathan asked the commander directly.

"Yes, but it is not orbiting Orswella, it is orbiting the asteroid Agosti One Four Seven. It mines the asteroid for the majority of its raw materials."

"How big is this shipyard?" Nathan wondered.

"It encompasses the entire asteroid," the commander explained, "at the equator."

"And they built this in less than twenty-eight years?"

"No, the ring was built by us, many decades prior to their arrival. It is how we mine asteroids. They simply added the shipyards *to* the ring structure."

"How many ships can this thing hold at once?" Nathan wondered.

"Thirty-eight," the commander replied. "Twelve of which are kept open for the maintenance and repair of Dusahn ships."

Nathan's eyes narrowed, his mind racing. "How far away did you say Orswella was?"

"We are a long way from home," Tham commented over comms as they came out of the automated jump series at the rally point.

"I thought you always dreamed of traveling to other worlds?" Alayna teased.

"Sure, when I was five. And I didn't expect to be attacking them."

"Not *them*," Vol corrected as he checked their position. "Just the Dusahn ship orbiting above them."

"Incoming message from Striker One," Isa reported from Shenza One's back seat. "Captain Nash is wondering what took us so long."

"Tell him we stopped for lunch," Tariq suggested.

"Settle down people," Vol instructed. He glanced at his sensor screen, checking that all eight Gunyoki had arrived at the rally point, as planned. "Alright, everyone. Just like we discussed in the mission briefing. We draw their fire, and the Cobras finish them off."

"How did we get the shit duty?" Tham wondered.

"Don't worry, Tham, it'll all be over in a few minutes."

"Yeah, and then it's another four hours of jumping to get back home," Alayna complained.

"Would you rather fight them off on our doorstep?" Vol wondered, glancing at his mission clock. "Twenty seconds, everyone. Two, follow me in, then Three and Four, and then Five through Eight. Fire only at your assigned target points. You ready, Tariq?"

"What do you think?"

"I think we go anyway," Vol replied as he watched the last few seconds tick away. At zero, he pressed his jump button, and a split second later the Dusahn assault ship was less than five hundred meters away, filling his cockpit windows as it rushed toward him. Without pause, he pressed and held the firing button on his flight control stick, unleashing a barrage of plasma energy at the rapidly approaching side of the ship.

"Targets locked," Isa announced. "Launching missiles."

A stream of snub missiles, each assigned their own individual point of impact, leapt from the missile pods on either side of the Gunyoki fighter's cockpit, rushing toward their targets and spreading out as each honed in on its target. Within seconds, all forty-eight snub missiles had been launched.

Vol watched his targeting screen as he continued firing. Out of his peripheral vision, he could see the assault ship's gun turrets turning to take aim, but it was too late. Small explosions began appearing all over the side of the Dusahn vessel as the snub missiles began striking their targets. Vol pulled back on his flight control stick, pressing his jump button the moment he had a clear jump line.

"Outta my way, Vol," Tariq muttered as he jumped in behind Vol. As if on cue, Shenza One pitched up and jumped away, giving Tariq a clear line of fire. Explosions were already lighting up the side of the Dusahn assault ship as Tariq pressed and held his firing button. "Let 'em have it, Jova!"

"Locking missiles on targets," Jova reported from Shenza Two's back seat. "Firing missiles!"

"Damn!" Tariq exclaimed as four dozen missiles streaked away. "That should make them piss themselves!"

"That has *got* to hurt!" Jova exclaimed as their missiles began striking their targets all across the port side of the enemy ship.

Tariq looked up as two more Gunyoki ships appeared as if

from nowhere. "That's our cue," he said, pressing his jump button.

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"Looks like their port, midship shields have about had it!" Gento reported from the back of Shenza Three.

"Alayna! Their port shields are down, but their guns aren't!" Tham called over comms. "Corkscrew left, I'll go right! Light 'em up!"

"You got it, Tham!" Alayna replied.

Tham pushed his control stick hard right and forward, twisting it to the right as he shoved his throttles to the stops. As soon as he established his corkscrew maneuver, he yanked his throttles back to idle and flipped his engine outward as he held down the firing trigger.

Both Gunyoki fighters corkscrewed downward toward the battered Dusahn assault ship, their engines angled outward, spreading their hail of plasma fire in a spiraling pattern. Their rain of destruction tore through the top of the assault ship's port side, overloading her shields and ripping open the outer layers of her hull.

Finally, both ships pulled out of their corkscrew dives, angling away, fore and aft, just enough to establish clear escape routes along which they jumped to safety.

On the opposite side of the assault ship, four more Gunyoki fighters appeared, each of them angling to attack different sections of the lone warship. The Dusahn guns spread apart, each of them looking for a different target, but as they opened up, the targets jumped ahead a few

meters, repeating the process and skipping ahead of the Dusahn guns before they could get a lock on them.

Robert glanced at his tactical display as his Cobra gunship came out of its attack jump. As planned, Strikers

Two and Three had jumped in at the same time.

He looked out his forward window. Five hundred meters ahead of him, and approaching fast, was the unshielded, port side of the Dusahn assault ship. As expected, her port guns were dormant since she was channeling all of her energy to her starboard side, the direction from which she was currently being attacked.

Robert wasted no time, immediately unleashing a series of plasma torpedoes; firing simultaneous triplets from all four mark-three barrels under his ship's nose. With all three Cobra gunships doing the same, thirty-six plasma torpedoes struck the doomed warship at the same time, ripping her core apart.

No pilots witnessed the final destruction of the Dusahn gunship over Paradar that day. Not Gunyoki; not Cobra. But each of them knew that the retaliation had only just begun.

\* \* \*

Nathan entered the Aurora's power generation section, carrying two ration packets. After taking a single step inside the compartment, Cameron's words echoed in his mind.

The compartment was in chaos. Panels were opened up with wires and testing leads spilling out. There were at least eight techs working, and none of them looked happy. Even the access panels to reactor two were opened, which was a rare occurrence.

Just as Nathan was about to ask one of the passing techs

where the chief engineer was, he heard Vladimir's familiar voice uttering Russian curse words from the next compartment.

Nathan, following the sound of his friend's voice, found him looking at a large component, most likely pulled from reactor two. The component was charred and partially melted. "Something wrong, Commander?" Nathan asked as he approached.

Vladimir glanced over at him and then returned his attention to the technician holding the component. "We have no choice," he told the tech. "Run diagnostics on all components downstream of this. Maybe we'll get lucky and can salvage something of use."

"Yes, sir," the tech replied, turning to depart. "Captain," the tech nodded as he passed Nathan.

"I thought you might be hungry," Nathan said, tossing one of the ration packs to Vlad.

"I'm always hungry," he replied as he caught the ration pack.

"Yeah, I know," Nathan said as he pressed down on the center of the packet with both thumbs, breaking the seal. There was a small snapping sound, and Nathan began shaking his packet with one hand. "I take it things aren't going well."

Vladimir sighed as he, too, shook his ration pack. "I am beginning to have serious doubts about our ability to repair reactors two and four," he admitted.

"Yeah, Cameron expressed her doubts about that, as well," Nathan said as he tore the cover off his ration pack and broke off the spoon attached to the inside of the lid.

"She did?" Vladimir said, seeming hurt.

"Don't take it personally, Vlad," Nathan insisted as he sat

down on the edge of one of the toolboxes. "No one expects you to be a miracle worker."

"Of course they do," Vladimir argued, taking a seat at the control station. "I'm the Cheng. That's what I'm supposed to do."

"Vlad, even *I* know that you can't fix those reactors here. You'd have to pull the entire thing...*both* of them. Hell, fabricating the parts *alone* would take months. It's just not feasible."

"Well, we've got to do *something*," Vladimir insisted as he took his first bite. "We need at least *twice* as much power than we are currently able to produce if you plan to get this ship back in the fight."

"There's a lot more wrong with this ship than her failed reactors," Nathan reminded him.

"Yes, but without enough power, none of that even matters. Besides, propulsion and maneuvering will be fine, and replacing the damaged jump emitters will only take a week, two at the most. *Power*, Nathan, *that* is the problem." Vladimir shoveled the last of his ration pack into his mouth and then added, "If only this had all started six months later."

"Why?" Nathan wondered.

"The refit," Vladimir replied. "Ah, but then I would no longer have been on the Aurora, and you'd have to do all of this without me, which you and I both know would be impossible."

"You were going to leave the Aurora?" Nathan wondered. "Da."

"I find that hard to believe. You love this ship."

"Da, but much was going to be changed. The new systems...I would not have been qualified to be her Cheng

any longer. Plus, my sister is always telling me that I need to settle down, get married, have children."

"You have a sister?"

Vladimir looked crossly at him.

"What does she look like?"

"Don't even think about it," Vladimir warned.

"I'm hurt," Nathan told him.

"Don't be," Vladimir replied. "She is not your type. Plus, she is already married and has three children of her own."

"What were you planning to do?" Nathan asked.

"About getting married?"

"No, about work."

"Oh. I was transferring to research and development," Vladimir explained.

"You would have been bored," Nathan insisted. "You belong in the thick of things, just like me."

Vladimir looked at Nathan with one eyebrow raised.

"What?"

"So, you finally admit it."

"Admit what?" Nathan asked.

"That this is what you were meant to do."

"What, eat lunch with a grumpy Russian in a busted up power-gen department?"

"You know what I mean," Vladimir insisted. "When did you finally figure it out?"

"Honestly?" Nathan thought for a moment. "Probably when I was about ten. Our coach was late, so I ran practice for half an hour. I just started telling everyone what to do and they did it. The coach made me team captain after that."

"And then you spent the rest of your life avoiding leadership responsibilities," Vladimir stated sarcastically.

"Something like that," Nathan admitted. "I think when I

heard my father had died, something inside me clicked. Like I could hear his voice telling me to step up."

"I always assumed that had happened when Tug was killed," Vladimir commented.

"Maybe a little," Nathan admitted, "but not like this. Now it's all I think about. It's what I *want*. It's who I *am*."

"That is good to hear, my friend," Vladimir stated. "You were getting dangerously close to being that same whiny, self-absorbed, spoiled, little rich boy you were the first time around. I was afraid I would have to slap you around a bit."

"Oh, really?"

"It's what friends are for," Vladimir shrugged. "Are you going to finish that?" he wondered, pointing to Nathan's half-eaten ration pack.

"Help yourself," Nathan said, handing it to him. He watched his friend eat for a moment. "They were planning on refitting this ship with ZPEDs, right?"

"What are you talking about?" Vladimir asked as he scarfed down the rest of Nathan's ration pack.

"The refit?"

"Oh! Da! Many other things, as well, but mostly the ZPEDs. They were going to install two of them. It would have given us ten times as much power, without all the problems associated with antimatter reactors. That would have given us greater single jump distance, much faster recharge times, more power for weapons and shields...you name it."

"How complex was it going to be?" Nathan wondered. "Was it really going to take six months?"

"Not for the ZPEDs," Vladimir insisted. "Those would have only taken a few weeks. It was the propulsion and jump drive upgrades that were going to take so long, along with the structural work and the changes to the weapons systems. The ZPEDs would have been the easy part."

"Why don't we just change to ZPEDs, then?" Nathan suggested.

"Because we don't *have* any ZPEDs large enough to run this ship," Vladimir stated as if it were obvious.

"Can't we build one?" Nathan wondered. "I mean, we fabricate them for shuttles and stuff."

"The smaller ones, yes. The big ones are a bit trickier," Vladimir explained.

"What if I could *get* us some big ZPEDs?" Nathan asked. "Could you make them work?"

Vladimir stared at him for a moment, studying his face. "You're serious, aren't you?" Vladimir laughed. "Where are you going to get a class-four, zero-point energy device?"

"I may know a guy," Nathan replied, smiling.

\* \* \*

Lord Dusahn stood in the center of the combat triad, dressed in traditional Chankarti robes of black and crimson. In front of him was one of his instructors, dressed in similar robes, but of white and gray, and behind him to his right and left were two of the instructor's assistants, dressed much the same.

A chime sounded, and the instructor nodded to his opponent, who returned the nod before assuming his combat stance. The instructor charged forth a second later, delivering a series of blows with both hands and feet, none of which made it past his lord's defenses. As soon as Lord Dusahn delivered a return strike, knocking his instructor back a step, the man behind him and to his left also charged.

As if he had eyes in the back of his head, Lord Dusahn leaned to his right while making a sweeping motion up and

over the second attacker's outstretched arm, trapping it against his own body.

The third man charged a moment after the second, and Lord Dusahn avoided him by throwing his feet up and to his right, and walking up the face of the approaching man. The Dusahn leader pivoted over the second attacker's still-trapped arm, landing on his feet on the second attacker's opposite side.

With a sweeping motion of his leg, Lord Dusahn brought the second attacker to the mat, releasing his arm as the man went down. A perfectly timed sidestep to his left avoided the third attacker's continued charge, and a roundhouse kick to the back of the man's head as he passed ensured that he would not be attacking again, anytime soon. A quick stomp onto the face of the second attacker as he attempted to rise meant Lord Dusahn now only had one attacker to deal with.

His instructor charged again, calmly delivering a barrage of combinations: left hand, right hand, left elbow, a spinkick, and finally a knee-rise to the chin. None of them connected well enough to faze his leader.

The overly confident instructor put too much momentum into his spinning attempt to strike his student on the side of the head. It was when his instructor over-committed himself that Lord Dusahn spotted his opportunity. He leaned to his left and ducked slightly, allowing his master's foot to clear his head by centimeters. At the same time, he swept his master's other leg, which was still airborne, out from under him, causing the elderly instructor to descend out of balance, landing on his side.

Lord Dusahn stomped forward, driving his heel into his master's abdomen. He quickly raised his foot and delivered a second blow to the old man's face, bloodying his nose and stunning him enough for the referee to call the match in favor of his lord.

Lord Dusahn returned to the center of the triad, waiting for his opponents as they struggled back to their feet, tired and beaten. Once each man had returned to their points on the triad, Lord Dusahn nodded respectfully to each man in turn. It was the only time the leader of the Dusahn Empire bowed to any man.

With his daily practice completed, Lord Dusahn strolled over to the side of the room and picked up his towel and the crystal tumbler of ice-cold water. He wiped himself off and then downed the entire contents of the tumbler. "Those who lurk in shadow either carry bad news or are the harbingers of doom," he declared as he poured another tumbler full of water. "Which are you, old man?"

General Hesson stepped out from the shadowed doorway. "I was merely admiring your prowess on the triad, my lord. Time has not dulled the edge of your sword."

"One must keep their edge sharp," Lord Dusahn replied, "especially when one leads an empire." He took another long drink of water before continuing. "For one never knows when his sword will be needed."

"Portensus?"

"His third writings." Lord Dusahn set down the tumbler and turned to the general. "What word do you bring?"

General Hesson paused, waiting for the others to leave the triad chamber before continuing. "Two days running, they challenge us," he began. "Yesterday at Paradar, today at Ursoot."

Lord Dusahn eyed the general.

"Damaged, but still operable," the general assured his lord. "These hit-and-run tactics are an effective strategy, especially while we are trying to cover more territory than we should. It requires a constant state of readiness, which is hard on our ships *and* crews."

"Abandon the outer worlds, and send those ships to finish off the Aurora," Lord Dusahn stated calmly. "Make sure their captains know that their lord will not accept failure. They must return with news of the Aurora's destruction, or they do not return at all."

"Might I suggest an alternate strategy, my lord?"

Lord Dusahn looked annoyed. "Speak."

"Abandon the outer worlds, and bring our ships and crews back to the cluster. Those worlds were nothing more than a ruse to lure the Aurora out of her nest, which failed."

"Careful, old man," Lord Dusahn warned, raising a finger.

"My job is to speak the truth, my lord. The Pentaurus cluster is all we need to grow our forces. The industrial capacity of the Rogen system *pales* in comparison. They can *never* surpass us, as long as we maintain control of the cluster. The Aurora cannot leave her nest for fear of us striking while she is away. It takes her three days to reach us, just as it does for us to reach her. We can task a few of our frigates and gunships to hide out within single jump range of the Rogen system and use them to harass the Karuzari in the same way they are now attempting to harass us. With every raid, we will acquire more intelligence on the Aurora's condition. With any luck, we will discover a way to destroy her."

Lord Dusahn glared at his general. "Do you know why I always win in the triad, despite the fact that all those who face me have far more training than I ever will?"

"No, my lord, I do not."

"It is because I do not fight from a position of fear. I do not waste my time throwing countless combinations that I know will never have the affect I desire. I wait until an

opportunity presents itself and then I *seize* that opportunity, striking with *all* of my might. *That* is how one wins in battle. You do not *play it safe*. You do not play the *long game*. When the door is opened, you run in with everything you have and you *take* what you want." Lord Dusahn looked at his general, a menacing stare in his eyes. "Do you understand?"

"Those with the patience to lay in wait, until they can fully understand their opponents' weaknesses, are guaranteed victory with minimal losses."

"His fifth writings," Lord Dusahn said dismissively with a wave of his hand. "Portensus was already old and feeble by then."

"We can do both, my lord," General Hesson suggested. "Send the battle group, but conduct force recon strikes first, *before* committing the entire group."

"You wish me to seem cautious," Lord Dusahn surmised unhappily. "To seem *weak* in the eyes of our subjects."

"I wish you to seem wise and cunning in the eyes of *everyone*, the way that *I* see you, my lord."

"You do know how to dance around my temper, Hesson," Lord Dusahn stated, shaking his finger at him. "Be careful you do not dance off the edge of the stage. At your age, you might not survive the fall." Lord Dusahn turned and headed for the door. "Two frigates, four gunships, and two cruisers," he said as he reached the door. "They have ten days to destroy the Aurora, or suffer my wrath." He paused at the door, turning back to the general. "This will either be your shining moment, or your final failure, old man. If they fail, you will suffer their fate, as well."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lieutenant Shan glanced at the patrol sequencer display on the side console of his Super Eagle fighter. "Two more jumps to the relief point," he announced.

"I heard they're going to let us go into town tomorrow," Ensign Garson said over comms.

"What is it with you and going into town?" the lieutenant wondered. "From what I hear, there's not much going on there."

"There are women there," the ensign replied.

"There are women on the Aurora, too," the lieutenant reminded him. "There are even women in this squadron."

"All of whom have shot me down," the ensign pointed out, "multiple times."

"And yet, somehow, you expect to do better with the women in town."

"I couldn't do any worse."

"Good point." The lieutenant checked his long-range sensors, then his tactical display, both of which were clear. "Coming up on the next jump point. I've got clear screens."

"Mine are clear, as well."

"Jumping in three seconds." The lieutenant waited for the sequencer to count down and automatically execute the next jump in the patrol sequence. "Jump complete. Starting scans." The lieutenant studied his tactical display first, then his long-range displays. "All clear."

"Ditto."

"You know, they may not all speak English," the lieutenant said.

"Yeah, I'm kind of hoping they don't," Ensign Garson replied. "I'm far more charming when you don't understand what I'm saying."

"That, I can believe." The lieutenant glanced at the patrol sequencer again. "Fifteen seconds to the last jump point."

"Good. I need to get back and practice my Casbon pickup lines."

"You need to practice getting your face slapped," the lieutenant joked. "Three seconds..."

"I've already got that mastered," the ensign insisted as both ships jumped in unison.

As soon as they came out of the jump, the lieutenant's tactical display beeped, and two icons appeared on his screen. "Two contacts. Squawking friendly. Eagles Nineteen and Twenty. Same course and speed."

"I love it when relief is on time," the ensign commented.

"Eagle One Niner, Eagle One One," the lieutenant called over comms. "On your six, ready to hand off."

"Eagle One One, Eagle One Niner. We have the baton," Lieutenant Cristos replied. "You're clear for the quarry."

"Thanks, Damon. We'll see you back at the barn," he replied as he entered Casbon as his new destination. "Let's head home, Pali."

"Ready when you are, Desh," the ensign replied.

Lieutenant Shan activated the new destination, and his auto-flight system turned his ship to the left and pitched down, bringing him to the new course for the jump back to Casbon. A quick glance at his sensor screen assured him that his wingman had executed the same turn. "Jumping back to Casbon in three......two......one......jumping..."

Commander Prechitt looked out at the group of twenty

men and women standing in formation before him. "Let's face it," he continued, "none of you are here because of overwhelming qualifications, resulting from some in-depth testing. You're here for two reasons: because volunteered and because you speak 'Angla', and technically, only the former is a requirement. While I am certain all of you have good intentions, you should know the life of a fighter pilot is not as glamorous as most think. The only time it is, is when you're at the bar. The rest of the time, it is brutal, time-consuming, and extremely challenging, both mentally and physically. Inertial dampeners only do so much, and they are generally the first system to be shut down when your ship is damaged. Yes, damaged. Don't forget, you will be shot at, and some of you will be hit...and killed. So, be sure you take that into consideration. In order to *avoid* being killed, you need three things: dedication, and luck. We can teach the first, but you must provide the second. As to the third, that's up to you and whatever god, destiny, or universal force you happen to believe in. Trust me, *luck* saves your ass more often than anyone likes to admit."

The commander studied their faces again, noting that no one seemed to look apprehensive. "Apparently, I didn't scare you enough." He held up his left hand. "Behind me is the Sugali, A-four Seven J, Advanced Tactical Fighter, also known as the Nighthawk. It is a multi-environment fighter, meaning it can operate in both space and in any imaginable. atmosphere Its primary mode of lift. propulsion, and maneuvering is a gravity propulsion system. Don't ask me how it works, because I have no idea. That's for physicists and engineers. I just know how to fly it. However, as I have very little time in this ship, allow me to introduce someone who does, Talisha Sane." Commander Prechitt stepped aside. "Miss Sane."

"Thank you, Commander," Talisha replied, stepping up to take over. "The A-four Seven J Nighthawk is perhaps the ultimate fighter in all the galaxy. It is quick, highly maneuverable, and thanks to the incorporation of a multijump capable jump drive, it has incredible range. When operated by a skilled and well-trained pilot, it is arguably one of the most *difficult* fighters to kill. A large part of that equation is its PAS, or 'pilot assist system.' The PAS is an artificial intelligence that not only helps the pilot fly the ship with improved accuracy, it also helps the pilot managed the myriad of weapons, communications, sensor, and countermeasure systems carried within. Without it, most pilots would suffer from massive task overload, especially in the heat of combat. The PAS is the pilot's best friend. It is your copilot, your weapons officer, your navigator, and your advisor. It quite literally is your savior. It will even fly you back to safety, should you become incapacitated. The one thing it will not do is fire your weapons on its own. It cannot do so without its pilot's orders, no matter how grave the situation. You must do the fighting. The PAS is merely there to *help* you."

"Thank you, Miss Sane," Commander Prechitt said, taking over the briefing, once again. "Over the next few weeks, you will be introduced to the various systems of the Nighthawk and taught how to fly it. But be forewarned, none of you will be combat-ready pilots when you're first called upon to defend your world. You will all be newbs with barely enough training to fly the Nighthawk without crashing it. Creating true combat-ready pilots takes months, sometimes years. Therefore, I urge you all to take advantage of the simulators that are currently being

assembled. They may seem like toys, but for many of you, they will be the *only* reason you make it back alive."

An alarm klaxon suddenly rang out, interrupting the commander.

Commander Prechitt immediately tapped his comm-set. "Command, Prechitt, status?"

Before the officer at base command could answer, two Ahka raiders jumped in low, just beyond the edge of the quarry, descending as they passed overhead.

"Shit," the commander cursed as the two raiders came to a hover two meters off the deck, and armed Ahka troops started jumping out. He turned to Talisha. "You're about to get your first taste of combat, Miss Sane."

Talisha nodded, tapping her comm-set as she turned to head toward her ship, three bays down. "Leta! Spin everything up! Combat launch!"

"Preparing for combat launch," Leta replied calmly.

"All of you head for base security and grab weapons!" Commander Prechitt barked.

"But, we're pilot trainees," one of the trainees stated, his eyes wide.

"Right now, you're grunts. Now, move!"

"Two days on this rock and I'm already missing Cookie's chow," Lieutenant Commander Cardi complained as she dropped her ration packet unceremoniously on the dusty table and took a seat between Lieutenants Rado and Bilak.

"I heard they're setting up the mess tomorrow, Sami," Lieutenant Rado said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Not soon enough for me," the lieutenant commander stated as she forced her first bite down. "This tent life is for grunts."

"How long do you think we'll be stuck here?" Lieutenant Bilak wondered.

"I'm guessing at least a month or two," Lieutenant Rado replied, "maybe more. You know not one of those 'trainees' have *any* flight experience. Hell, they've never been off this rock, let alone *flown* in anything, even as a passenger. How do you turn *them* into fighter pilots in a few months?"

"I heard the Sugali fighters have an AI that makes them crash-proof," Lieutenant Garmon claimed as he sat down to join them.

"You could have used something like that a couple days ago, Toby," Lieutenant Rado snickered.

"Funny," Toby replied. "I don't want to hear any of you complaining. At least you all *have* Eagles to fly."

"Don't worry, Toby," the lieutenant commander said. "I'm sure we can spare a Sugali fighter just for you."

"A ship with training wheels," Tobi replied, "no thanks."

"Better than not flying at all," Lieutenant Bilak said.

"How would you know, Guy?" Toby quipped. "Nobody calls what you do, flying."

An alarm sounded, and everyone in the room jumped to their feet.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Lieutenant Bilak exclaimed as they headed for the door. "After we cleaned their clocks two days ago?"

"Relax, it's probably a drill," Lieutenant Rado insisted as they headed for the exit along with everyone else.

They dashed out through the door, stopping in their tracks as they spotted troops dropping out of two Ahka raiders hovering a couple meters off the deck, over the middle of the compound.

"Pretty sure it's not a drill," Sami said, looking back over her shoulder. "To your ships!" One by one, a dozen armed men, dressed in ragtag uniforms, dropped from the two Ahka raiders hovering over the middle of the compound. As the last of the troops jumped to the surface, the two raiders opened fire with their forward and side guns, slowly rotating in opposite directions as they swept the perimeter of the quarry, blowing apart everything their energy blasts touched.

Commander Prechitt ran as fast as he could toward one of the single-seat Nighthawks a few bays away as energy weapons fire from the two Ahka raiders, hovering in the center of the compound, lit up the perimeter. Ducking as he ran, two blasts barely missed his head, slamming into the rocky side of the quarry, sending molten rock spewing in all directions.

The commander stumbled from the nearby explosion of red-hot rock, falling clumsily to the ground and covering his head with his hands. He felt something hot on his back and immediately scrambled to his knees, frantically removing his smoldering jacket and tossing it aside as he got to his feet again.

All around him, alarms were sounding, and men and women were running to their stations. Pilots were running toward their ships, ground crews were scrambling to prepare those same ships for launch, and support personnel were heading for gun emplacements.

Two more Ahka raiders jumped in to his left, opening fire on the base within seconds of arrival, screaming over the commander's head as they released pairs of simple bombs. The commander watched in horror as the four simple devices tumbled to the surface, detonating on impact, and knocking him backward onto his ass.

"Jump comp..." Lieutenant Shan paused mid-sentence, a moment of disbelief at what appeared on his tactical display. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed. "The base is under attack! Pali! Go manual, and follow me down. We'll jump in to the east and shoot at the first raider we see!"

"Let's do it, Deshi!" the ensign agreed.

Lieutenant Shan pushed his flight control stick forward and slightly right, dialing up an appropriate jump range at the same time. "You ready, Pali?"

"I'm with you!"

"Jumping," the lieutenant reported as he pressed his jump button. A split second later, his ship shook violently as he instantly transitioned from the vacuum of space to the thick atmosphere just above the surface of Casbon. His tactical display instantly lit up with four, then six, targets as more raiders jumped in to join the attack. "I've got the three on the left," he announced, touching the icons on the screen to designate them as targets for his weapons control system.

"I've got the three on the right!" the ensign replied.

"Launching three!" the lieutenant announced as he pressed the missile launch button on his flight control stick.

On the underside of Lieutenant Shan's Super Eagle, a narrow bay door slid open, and three small missiles dropped out of the bay in rapid succession, each of their engines igniting as they cleared the bay, sending them streaking toward their assigned targets. The missiles

closed the distance within seconds, but the first missile found its target jumping away just before impact. The second missile also missed, as the second raider jumped, but the third missile found its target, likely due to its pilot's failure to recognize the threat fast enough.

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"I got one!" the lieutenant exclaimed as he pulled into a left turn.

"No joy!" the ensign admitted angrily. "All three of mine jumped before impact!"

"They're getting better," the lieutenant admitted. "Circle east and find a target," he added. "I'm circling west."

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Talisha ran with all her might toward her waiting Nighthawk as energy blasts slammed into the sides of the quarry around her, and bombs detonated in the compound. Never had she been under such pressure. Nothing in her relatively benign life, as the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, had prepared her for this moment, other than the flight training she had received and the experience she had in the Sugali fighters, themselves.

Dodging the flying debris as she ran, she barely heard Leta over her comm-set.

"The ship is ready for departure," Leta reported. "However, there are currently four hostile targets in the area, as well as several surface combatants. Safe departure will be difficult."

"No kidding!" Talisha barked as she rounded the corner of her ship's bay. She ducked under the starboard nosecone and bounded up the steps built into the bottom half of the cockpit surround. As she reached the top step, she spun

around, landing in the pilot's seat. "Close up and put us in a low hover!" she ordered as she fastened her restraint harness.

"Overhead clearance is less than three meters," Leta warned as the forward-facing, clamshell canopy began to close.

"Then hover at a meter and a half, AGL, Leta!"

The ship immediately rose a meter and a half above the ground as the cockpit surround closed, sealing her in the darkness for a second. The walls of the surround lit up, displaying the view of the cave encircling her hovering Nighthawk as if the cockpit walls were not even there.

Another Ahka raider slid into view in the middle of the compound, directly ahead of her. Without even thinking, Talisha grabbed her flight control stick with her right hand and pressed the firing trigger, sending streams of yellow plasma energy from her wingtip cannons into the hovering enemy combat shuttle. About to unload more troops, the raider's shields were down, and the yellow streams of plasma tore the unprotected ship open, causing it to explode only a few meters above the ground, falling to the surface ablaze.

"Oh, my God!" Talisha exclaimed, having never fired her weapons at an actual, live target. The impact of having just ended at least seven or eight lives would not hit her until later.

"Now would be a good time to go," Leta suggested.

Talisha slammed her throttle forward with her left hand, and her fighter leapt forward like a missile from its little cave. She accelerated rapidly, barely clearing the burning hulk of the raider she had just shot down. She pulled back hard on her flight control stick, pitching up as multiple

icons appeared on her tactical display. "Shields up!" she instructed.

"Shields are at maximum," Leta replied. "Four inbound hostiles to your left. Also two friendlies; one circling east, the other west."

"This sure isn't an air show," Talisha said under her breath as she pulled into a tight, rolling, left turn.

Lieutenant Commander Cardi dove behind the cargo truck as energy blasts slammed into the ground nearby. Two more explosions rocked the surface under her as Lieutenants Rado, Bilak, and Garmon landed beside her, finding cover to protect themselves from flying debris.

"We're never going to reach the flight line!" Lieutenant Garmon yelled as more energy blasts rocked the area. A Sugali fighter streaked over their heads, rolling to the left and turning away as it climbed.

Samita tapped her comm-set. "Sugali fighter departing! Target raiders to the left so we can reach the flight line!"

"I'm on it!" Talisha replied, her voice somewhat shaky.

"Who the hell was that?" Lieutenant Rado wondered.

"I think it's the lady who delivered the fighters!" Samita replied.

"I thought she was a stunt pilot," Lieutenant Bilak said.

Lieutenant Commander Cardi peered around the corner of the vehicle, watching as the Sugali fighter opened fire, causing the four attacking raiders to cease firing and break formation. "Not today," Sami insisted. "Today, she's a fighter pilot."

"Hell yeah, she is!" Lieutenant Garmon agreed.

"Let's go!" Sami said, taking off across the compound again.

Commander Prechitt quickly bounded up the boarding ladder built into the front, lower half of the Nighthawk's cockpit surround, spinning around and falling into the pilot's seat as he reached the top. "Start this thing!" he yelled. Nothing happened. "What the hell?" He quickly scanned the console, finally selecting what he thought was the activation switch for the Nighthawk's PAS.

"Good morning," a male voice greeted over the cockpit speakers. "Please identify yourself."

"Commander Prechitt, commanding officer of the Karuzari forces assigned to Casbon as protection and to help with the training of Nighthawk pilots!"

"Pleasure to meet you, Commander," the AI replied. "How may I be of service?"

"Fire this thing up and get us airborne, and make it quick!"

"My apologies, Commander, but my current programming only allows me to follow the instructions of Talisha Sane. Is Miss Sane available to release control to you?"

"She's out there, fighting enemy raiders!"

"Again, my apologies, Commander, but without..."

"Oh, for crying out loud! Do you see her ship on tactical?"

"One moment," the AI replied. "Affirmative. She is currently attempting to evade pursuit by three hostiles."

"Precisely! Now fire up this ship, so we can help her!"

"Again, my apologies..."

"Christ! Can you raise her on comms?" the commander asked, becoming more frustrated.

"One moment, please. Nighthawk AI Seven, calling Talisha Sane. Are you there, Miss Sane?"

"I don't believe this shit," the commander cursed as a

nearby explosion shook the ground, threatening to collapse the cave on top of him.

"This is Sane!" Talisha replied over comms. "Who is this?"

"Miss Sane, this is Nighthawk AI Seven. Commander Prechitt is requesting control over this ship, but I am unable to grant his request without..."

"For Christ's sake, do it!" Talisha screamed.

"Understood," the AI acknowledged. "Commander, I stand ready to assist."

"Finally!"

"Powering up all systems and preparing for combat launch," the AI reported.

"Great."

"I assume you wish me to close up the cockpit surround?"

"That would be preferable, yes," the commander replied, rolling his eyes.

"The ship will be ready to launch in twenty seconds," the AI assured him as the upper and lower halves of the forward cockpit surround began to close.

"What should I call you?" the commander asked.

"I have not yet been assigned a name, Commander."

"How about Max?" the commander suggested as the cockpit surround sealed shut, and the cockpit walls around him became as if transparent.

"Max will be fine," the AI replied. "The ship is now ready for departure, Commander. What are your orders?"

"Just don't let me crash, Max," the commander instructed as he twisted the throttle handle just enough to cause the ship to raise a meter off the deck, and then slammed the throttle forward, accelerating out of the cave.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Breaking right!" Lieutenant Shan announced as he

pushed his ship into a tight, right turn.

"I'm turning inside you," Ensign Garson reported.

The lieutenant glanced at his tactical display, then back over his shoulder at the Ahka raider who was attempting to get behind him. "I cannot *believe* this guy thinks he can out-turn me in that hunk of junk."

"Set him up, and I'll knock him down," the ensign bragged.

"You'd think the fact that I'm not simply jumping away would clue him in."

"Locking a slammer on him," the ensign reported. "Firing!"

The lieutenant held his turn, luring the doomed raider toward his demise. He watched his tactical display as the icon representing the missile quickly closed on the hostile, then, just as it was about to hit him, the lieutenant pressed his jump button, transitioning his fighter a kilometer ahead in the blink of an eye. His tactical display quickly refreshed, now showing a debris field where the raider had once been. "Sucker!"

"What a dumbass!" Ensign Garson exclaimed, almost laughing.

"Coming around," the lieutenant announced as he pulled up into a half loop, rolled over level, and pressed his jump button to return. As he came out of the jump, he spotted Eagle One Two, coming about to slide in behind him again. "Let's see if we can do something about the grunts on the ground," he told his wingman.

"You go in, and I'll cover you from above," Ensign Garson replied. "Tear 'em up, Deshi!"

Commander Verbeek covered his head as he ran into the

open cave containing his Super Eagle fighter as bombs detonated just outside. Debris fell from the ceiling of the cave, causing the few ground crews who were already inside to scramble for cover. A large crack appeared in the ceiling, threatening to come loose and crush the fighter beneath it, at any moment.

"She good to go?" the commander yelled to the nearest crewman.

"Her reactor's already hot, sir!" the crewman replied, still covering his head from the falling debris. "You'd better get out of here! That ceiling is about to go!" he added, pointing at the massive crack overhead.

"Get the hell out of here!" the commander ordered the ground crews as he scrambled up the side of the ship and jumped into the cockpit.

Another explosion rocked the cave, and the crack directly over the commander widened. The large section of rock shifted, threatening to fall, held in place only by the carbon fiber webbing that covered the cave walls.

The commander activated his canopy, putting his helmet on while it closed. He slipped his shoulder restraints on as his engines spun up. Another bomb exploded outside, and the cave shook one last time. The commander looked up just as the carbon fiber netting broke free. His eyes wide, he slammed his throttle all the way forward, rolling out of the cave just as the roof gave way.

Ensign Topetti stumbled into the cave containing her Super Eagle, knocked to the ground by the nearby explosion. There was a terrific rumble; the ground continuing to shake long after the detonation. She turned around, spotting a growing dust and debris cloud spreading from right to left. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed.

"Get up there, sir!" the crew chief yelled, grabbing her by the shoulder and pulling her up. "You gotta get up there, and get those assholes off of us!"

"She ready?" the ensign asked as she got to her feet.

"Reactor is hot, and engines are ready!" the crew chief replied. "She just needs a pilot!"

"Get to safety, chief!" the ensign ordered as she headed toward the waiting fighter.

"Safety, my ass!" the chief argued. "I'm grabbing a gun! They got boots on the ground!"

Ensign Topetti quickly climbed up the side of her fighter, dropping smoothly into the pilot's seat and grabbing her helmet from its storage position atop her forward console. She activated the canopy, donning her helmet as it began to close, quickly fastening her shoulder restraints as the canopy sealed shut. She eased her throttle forward, rolling her fighter slowly out of the cave and into the cloud of dust outside.

Small rocks bounced off her canopy like a hard rain as she brought her lift thrust up. Her ship rose up off the surface and began veering left, pushed by the dust cloud swirling around her. She felt her ship rolling to the left. Fearing she was about to lose control, she instinctively slammed her throttle to maximum as she pulled back on her flight control stick.

"I can't shake this guy," Talisha exclaimed, barely able to control her fear. "Every time I jump, he jumps with me!"

"You need to vary your jump distances more than just a

few hundred meters!" Commander Prechitt told her over comms.

"Right," Talisha replied, feeling stupid. "Leta, can you get a lock on him with our tail gun?"

"Sorry, Talisha, but the target is moving around too rapidly for the aft cannon to track accurately. Perhaps you should take the commander's suggestion and jump clear."

"Don't jump just yet," the commander insisted. "Do a half-loop and then roll level, so you're headed back toward me. Then, on my command, pitch down ten degrees and jump ahead two clicks."

"Got it," Talisha replied, pulling into a loop. "What's a click?"

"An Earth term for kilometer," the commander replied.

"Right," Talisha replied as she reached the top of her loop and snap rolled to level flight again. "I've reversed course!" she reported, glancing back over her shoulder. "He's still on me!"

"Get ready," Commander Prechitt instructed. "Max, target the raider on Talisha's six and prepare to reacquire. Range of five hundred meters."

"Commander, we do not have a clear line of fire to the target. Talisha's fighter is between us and the target."

"She won't be," the commander insisted.

"Also, the target is currently ten kilometers away. It is highly unlikely that our range will decrease over nine kilometers in only a few seconds."

"You're forgetting about the jump drive, Max," the commander replied. "NOW, TALISHA, NOW!" The commander waited half a second, then pressed his own jump button. Suddenly, Talisha was gone, and the raider,

which had been nearly ten kilometers away and coming toward him, was suddenly only five kilometers away and on a collision course.

"Collision alert," Max warned.

"Reacquire target!" the commander ordered.

"Target reacquired," Max replied in his characteristically unemotional manner.

Commander Prechitt pressed his firing button, waited two seconds, then pitched up and touched his jump button again. "That's *gotta* hurt!" he announced gleefully as he noticed the icon on his tactical display changing to a debris field.

Eagle Eight rolled out of its bay in the side of the quarry as it attempted to get airborne and join the fight. As its nose cleared the cave opening, an Ahka raider jumped in from the opposite side of the base and opened fire, striking the top edge of the cave, causing it to collapse. The rocks fell on top of Eagle Eight, partially burying the fighter. A second later, the Super Eagle exploded.

"Eight is down!" Ensign Garson exclaimed. "Oh, my God, Esau is down hard!"

"Fuck!" Lieutenant Shan cursed as he rolled into a left turn toward the two raiders passing to port. Two seconds later, he rolled right and locked onto the trailing raider, launching his last missile a moment after. The missile slammed into the tail of the Ahka combat shuttle, blowing its starboard engine off its stern, sending the ship tumbling toward the surface.

Without regard to the fate of the raider, he checked his

range to the next target and then adjusted his jump range to be slightly less. He pressed the jump button and suddenly found himself only a few meters behind and slightly below the remaining raider. He cut his throttles and set his control stick to docking-thruster mode, then pulled back and to the right slightly. His ship defied its aerodynamics, pitching up just enough to bring his plasma cannons onto the remaining raider. A quick touch of his firing button and the raider's stern exploded as the lieutenant, again, pressed his jump button to jump ahead of the raider before it could fall and collide with him.

"That was slick!" Ensign Garson congratulated over comms. "How come you never taught that move to me?" "I just thought of it," the lieutenant laughed.

Commander Verbeek's Super Eagle came out of its escape jump five kilometers away and six thousand meters above the surface of Casbon. He chopped his throttle, and brought his nose up and over, pulling into an unpowered dive in the direction from which he had come.

"Six is up!" he heard Ensign Topetti report. "Oh, my God, Jeudell is gone! Repeat! Eagle Eight is down hard!"

"Nikki!" Commander Verbeek called. "Jump up to angels three and come over. I'll jump in just in front of you, and we'll make them pay for Esau!"

"Yes, sir!" the ensign replied.

The commander adjusted his dive, setting a course to intercept the ensign's return track. As soon as he spotted her transition to three thousand meters up, he jumped forward, coming out directly in front of her. "You got me, Nikki?"

"I'm on your six, Verbee! Half a click, slightly high and

right!"

"Eagle One One and One Two, Leader! Break off on my mark and jump clear! We're diving in from directly above!"

"One One copies!" Lieutenant Shan replied.

"One Two copies!" Ensign Garson acknowledged.

Commander Prechitt watched his tactical display as he held his dive. The icon representing Eagle One One was almost motionless as it hovered over the base, hammering the Ahka troops on the ground; Eagle One Two protecting it from above.

"Two more raiders just jumped in from the east!" Ensign Garson reported from Eagle One Two.

"Perfect," the commander said to himself. "Clear out, now!" The commander looked at his tactical display again. "I got left, you got right. Roll out toward your target."

"Got it!" Nikki assured him.

The two icons on the tactical display representing Eagle One One and Eagle One Two suddenly disappeared, leaving only the two Ahka raiders who had just jumped in. "Jump!" the commander ordered, touching his jump button. A split second later, two raiders were directly below him, passing from right to left. He veered slightly to the left and opened fire, just as Nikki came out of her jump and opened fire on the raider to the right. The raider to the left exploded, followed two seconds later by the raider to the right.

The commander pulled his flight control stick back hard and shoved his throttle to maximum, coming out of his dive and skimming over the top of the quarry, only a few meters above the ridgeline.

The cockpit surround flashed as Talisha's ship jumped. She pulled back hard on her flight control stick and rolled her ship to starboard, coming into a tight, right turn. Two seconds later, she rolled level, an Ahka raider directly in front of her. She pressed her firing button, unleashing a brief burst of yellow plasma energy that cut through the enemy ship with ease. The two halves of the ship tumbled through the air for several seconds before the aft section exploded. "Damn!" she exclaimed. "Awfully nice of them to just sit there and let me shoot them!"

"Two bandits, three o'clock!" Commander Prechitt warned. "Jump!"

Talisha's threat alert went crazy as two fast-moving icons appeared on her tactical screen. "What the..." She tapped her jump button, instantly transitioning ahead three kilometers. "Why didn't you tell me these assholes had missiles?" she barked over comms.

"They didn't!" Commander Prechitt replied. "At least they didn't last time!"

"Well, they sure as hell have them now!" she replied, pulling her ship into a tight turn to port to come back around and reengage.

"All Karuzari forces! This is Prechitt! Raiders have missiles! I repeat! Raiders have missiles!"

"Fucking lovely," Commander Verbeek cursed as he skimmed the surface of Casbon in a wide turn to the right. "You hear that, Nikki?"

"I heard," the ensign replied. "Just makes it more sporting, right?"

Commander Verbeek glanced at his tactical display, noting the ensign's position. "We'll merge in ten seconds," he told her. "Slide under me and come in on my right side.

Four more hostiles just jumped in from the south, three clicks out."

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"Commander," Max said. "The new contacts have different energy signatures than the previous ones. It suggests that the recent arrivals are carrying low-yield nuclear weapons."

Commander Prechitt felt a cold chill wash over him. "Prechitt to all Karuzari forces. Target the four targets to the south! Do not let them near the base! They're carrying nukes!"

The commander turned toward the new contacts, adjusting his jump distance as he turned. "Talisha! Fall in behind me, half-a-click separation! Target all four, and be ready to launch after I jump clear!"

"What if they jump?" Talisha asked.

"Plan B," the commander replied. "Verbee, you listening?"

"Eagles One and Six, moving to secondary kill slot," Commander Verbeek reported.

"Eagle Leader, Eagle One One. We'll back you up from the east," Lieutenant Shan reported as he initiated a turn to port. "Pal, we'll jump a four-click box...north, east, south, then west. That should put us in cleanup position right on

time."

"Sounds good, Deshi!" the ensign replied over comms.

The lieutenant rolled out of his turn on a northerly heading and pressed his jump button, transitioning ahead four kilometers in the blink of an eye. He checked his

tactical display, ensuring that his wingman was still with him, then turned east, as planned.

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Commander Verbeek finished his turn, then pressed his jump button. "Eagle One, in the secondary slot," he announced. "You still with me, Nikki?"

"Still with you, boss," the ensign replied.

"Lock your missiles on all four targets," the commander instructed.

"I've only got two missiles left," the ensign warned.

"That's alright," the commander assured her. "Between the two of us, we've got four, and we're just the backup team."

"Get everyone to cover, just in case," Commander Prechitt ordered over comms as he made the final adjustment to his course.

"We'll do our best, but they've still got a few boots on the ground," Lieutenant Sandau replied.

"Do what you can, Lieutenant." The commander checked his tactical display one last time. All four Ahka raiders were still headed toward the base, holding their course, speed, and altitude.

"Why aren't they just jumping ahead and dropping?" Talisha wondered.

"Trust me, they will," the commander replied. "That's the thing about jump battles...they're both unpredictable and predictable, all at the same time. It's about having a plan for every possible move your opponent might make. They're going to jump ahead the moment we launch missiles."

"Then why launch at all?" Talisha asked.

"So that they *will* jump," the commander replied. "Jumping in five. You're on a three-second delay."

"Got it!"

Commander Prechitt pressed his jump button, transitioning into the primary kill slot directly in front of the onrushing Ahka raiders, less than a kilometer away and headed directly for them.

"Four targets, dead ahead, one kilometer and closing fast," Max reported.

"Reacquire," Commander Prechitt instructed.

"Collision alert," Max added. "Targets reacquired."

"Missiles away," the commander announced as he pressed the missile-launch button on his flight control stick. He immediately pitched up, clearing a firing path for Talisha, who would be jumping in behind him.

"Reacquiring targets," Leta announced as Talisha's Nighthawk came out of its jump. "Collision alert. Five seconds. Targets reacquired."

"Launching!" Talisha exclaimed as she pressed the missile-launch button on her flight control stick.

"Missiles away," Leta confirmed. "Targets are altering course...they are veering outward for clear jump paths."

"He was right," Talisha realized. She, too, adjusted her course, sliding over just enough to block the path of one of the onrushing raiders.

"Talisha, you are maintaining a collision course with target three..."

"I know!"

"Three targets have jumped," Leta reported. "Recommend evasive action. Five seconds to impact."

Talisha watched her tactical display as the onrushing

raider attempted to maneuver to a clear jump line, but she matched the target's move again.

"Collision alert, collision alert," Leta repeated.

There was a brilliant explosion directly ahead of them, and Talisha immediately rolled onto their port side and pulled back hard on her flight control stick.

"Missile impact," Leta reported. "Target destroyed."

"YES!" Leta exclaimed, rolling level again.

"A daring strategy," Leta congratulated. "And quite risky, I might add."

"Not exactly an air show, is it."

"One down!" Commander Prechitt reported over comms.

Three targets suddenly appeared on Commander Verbeek's tactical display, and his collision avoidance alert began squawking like crazy. Undaunted, he quickly checked that his missile targeting system was linked with Nikki's, then assigned all three raiders as targets for the four missiles remaining between the two of them. A split second later, the targeting system showed that all four missiles were locked on their targets, and the commander pressed his missile launch button. "Launching two!"

"Launching two!" Nikki replied from behind and to the commander's right.

With only seconds before they would collide with the incoming raiders, the commander angled slightly left and pressed his jump button, jumping between two of the targets, clearing them by less than three meters to each side.

One of the three raiders disappeared in a blue-white flash

as the other two exploded.

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"Two down!" Nikki reported over comms. "One jumped ahead!"

Lieutenant Shan looked at his tactical display as the last raider appeared. "Targeting the last raider!" he reported. But he was too late.

Another icon appeared; a smaller one, coming from the raider itself. A second later, the raider disappeared in a blue-white flash.

"Shit! He's launched!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "Fuck! The weapon is already past me! Can you get it, Pali?"

Leta instinctively brought her Nighthawk into a tight, right turn, coming around to pursue the targets that had gotten away.

"Shit! He's launched!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "Fuck! The weapon is already past me! Can you get it, Pali?"

"Negative!" Ensign Garson replied over comms. "It's already behind me!"

"I'm coming around to port!" Lieutenant Shan reported.

"You'll never make the turn fast enough!" Talisha warned.
"I've got this!" she added, pushing her ship into a steep dive. "Leta! Growler guns!"

"The target is out of the weapons range," Leta responded.

"Not for long," Talisha replied, pressing her jump button.

The Nighthawk fighter jumped ahead, transitioning to a position just above the nuclear bomb as it tumbled through the air toward the base.

"Growler guns are ready," Leta reported. "Target is in range."

Talisha pressed and held the gun trigger on her flight control stick. Her ship rumbled as the weapon sent a hundred slugs per second along its multiple mag rails. A wave of glowing slugs spread out before her, streaking toward the tumbling weapon, its field of fire widening with every meter of travel. Seconds before the weapon reached its detonation point, the slugs found it, tearing it to shreds, and destroying it in uneventful fashion.

"YES!" Talisha exclaimed. "Weapon destroyed!"

"Good job!" Commander Prechitt congratulated over comms.

"Anyone get a bead on that last raider's escape jump?" Commander Verbeek inquired.

"I've got him," Commander Prechitt replied as he plotted an intercept course. "Transmitting estimated position now," he added. "Talisha? Are you receiving the coordinates?"

"Affirmative," she replied.

"Then meet us there," he instructed. "We have some carriers to kill."

"Jumping," Commander Prechitt reported just before his Nighthawk disappeared in a blue-white flash.

"Jump plotted and ready," Leta announced.

"Jumping," Talisha said as she pressed the jump button on her flight control stick. A moment later, she again found herself on the tail of Commander Prechitt's Nighthawk as he opened fire on the Ahka carrier ship, directly in front of him, with his own Growler guns. As he dove, he translated upward, constantly pitching downward to keep his guns on the target as he passed over the top of it, continuing to fire

until he had no choice but to stop, for fear of hitting his own wingman.

Talisha opened fire, as well, targeting the same shield section as the commander, holding her trigger down as she executed the same translation and pitch maneuver. As she passed over the top of the carrier, it jumped away in a blinding blue-white flash. "Damn it!"

"Don't worry," Commander Prechitt told her. "We'll track them all the way back to Ahka if we have to."

"His shields were down to ten percent!" she exclaimed. "I almost had him!"

"There's another one out there somewhere," Commander Verbeek said, after jumping into the area to join them.

"We're going to have to take the fight to them," Commander Prechitt realized. "They're not raiders anymore. Not if they're willing to drop nukes. It's time we went on the offensive, Commander."

"Agreed," Commander Verbeek replied, "but we're going to need bombers to do so. Bombers with shield busters."

"Talisha, how fast can these Nighthawks get us to the Rogen system?"

"That depends," Talisha replied. "Where's the Rogen system?"

"Commander, we can send a comm-drone," Commander Verbeek reminded him.

"No time," Commander Prechitt insisted. "It hasn't returned from our last comm-relay yet. Talisha, transmit to all Nighthawk AIs and give authorization for Commander Verbeek to take control of them."

"I'm on it," Talisha assured him.

"Verbee, take command. Any of our pilots without a Super

Eagle to fly get put into Nighthawks. Get them up immediately so they have time to get used to it. Maintain a high state of readiness, and start planning an attack on Ahka using Eagles, Nighthawks, and Reapers."

"How long do I have?" Commander Verbeek asked.

Commander Prechitt pulled up the star charts on his Nighthawk's navigation display. "Max, how long to get to.....star designation one five seven two alpha five?"

"Approximately eighteen hours, Commander," Max replied. "However, I show no record of any civilizations at that location."

"Trust me, there is," the commander insisted. "Plot a course and prepare to get us underway."

"You might want to let me take lead on this run," Talisha suggested. "You may have the combat experience, but I've got the actual flight time in these ships."

"Lead the way, Miss Sane," Commander Prechitt insisted.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

"Captain," the guard called from the hatchway to the captain's ready room, "someone would like to speak with you."

Nathan looked up from his view screen, spotting Naralena at the entrance. "Naralena," he said, standing up. "Please, come in."

Naralena stepped inside, the guard closing the hatch on his way out.

"How are you doing?" Nathan asked, coming around his desk.

"I'm good," she assured him.

"Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk as he took a seat on the edge. "You're sure you're alright? You've been through a lot."

"Please," she said dismissively, "I went through a lot worse last time. Besides, medical cleared me."

"Of course," Nathan replied. "What can I do for you?"

"First, I wanted to thank you for rescuing me...for the second time, I might add."

"To be fair, I wasn't rescuing *you*," Nathan admitted. "I didn't even know you were *with* them."

"You didn't realize you were rescuing me the first time either, when you took us off of Haven. Regardless, I'm grateful." She looked down, smiling. "At times, it seems nothing short of a miracle...you, coming back from the dead and rescuing me without even *meaning* to."

"It's not a miracle, Naralena. It's just a series of

unrelated events that happen to put me in a *position* to rescue you."

"Some simply see miracles as incredibly long odds. Others see miracles as an event that defies all understanding and has no explanation based on logic or science. *Miracles* are in the eyes of the observer."

"Perhaps, but at least in *my* case, there *is* an explanation."

"Yes, Jessica gave me all the details, every step of which defies all odds."

"So, I am Na-Tan, then," Nathan surmised.

"In the eyes of some, yes," she explained. "In Volonese, Na-Tan means *the one*. In Takaran, it means *savior*. In Angla, it means the same as Nathan, *gift from God*. But in Chezikan, it actually means *miracle*. It's all a matter of your point of view."

"So, what do you believe?" Nathan finally asked.

"I believe you to be a brave and honest young man who is a natural-born leader, and is unable to turn his back on the injustices that litter human civilization. I believe that you manage to do miraculous things, often in the defiance of all odds, but I do not believe that you are an immortal savior sent by God."

"After all, I did die," Nathan pointed out.

"Yes, you did," she agreed, "and then you returned, but not because of a direct act of God, but rather the actions of your friends."

"Some will argue they were doing the work *of* God," Nathan replied. "Not *me*, of course."

"It doesn't matter," Naralena said. "Again, it's all about individual perspective."

"That's not why you came to see me though, is it?"

"No, it's not," Naralena admitted. "I heard about Ensign

deBanco. I thought maybe I could help."

"We have other communications officers," Nathan told her.

"Ensign Laurel is also qualified as a communications systems maintenance specialist, and Ensign Jenib has a degree in fluid dynamics and is currently helping to repair some of the damaged transfer airlock doors on the port side."

Nathan looked surprised.

"I checked," Naralena admitted. "The point is, *you're* shorthanded, and *they* have skills that can be utilized elsewhere."

"You don't have to do this, Naralena," Nathan told her.

"I know, but I want to do it."

"You'll be in harm's way again."

"As long as there are people who believe they can force their will upon others, we are *all* in harm's way," she insisted. "It's only a matter of degrees. I cannot stand by and watch my friends risk their lives for me, and everyone else, and do nothing to help. I couldn't then, and I cannot now. I need to be a *part* of the solution, and this is the best way. Communication *is* my specialty. It's what I was genetically skewed to do."

"I'm pretty sure this *isn't* what your parents had in mind when they made that decision," Nathan insisted as he rose and headed back around his desk. "Head down to the quartermaster's office on deck E," he told her as he took his seat again. "I doubt there is anyone there at the moment, but you should be able to find a few uniforms that fit. I'll have Cameron find you a bunk." Nathan smiled. "Welcome back, Miss Avakian."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, also smiling as she rose and headed for the exit.

"Naralena," Abby exclaimed, greeting her at the hatchway. "I heard you were aboard. It's good to see you again."

"You as well, Abby. If you'll excuse me, I have to get to work."

"Of course," Abby replied. She turned to Nathan as Naralena left. "She's back?"

"It appears so," Nathan replied. "I didn't know you were coming aboard, Abby. What's up?"

"I wanted to tell you in person. I've completed my designs for the long-range jump emitters, and I'm ready to begin testing."

"That is good news, but you could've just called."

"I'm meeting with Commander Kamenetskiy. He asked for my help stabilizing the containment fields on reactor three."

"Vlad asked you for help?"

"I was equally surprised," Abby admitted.

"Worried would be a more accurate term."

"There are two problems with my designs, however, both of which can be solved in time."

"What kind of problems?" Nathan wondered.

"The design needs quite a bit of aramenium to produce the emitters. They also require a lot more power, necessitating a complete overhaul of your current emitter power distribution network."

"I'm not sure if the aramenium will be a problem or not," Nathan admitted. "I'll have to speak with the leaders of Casbon. As for the emitter power distribution network, it's half destroyed at the moment."

"But changing the remainder of it means the Aurora will be without jump capabilities for twice as long," Abby pointed out. "If we can get to Takara in a single jump, it will be worth it," Nathan insisted. "Besides, the Weatherly should be returning in a few hours, and we're working on turning the Orochis into armed missile frigates."

"But the power requirements may be more than two reactors can handle," she warned, "even if both are running at one hundred percent."

"Let me worry about that, Abby," Nathan insisted. "I already have an idea on how to solve that problem."

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"Three more jumps to the rally point," Charnelle announced from Striker Three's right seat.

"I still can't get used to you sitting right seat with me," Aiden said.

"That's the tenth time you've said that, today," Charnelle told him. "Get used to it, already."

"I'm trying."

"Don't worry," she said. "Kenji will be well in a few days, and you'll be rid of me."

"Don't misunderstand," Aiden corrected, "I *like* having you in my right seat. If nothing else, you're far better looking than Kenji."

"You're such a flatterer."

"And you don't whine as much." Aiden checked his flight displays as the next jump cycled. "Sorry about Wabash," he added. "I know you two went way back."

"All the way to secondary ed."

"It's amazing that you managed to survive."

"Me and my gunners," Charnelle replied, sounding as if she'd rather not be reminded of the ordeal.

"Gunners usually do," Aiden said, "which is odd, since they're the most exposed. Still..."

Charnelle looked at Aiden, noticing the guilt on his face.

"It's not your fault, Aiden."

"I didn't say it was."

"I know that's what you're thinking. No one *made* us come along. We both could have said no."

"You said yes because I said yes," Aiden insisted. "And Sari said yes because *you* said yes."

"Even if all that's true, it was still *our* choice, and we both knew the risk."

Aiden didn't respond at first, then finally sighed and said, "I'm just glad *you* didn't die."

Charnelle smiled. "Aw, you care."

"Shut up."

"One more jump to the rally point," Charnelle said, still smiling. "What are you guys now, one and two?"

"The objective isn't necessarily to *kill* them, Char, but to keep them on their toes and afraid to abandon their positions to come to the Rogen system."

"I'm just teasing, Aiden," Charnelle assured him as the last jump in the series cycled. "We're at the rally point."

"Striker Leader...check in," Robert called over comms.

"Two," Gil replied.

"Three," Aiden answered.

"Okay, boys and girls," Robert began, "today's target is a light cruiser, apparently one of their older models. We'll be targeting their port aft shields. I'll go high, Gil goes low, and Aiden goes straight in."

"Why do I always get the straight-in approach?" Aiden wondered.

"We're trying to build up your battle nerves, kid," Gil laughed. "That, and because we just don't like you."

"But, I've got Charnelle with me," Aiden replied. "You like her, right?"

"Just her bad luck, I guess," Gil joked.

"Stop whining, kid," Robert insisted. "Five-second intervals, five seconds on target. Single pass, then everyone takes their own evasive home. Understood?"

"Got it," Gil replied.

"Understood," Aiden responded. "Third in really shouldn't be straight-in approach," Aiden said to Charnelle. "They're at full GQ by then, and the straight-in approach has the most guns on them. The *first* one in should be straight in."

"Look who's whining now," Charnelle said. "Third has the best chance at the kill shot, and straight in has the best damage angle."

"Whose damage," Aiden said, "theirs or ours?"

"Attack jump in thirty seconds," Robert warned.

"Heads up, everyone," Charnelle announced to the rest of Striker Three's crew. "We're about to go on the attack. Sound off."

"Sensors, ready," Sergeant Dagata reported.

"Systems, ready," Chief Benetti announced.

"Port gunner, ready," Ali replied.

"Starboard gunner, ready," Ledge followed.

"Ten seconds," Charnelle announced.

"One just jumped," the sergeant reported.

Aiden settled into his seat, moving it closer to the console in preparation for the engagement.

"Two just jumped."

"Three seconds...two......one......jump."

Aiden pressed the jump button. A split second later, his forward shields lit up, and his ship shook violently. "What the..."

"They're already locked onto us!" Sergeant Dagata exclaimed. "Eight guns!"

Multiple warning alarms sounded in Striker Three's cockpit.

"Forward shields are down to ten percent!" Charnelle warned. "We need to jump clear!"

"I'm turning to a clear jump line!" Aiden exclaimed.

"Forward shields are gone!" Charnelle added.

"Ash!"

"I'm working on it!"

The ship rocked from side to side as several plasma blasts slammed into their hull.

"Hull breaches!" Ashwini reported.

"Two emitters are gone!" Charnelle announced. "We may not be able to jump!"

"Ash! Do something!" Aiden begged.

"You do something, Aiden!"

Aiden yanked his flight control stick and flipped his gunship end over end.

"What the hell?" Charnelle exclaimed.

"Aft shields at seventy percent!" the chief reported.

"We're on a collision course, Aiden!" Charnelle warned. "You'll never get enough thrust to change course in this attitude! You've got to flip back over!"

"If I do, we're toast!" Aiden insisted as he attempted to change course with only his translation thrusters.

The ship bounced and then shifted violently, as if it had hit something solid.

"Shit! We're inside their shields!" Charnelle added.

"Ali! Ledge! Blast any gun you can!"

The ship continued to shake as more energy blasts struck their aft shields.

"Aft shields at fifty percent!" the chief reported.

"I got one!" Ali reported from the port gun bubble.

"Ash! Can you channel more power into the translation thrusters?"

"Not without taking it from shields!" the chief warned.

"I got another!" Ledge reported excitedly from the starboard gun bubble.

"Target the top edge of that ship and blast away!" Aiden ordered.

"What?" Ali replied.

"YOU HEARD ME!" Aiden barked. He pushed his flight control stick to the right, rolling the ship over one hundred and eighty degrees while they continued to fly backwards toward the enemy ship.

Energy blasts from the Cobra gunship's two gun turrets pounded the top edge of the Dusahn cruiser's port side as they closed on the enemy vessel. As they fired, the topside thrusters on the gunship also fired, causing it to come up and over into a nose-first flight orientation, just as its underside slammed into the damaged port-dorsal edge of the cruiser.

The ship bounced hard, nearly tossing Aiden and Charnelle from their seats, despite their restraints. There was a terrible sound of tearing metal, and they were both thrown forward against their harnesses. The sound of twisting and tearing metal continued, sending violent vibrations throughout the gunship, and then it suddenly stopped. Aiden looked over at Charnelle, shocked that they were still alive. He pulled his flight control stick back hard, bringing their nose back over onto the enemy cruiser they had just collided with, and pressed the firing button. Four triple shots of plasma torpedoes shot out from under their nose, slamming into the side of the enemy cruiser not two seconds later. The cruiser's hull gave way, and secondary

explosions detonated from within as the enemy ship's systems were completely disrupted.

For several seconds, Aiden could do nothing but stare in disbelief.

"Their shields are gone!" the sergeant announced.

"Which ones?" Charnelle immediately asked.

"All of them!"

"Gunners!" Charnelle called. "You still with us?"

"Firing!" Ledge replied as he opened up.

"I'm with you!" Ali answered, also firing.

"Aiden!" Charnelle yelled, shaking him from his stupor.

"Right," Aiden replied, pressing his firing button and holding it.

Streams of staccato bursts of plasma poured from the backward-flying gunship's two side-mounted gun turrets, as well as solid lines of laser fire from the automated turrets mounted on its upper and lower surfaces. Waves of plasma torpedoes leapt from its under-mounted tubes, slamming into the enemy cruiser's unprotected hull, tearing it open even more, until it finally broke apart and exploded.

"That has got to be the most difficult way to destroy another ship ever invented!" Charnelle exclaimed.

Aiden looked at her, smiling in disbelief. "It worked, didn't it?"

"If we're going to jump, we'd better do it now!" Chief Benetti warned. "We're dumping jump energy by the bucket loads!"

"Max jump range!" Aiden ordered. "Get us as far away from here as we can get!"

"It's not going to be far!" Charnelle warned as she frantically prepared an escape jump. "GO!"

Aiden pressed the jump button and, a moment later, everything went black. "Did it work?" he wondered.

Emergency lighting kicked in, offering scant illumination in the gunship's cockpit.

"Everything's dead," Charnelle realized.

Aiden unfastened his shoulder restraints and pulled himself upward in the microgravity, to peer out the window. The ship was tumbling. "I don't see anything," he said. "Not debris, not Palee, nothing. We must have jumped."

"The question is where," Charnelle realized.

\* \* \*

"We should hold up here," Commander Prechitt said as he aborted his jump sequencer.

"Auto-jump sequence has been aborted," Max reported.

"We still have two jumps to go," Talisha replied.

"Current position is one point three two light years from destination," Max added.

"The Rogen system was attacked a few days ago," the commander explained. "If we jump in unannounced, there's a good chance a Gunyoki will blow us to bits."

"A Gunyoki?"

"A veritable tank of a fighter. Surprisingly maneuverable, especially considering its ungainly appearance."

"Shall I enter this class of fighter into my database?" Max asked.

"We'll worry about that later, Max," the commander replied.

"As you wish, Commander."

"So, we just fly in?" Talisha wondered. "That's going to take a while...like about fifty years."

"My guess is more like five minutes," the commander

opined.

"I'm not following."

The commander's tactical display began beeping. "I guess I underestimated them. Two contacts just jumped in. We're being targeted. I suggest you power down everything, except comms, and fast," the commander said as he started shutting everything down.

"This is a very odd strategy," Talisha insisted.

"I agree with Miss Sane's assessment," Max added.

"Trust me," the commander insisted.

"Targets are shutting down all systems," Chian reported as he studied the sensor display. "Targets are attempting to go stealth."

"Shenza Nine, Shenza One Zero," Sten called. "Targets are going cold."

"They're still squawking," Jenna replied. "Something's not right."

"I don't like this shit, Jenna," Sten insisted. "I say we put a few into them and sort it out later."

"Hold on, Sten," Chian argued from the back of the Gunyoki fighter. "There was something familiar about those contacts."

"Can you still see them?" Jenna wondered.

"Negative," Chian replied. "All I'm picking up are their transponders and our targeting returns."

"Come on, Jenna," Sten urged.

"Their shields are down and their weapons are offline, Sten," Jenna reminded him. "We can't fire on them while they're defenseless."

"Gunyoki fighters, this is Commander Prechitt of the Karuzari Alliance. Hold your fire, repeat, hold your fire." "Did you hear that?" Delan said.

"Unidentified ships, Shenza Nine. Challenge."

"Lima four one seven, Mike Oscar two five one five."

"That's today's ID code," Chian confirmed.

"Shit, Commander!" Sten barked. "We were about to light your ass up! What the hell are you flying?"

"A pair of Sugali fighters," Commander Prechitt replied.

"And thanks for not frying us."

"I thought you were on Casbon, sir. What the hell are you doing out here?" Jenna wondered.

"I need to speak with Captain Scott, urgently. Can you get me cleared in?"

"We'll launch a comm-drone straight away, sir," Jenna replied. "We should have your clearance in a few minutes." "Thanks."

"Jesus, Sten," Chian said from the back seat. "You were about to fire on a commander."

"Hey, our world almost got fried a few days ago. I think I have the right to be a little trigger-happy."

"I hear ya," Chian replied.

\* \* \*

"Your little plan screwed us up worse than when you tried to bounce us off the surface of Kohara," Chief Benetti scolded.

"Hey, that worked," Aiden insisted.

"Well, this time it didn't," the chief replied.

"We're still alive, aren't we?"

The chief just glared at him.

Aiden sighed. "How bad off are we, Ash?"

"Well, our entire back half didn't jump with us," Chief Benetti began. "Hell, I'm surprised we jumped at all, to be honest. So, we've got no power, just the emergency batteries for lights, comms, and basic life support." "So, we're basically a lifeboat," Charnelle surmised.

"A really crappy one, yes," the chief agreed.

"How long can we last?" Aiden wondered.

"A couple days at the most," she replied. "Assuming we don't develop a leak or a battery fails, or a Dusahn patrol finds us and finishes us off."

"We can extend that by everyone staying together in a confined space," Charnelle suggested. "Preferably as close to the center of the ship as possible."

"The center of what's left of the ship," Sergeant Dagata corrected.

"This is about as good a spot as any," Aiden decided. "Once they figure out something happened to us, they'll launch a search party."

"How are they going to know where we are?" Ali wondered. "We don't even know where we are."

"They know which evasion algorithm we were scheduled to use," Charnelle told her. "That's where they'll start."

"For all we know, we're still deep inside Dusahn territory," Ledge reminded them.

"Space is big," Aiden assured him, "the chances of anyone finding us are astronomical."

"Not helping," Sergeant Dagata commented.

"I meant someone who doesn't know where to look," Aiden explained. "Look, we just have to stay alive as long as we can, and hope for the best. Right now, we're all still alive, and we've got enough of a ship left to keep us that way for a few days. Chief, figure out how to stretch our energy resources for as long as possible. And everyone, let's keep a positive attitude."

"Yeah," Chief Benetti agreed. "I'm positive we're fucked."

"Chief," Aiden scolded.

"Sorry," Ashwini replied. "It's my personality type."

Aiden looked at Charnelle. "We'll be fine," he assured her. "I'm certain of it."

"I know," Charnelle replied, albeit halfheartedly.

\* \* \*

"Commander," Nathan greeted as he and Cameron entered the command briefing room. "Welcome back."

"Thank you, sir," the Commander Prechitt replied. "I'd like to introduce Talisha Sane, Nighthawk fighter pilot. Miss Sane, Captain Scott, and Captain Taylor."

"A pleasure, Captains," Talisha greeted.

"Nighthawk?" Cameron wondered.

"The Sugali A-four Seven J, Advanced Tactical Fighter," Talisha explained. "It is commonly referred to by the Sugali as the Nighthawk."

"Please, be seated," Nathan replied. "I was told your need to speak with us was urgent. I hope everything is alright."

"The Ahka have attacked twice in as many days. The last time, they tried to drop nukes on us. In fact, if it hadn't been for Miss Sane's quick thinking, they would have succeeded."

"Casualties?" Cameron asked.

"Three ground crew, one pilot, and four ships...all in the second attack," the commander replied. "The first attack they weren't expecting any fighters. The second attack, they jumped in low and quick, pounding the hell out of us in minutes. Miss Sane was the first up, then myself, Commander Verbeek, and Ensign Topetti. None of us would have gotten up had it not been for Lieutenant Shan and Ensign Garson, who were just returning from patrol when the attack began. Their cover fire helped the rest of us get airborne. Captain, the Ahka now know about, not only, our Eagles but also of the Sugali Nighthawks. The fact that they came at us with nukes, tells me they are willing to

escalate in order to maintain their superiority over the Casbons. We need to take the fight to them. We need to strike them hard, target their carrier ships, as well as their surface defenses, so they know we mean business."

Nathan looked to Cameron. "Captain?"

"The fact that the Ahka have nukes, and are willing to use them, is enough of a reason for me," Cameron agreed. "However, I would only attack their ships, *not* their surface defenses. We have no idea what other threats there are in that area. If we take out their surface defenses, we leave them wide open for attack. Better to take away their ability to attack others, and then follow with a warning that if they attempt to do so, again, their surface defenses are next."

"If we don't take out their surface defenses, we are putting our own ships at risk," Talisha argued.

"Our Reapers have very good shields and very precise ordnance," Cameron insisted. "They should be fine."

"Our Reapers?" Nathan wondered.

"That is why you came, right?" Cameron surmised. "To ask to use the Reapers for the attack?"

"Yes, it is," Commander Prechitt admitted.

"You could've just sent a comm-drone," Nathan pointed out.

"It had yet to return at the time I made the decision to return, myself," the commander explained. "Besides, there was something else I felt you needed to see. However, I think you may also want Miss Ta'Akar and Doctor Sorenson present, as well."

\* \* \*

"New contact," Kasma reported over Robert's comm-set.
"It's Striker Two."

"Anything, Gil?" Robert called over comms.

"Nothing," Gil replied. "We followed his evasion route all

the way back to the first waypoint after the attack. I was going to jump into the outskirts of the system and take a peek, but I figured we'd better check back in first, just in case the kid just got lost and had shown up. I guess he didn't."

Robert sighed. "No, he didn't."

"Knowing Walsh, he's probably showin' off for Charnelle. I told you it was a bad idea to let her fly right seat for him."

"She needed to get back in the saddle, and you know it."

"I suppose." After a moment, Gil asked, "What do you want to do, Bobby?"

"You wide-scanned at each waypoint, right?" Robert asked.

"Of course," Gil replied. "Hell, we even jumped half a light year side to side at each waypoint, just in case his nav systems were damaged and they were calculating their jumps manually. They're either improvising for some reason, or they got their asses shot off."

"Either way, we need to know," Robert decided.

"You want me to jump back to Palee and take a peek? I might be able to pick up his old light and follow it out."

"Palee is going to be crawling with Dusahn by now," Robert said. "Besides, I've got more propellant left. You should return to the Aurora and refuel."

"Bullshit, we've got plenty of fuel, and I'm sure as hell not going to let you go back to Palee alone. You'll get your ass shot off, as well. Then, I'd have to do all the work on my own."

"I could make that an order, Gil," Robert reminded him.

"Then, I'd have to tell you where to shove that order, Bobby. Now, are we going back to Palee to find Striker Three, or what?"

"We'll go direct to save time, and jump in about four light

hours from Palee. That way we can pick up their old light, and follow it without anyone detecting us," Robert acquiesced.

"That's what I thought," Gil replied.

"I thought you were in charge of this battle group?" Robert's copilot commented.

"That was Gil's way of *letting* me be in charge," Robert replied as he prepared to jump their way back to Palee.

\* \* \*

"Well, this is different," Nathan commented as they approached the pair of Nighthawk fighters.

"That was the first thing I noticed, as well," Commander Prechitt agreed.

"The single-seat version has the front-opening cockpit, as opposed to the traditional, top-opening arrangement on the two-seat variant," Talisha explained. "Most Nighthawks still flying are built this way. The two-seaters were the original design. The single-seat design was developed later, after the Pilot Assist System was introduced."

"That's what they call their AI copilot," Commander Prechitt explained as they reached the front of Talisha's fighter.

"Actually, we address them as either PAS or a name of the matched pilot's choosing," Talisha corrected.

"Matched pilot?" Nathan asked.

"Each PAS's personality and thought patterns are based on that of its pilot," Talisha explained. "This gives the PAS greater ability to anticipate its pilot's actions and needs."

"What happens if the ship is damaged or destroyed?" Cameron asked.

"The PAS's identity core is stored in a module contained in the pilot's ejection system," Talisha told her. "If the pilot ejects, the pilot's PAS ejects with them and can easily be plugged into another ship. This is necessary since the patterning process is time-consuming. It takes weeks for a newly-matched PAS to become familiar with its pilot."

"Is this a true artificial intelligence?" Deliza wondered.

"It depends on your definition," Talisha replied.

"Is it self-aware?" Abby inquired.

"Not in the sense that you are likely inferring," Talisha replied. "It does not recognize itself as an 'entity' equal to you or I. It knows that it is a computer program designed to mimic human behavior in order to better interact with the pilot."

"And it desires nothing more?" Abby wondered.

"It is a computer program," Talisha replied, surprised. "It cannot *desire* anything. Why would it need to?"

"Are such systems common on Sugali?" Deliza wondered.

"Quite common," Talisha replied. "They are in our vehicles, our spacecraft, our homes, our streets, and our buildings. They run all our automation, and they help us with our daily lives. Our more affluent citizens even wear a device on their wrists to provide a connection to their digital personal assistant, which is just another version of the same program."

"Just how automated is your world?" Cameron wondered.

"All manual labor is performed by robotic systems," Talisha told her. "Some of them are controlled by AIs, others by human telepresence. It depends on the task."

"Amazing," Deliza exclaimed.

Talisha looked puzzled. "We have had such systems for centuries. I am surprised that *you* do not. After all, the jump drive is far more advanced than any FTL system in common use. One would think a civilization capable of creating such a system would already be heavily dependent on robotics and AIs."

"We have robotics," Nathan told her. "But we've had some aversion to AIs, ever since the bio-digital plague."

"Plague?" Talisha wondered.

"The one that swept the Earth and its core worlds a thousand years ago?" Nathan explained.

"I was not aware of such a plague," Talisha replied. "Were many people killed?"

"Eighty percent of humanity was wiped out," Cameron explained, dumbfounded at Talisha's ignorance.

"You're kidding!" Talisha exclaimed.

"I'm not," Cameron replied in all seriousness.

"What happened to the other twenty percent?" Talisha wondered.

"Fifteen percent fled to the stars," Nathan replied. "How could you *not* know this?"

"Sugali is nearly two thousand light years from Earth," Talisha explained. "It was founded by one of the first colonization missions funded by the Independent African Nations of Earth. Our people have had no contact with any of the core worlds since departure."

"By design?" Abby wondered.

"By distance," Talisha replied. "It took over three hundred years for our founders to reach Sugali. We sent word of our arrival back to Earth but never received a response. We simply assumed the message was never received, and that the people of Earth had forgotten about us. After all, there were many expeditions being launched at the time."

"Not to destinations that were two thousand light years away," Nathan corrected.

"Sugali was not our founder's original destination. It was chosen during transit, when it was discovered that the star of their original destination had become unstable. Although three times as distant, Sugali was the nearest hospitable alternative that could be reached with the resources aboard."

"I remember something about a lost expedition from one of the IAN countries," Nathan said. "There were several lost expeditions, in fact. In the early days, the success rate was less than sixty percent."

"Commander Prechitt told me that *you* are from Earth," Talisha stated. "Is that correct?"

"Captain Taylor, myself, and Doctor Sorenson," Nathan explained. "And, of course, this ship."

"Then, the Earth and its core worlds have recovered?"

"For the most part, yes, but the Earth fell into a long dark age, and had to rediscover and reinvent most of its technology. If it hadn't been for the data ark, we wouldn't be here, now," Nathan explained.

"Unbelievable," Talisha exclaimed.

"You would think that the people of Sugali, now that they have jump drives, would have learned about the plague from other worlds," Cameron stated.

"We have only had the jump drive for a little over a year," Talisha stated. "Until then, the only other world we've had contact with was our enemy. We have been selling off the bulk of our Nighthawks to pay for the construction of jump-capable ships to establish contact with outside worlds. The worlds of the Ilyan are the first we have made contact with. They, too, have shown great interest in our AI technology." Talisha turned to the open cockpit of her Nighthawk and spoke. "Leta?"

"Hello, Talisha," the female voice in the ship responded. "Shall I prepare the ship for departure?"

"Not just yet, Leta," Talisha replied. "I have some people I'd like you to meet. You already know Commander

Prechitt. From my right to left are Captain Nathan Scott, Captain Cameron Taylor, Doctor Abigail Sorenson, and Miss Deliza Ta'Akar."

"A pleasure to meet you all," Leta greeted.

"These people are interested in your abilities to assist in the operation of complex systems."

"Understandable," Leta replied. "Based on my limited sensor data, the ship we are currently on is extremely complex, far more so than the systems on a Nighthawk fighter."

"What kind of systems are you able to operate?" Abby asked.

"I am capable of controlling any system that meets Sugali Automation Protocol one five seven omega."

"We are not familiar with that protocol," Deliza said. "Can you elaborate?"

"Sugali Automation Protocols are designed to create an interface through which an assistive artificial intelligence, such as myself, may sense the state of a system and all its subsystems, and make adjustments to that system and its subsystems, as needed, according to the wishes of the system's operator."

"What governs your range of operations?" Abby asked.

"The boundaries established by the owner of the system or its operator."

"Are you able to exceed those boundaries?" Abby asked.

"Only if exception states are defined and are applicable to maintain the safe operation of the system, and or to protect the safety of any human beings who might be negatively affected by that system's improper operation and or failure."

"What if the system cannot be operated safely and poses a threat to the well being of humans?" Abby wondered.

"Then, I would be required to issue a warning to any and all humans who might be negatively affected, and to ask for guidance as to how to proceed."

"Is there any scenario where you would allow one or more humans to suffer?" Abby asked. "For example, allowing the death of one human to save many?"

"I understand the scenario, but I am not programmed to make such decisions. It is unfortunate, but I would have to protect the first human to be negatively affected, at the cost of numerous humans who might be negatively affected later."

"Are there versions of you that *can* make such decisions?" Deliza asked.

"None that I am aware of," Leta replied. "However, it is possible."

"Leta," Nathan called, "are you alive?"

"No more so than the communications device each of you wears on your heads," Leta replied.

"The comm-sets don't hold conversations with us," Nathan said.

"If they were programmed to do so, they would."

"Clever," Nathan commented.

"My intent was not to be clever, Captain Scott, but to make a point. Verbal communication is the most natural way for a human operator to interact with a computer system. Although my personality matrix makes me seem human to the operator, it is primarily designed to make interaction with the operator more natural and efficient. My programming was not designed to create a sentient, artificial intelligence. I can hold a conversation with my operator on many topics, but I am only a simulation of a person, not a person in itself. I hope that makes it a bit clearer." "Actually, it does," Nathan admitted.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

Aiden settled on the deck of the cockpit, in what was left of Striker Three, leaning against the edge of the center pedestal, his legs dangling over the opening from the flight deck to the main deck a meter and a half below. His copilot for the day, Charnelle, was cuddled next to him for warmth in the chilly temperatures, leaning against his left shoulder, sound asleep.

Chief Benetti ascended the ladder and sat down on the deck to Aiden's right, after having spent the last hour studying the only active console on the ship.

The grumpy engineer had never sat this close to Aiden, or to anyone else for that matter. At first, it made Aiden nervous, wondering if she was going to haul off and smack him for getting them into this mess. After an entire minute of silence had passed, he finally had to say something. "What's up, Ash?"

Ashwini leaned forward slightly, looking across Aiden at Charnelle. "She asleep?" she whispered.

"No," Charnelle replied, opening her eyes slowly. "It's too cold to sleep."

The chief gestured for her to keep her voice down, pointing to the other three crew members asleep in the compartment below. "They're using less oxygen if they're asleep," she whispered.

Aiden suddenly appeared worried. "Something wrong?"

"Everything is wrong, Aiden," the chief replied quietly.

"The oxygen generators are failing, the scrubbers are

barely working, and something is draining our emergency batteries much faster than they should be."

"What could it be?" Aiden wondered.

"Beats the shit outta me," she admitted. "I've been staring at that damned console for more than an hour trying to find the source of the energy drain. Everything indicates that it shouldn't be happening, yet the battery charge levels keep dropping."

"How long have we got?" Charnelle wondered.

"We'll be out of power in an hour," she replied, "assuming the drain doesn't get any worse."

"What about oxygen?" Aiden asked.

"Without power, the O-Two generators and the scrubbers won't work, so it's just a matter of time before we use up what's left inside."

"No reserves anywhere?" Charnelle wondered.

"Reserves were in the rear section," Ashwini explained. "I can vent the holding tank for the airlock into the cabin, but that's not going to buy us much."

"What about what's in the maintenance EVA suit?" Charnelle asked.

"Also aft."

After a moment of silence, Aiden asked, "I don't suppose you've done the math?"

"Does it matter?" Ashwini replied. After noticing Aiden's expression, she sighed and then answered, "A few hours, if we stay calm and quiet."

"We should sedate everyone," Charnelle suggested.

"What?" the chief asked, shocked.

"Survival protocol," Aiden told the chief. "Slows everyone's metabolism down so they use less oxygen."

"Is that really going to help?" the chief questioned.

"It could buy us another hour, maybe," Aiden replied.

"What if someone comes looking for us?" the chief wondered.

"I'll stay awake," Aiden insisted.

"I should be the one who stays awake," Charnelle said.

"Why you?" Aiden wondered.

"I'm smaller than you, so I use less oxygen."

"I'm the only one who can fix things if something goes wrong," Ashwini argued. "I should be the one who stays awake."

"It's the captain's job," Aiden told them. "It's my duty." "But..."

"If something breaks, I can give you a shot to counteract the sedative," Aiden told the chief, cutting her off.

"Aiden," Charnelle started to argue.

"My command, my responsibility," Aiden insisted.

"I'll get the med-kit," Charnelle said, moving quietly down the ladder.

"If we lose power, we lose comms," Aiden said to the chief.

"I tied one battery into short-range comms and isolated it from the rest of the ship," the chief explained.

"How long is *that* going to hold?" Aiden wondered.

"Longer than any of *us*," the chief replied.

Aiden cast a sidelong glance at her.

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Aiden replied, looking back at Charnelle in the compartment below as she began administering sedative shots to the other three crew members.

"Listen, Aiden," the chief began, "I'm sorry about what I said earlier, about it being your fault and all. I was just venting."

"I know."

She looked at him, one eyebrow cocked with suspicion. "You do?"

"You're not as mean and scary as you'd like us all to believe, Ash."

The chief snickered. "Actually, I'm worse. I've been holding back."

Aiden glanced at his chief engineer out of the corner of his eye. "When?"

Ashwini smiled and headed back down the ladder. Aiden watched while Charnelle gave the chief her shot, and the chief settled down on the deck between Sergeant Dagata and Ali and Ledge, who were already huddled up together for warmth.

Charnelle covered the four of them with two of the thin emergency blankets, then climbed back up the ladder to sit next to Aiden again. "You want to do me?"

"Huh?" Aiden asked, shocked.

Charnelle held up the pneumo-ject.

"Oh," Aiden replied. "Sure." He took the pneumo-ject syringe, set the dose, and then pressed it against the side of Charnelle's neck.

"Here," she said, handing him another pneumo-ject syringe.

"What's this for?"

"The reversing agent," she replied, snuggling back into his side again to stay warm. "So you can wake us up when help arrives."

"Oh, yeah," Aiden said, wrapping his left arm around her.

"Just don't let go," she whispered as she began to drift away.

"Never," Aiden whispered back. He gazed back down at his crew, huddled under the silver emergency blankets, not three meters from a warped bulkhead separating them from the frozen desolation of outer space. After a moment, he looked down at Charnelle, who was already dozing off in his arms.

Aiden leaned his head back, staring through the overhead view port at the stars outside as his battered half-ship slowly tumbled, drifting aimlessly through deep space. He knew exactly what the other Strikers would have to do to find them, and he knew the odds. No transponder and very little power meant no emissions that could be read, and their body temperatures were falling fast, which meant that unless a Striker was close enough to see them, they wouldn't pick up any thermal signatures.

Aiden closed his eyes, remembering how many times Kenji had warned that he would get them all killed. How ironic that Kenji would turn out to be the only one who survived.

\* \* \*

The Amonday's port boarding hatch rolled open, and they were met with a surprisingly cold blast of frigid air.

"Good call on the cold-weather gear," Jessica congratulated the Ghatazhak sergeant behind her.

"We were here yesterday to do a secondary sweep," Sergeant Sodano replied. "Cold as hell, even with level threes."

"I hope it's only the airlock," Jessica said as they entered the airlock.

"The whole ship," the corporal said.

"How the hell do they expect anyone to survive in this?" Jessica wondered.

The outer airlock door closed, and the inner airlock door rolled open, revealing a long corridor.

"They do not," Commander Andreola replied. "That's the

idea. If you fail to carry out the Dusahn's orders, they want you off the ship or dead. They care not which."

"Lead the way, Commander," Jessica urged, gesturing toward the corridor. After the commander walked past her, she turned to the sergeant. "If he tries anything, shoot him," she said in a near whisper.

"No problem," the sergeant replied.

Jessica and the two Ghatazhak followed Commander Andreola forward, down the corridor and around the corner. "This doesn't strike me as a warship," she commented as they navigated the frozen interior.

"All of our ships are built as general-purpose vessels," the commander explained as they walked. "Each can easily be converted into whatever is needed. They all began their lives as cargo ships. None of them became armed until the Porkaish incident when a Toramund ship attacked one of our cargo ships. That incident provoked a short-lived war between our peoples, followed by a military buildup by both sides that lasted decades, until the Dusahn arrived and put an end to it."

"By wiping out Toramund?" Jessica surmised.

"Precisely," the commander replied. "The Toramund were given the opportunity to ally with the Dusahn and refused. Extinction was their reward. That is why my people surrendered without resistance. The Dusahn came, bombarded our world for a few minutes, and then accepted our complete surrender."

"You just gave up without a fight?" Sergeant Sodano asked.

"It was a matter of survival," Commander Andreola insisted. "The Dusahn came with twenty ships, all of them vastly superior to our measly eight ships. Had we resisted, we would have suffered the same fate as Toramund."

"My apologies," the sergeant offered. "My intent was not to be judgmental. It's just hard for me to imagine."

"That is because you are trained as a warrior. You live your life in the company of warriors. The Orswellans are a peaceful people who were forced into war and then forced to serve their conquerors. Some of us may have been *trained* to fight, but it is not in our *souls*." The commander stopped at the next corner. "The bridge is there," he said, pointing to the hatch at the end of the short corridor.

"After you," Jessica replied, gesturing for the commander to continue.

Commander Andreola did as instructed, continuing to the hatch at the end of the corridor. He pushed the hatch inward, stepping through onto the bridge.

The lighting on the bridge of the Amonday was just as dim as it had been throughout the ship. The only difference was that a few panels appeared to still be alive. The commander moved over to one of them, taking a seat at the console. "This is a general-purpose station," he explained. "It can be used to access any ship system or function. From here, we should be able to download all schematics, specifications, and navigational data to a portable storage card."

"Card?" Jessica wondered.

The commander opened a small drawer to the right of the console, pulling out a card about the size of his palm. "We call these 'data cards'. We use them to move information between systems."

"Why not just transfer them directly?" Jessica asked.

"Isolation of critical systems," Corporal Teel surmised.

Commander Andreola looked at the corporal, surprised.

"The best way to prevent a cascade failure of networks,

due to erroneous or malicious code, is to keep them isolated from one another," the corporal explained.

This time, it was Jessica who looked at the corporal with surprise.

"What, you think all we know how to do is fight?"

"No, you're just the first Ghatazhak I've met who's also a computer geek."

"There are more of us than you think," the corporal said with a wink.

"Couldn't the malicious code be carried over onto the card and then introduced into the next system?" the sergeant wondered. "I'm not one of them," he said to Jessica. "What did you call them?"

"Geeks?"

"That's it."

Now it was Commander Andreola who was confused. "I do not understand this term."

"Geek?" the corporal asked. "It refers to someone who is really smart and really good-looking."

"I see," the commander replied. "In answer to your question, Sergeant, it is not possible for the data card to carry malicious code. In fact, it cannot store *any* code. The cards are designed to store data only."

The console where he was working suddenly went dark, as did the other consoles, one by one. Finally, the lighting on the bridge went out, as well.

"What's going on?" Jessica wondered.

Two lights appeared at the ends of both Ghatazhak soldier's weapons, both of which were pointed at the commander's head.

"It wasn't me," the commander assured them, his hands immediately going up.

"Alert, alert. Containment failure in one minute," a

computer voice announced.

"Uh-oh," the commander said.

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Jessica asked.

"Fix it!" the sergeant barked.

"I cannot!" the commander insisted. "It is the Dusahn! They must have rigged it to be triggered by any tampering!"

"Shuttle Two Five, Nash!" Jessica barked over her commset as she grabbed the commander by his jacket, lifting him from his chair. "Let's move! We've got to get to the shuttle!" she added, heading for the exit.

"Go for Shuttle Two Five," the pilot replied.

"Be ready for immediate departure!" Jessica ordered as they cleared the hatch and ran down the corridor. "This ship is about to lose antimatter containment! Call Rogen command, and make sure all ships are clear of the area and be ready to jump clear as soon as we're aboard!"

"Two Five copies! How long until containment failure?"

"Containment failure in forty-five seconds," the voice announced.

"Forty fucking seconds!" Jessica replied as they raced down the gangway ladder to the next deck.

"We'll never make it to the boarding airlock in time!" the commander insisted as they ran.

"We have to!" Jessica argued.

The commander stopped at the intersection. "We have to go this way!"

Jessica and the Ghatazhak also stopped. "The shuttle is that way!" Jessica insisted, pointing in the direction they had been running.

"Trust me!" the commander insisted, taking off down a side corridor toward the port side of the ship.

"Shit," Jessica cursed, turning to follow the commander.

"Jess!" the sergeant called after her.

"Come on, Sergeant!" Jessica ordered.

"You're kidding me," the corporal said, following the sergeant as he ran after Jessica.

"Containment failure in thirty seconds," the voice warned.

"This is a really bad idea, Jess!" the sergeant yelled as he and the corporal chased Jessica and the commander down the corridor.

Jessica followed the commander around the corner, where he stopped at a small half-height hatch and began punching numbers into a control panel next to the hatch.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Jessica demanded.

"Overriding the lockout," the commander replied.

"Containment failure in fifteen seconds," the voice warned.

"To what?" she demanded.

"An escape pod!" the commander replied. "Got it!" he added as the hatch slid open. "Get in!"

"Shuttle Two Five!" Jessica called over her comm-set as she climbed through the small hatch, practically falling into the cramped interior of the tiny pod. "Jump clear, now!"

"But..."

"Containment failure in five seconds," the voice warned as the corporal climbed through the hatch.

"That's an order!" Jessica added, cutting the shuttle pilot off.

"Four..."

"Understood," the pilot replied.

The sergeant practically dove through the hatch, tumbling into the corporal as he landed inside the pod.

"Three..."

"Two Five away," the pilot called. "Good luck."

"Two..."

Commander Andreola climbed inside the pod, activating the hatch from the inside.

"One..."

"Hold on!" the commander warned as he pressed the launch button.

"Containment failure," the voice announced.

There was a sudden hiss of compressed air and then a loud bang. The pod lurched out of its port, accelerating quickly through the Amonday's thick outer hull. The force of the sudden acceleration sent all four of them tumbling into a pile against the back wall of the escape pod, despite their best efforts to brace themselves. As they cleared the hull and jumped, something else hit them...as if they had been struck by a solid object from behind at the same moment they jumped.

Jessica could only remember one other time in her life when she had felt such a sensation. "Oh, please don't tell me we just jumped a thousand light years."

\* \* \*

"Anything?" Robert asked over his comm-set.

"Still nothing, sir," his sensor officer reported. "Trust me, sir, I'll let you know if I find anything."

"You've got the target, right?" Robert asked.

"Yes, sir. The Dusahn assault ship is just now coming around from the backside of Palee. We may have jumped in just a bit far out. I have no way of telling if this is the orbit during which we..."

Robert looked at his copilot when the sensor officer stopped mid-sentence.

"Jump flash!" the sensor officer reported. "It's us attacking the target. This is weird."

"What's weird?" Robert wondered.

"Nothing, just watching us from the past," the sensor officer replied. "Striker Two just jumped in as we jumped out. They're firing... Uh-oh,"

"What is it?" Robert asked.

"Jesus," the sensor officer exclaimed.

"What?"

"Oh, my God!"

"You're killing me, here, Kas," Robert exclaimed.

"Damn! That kid is a maniac!"

"Kasma! What happened to Striker Three?"

"One moment, let me play it back to be sure," the sensor officer replied.

"Easy, Robert," his copilot, Sasha, counseled his distraught captain.

"The target anticipated Three's attack, sir," the sensor officer finally reported. "They had guns on him the moment he jumped in. Tore the hell out of them. It looks like they couldn't get a clear jump line to escape. Striker Three actually glanced off the target's hull trying to get to their jump line, which is amazing, considering they were trying to keep their best shield toward the target the entire time. They even killed the target!"

"Did they jump?" Robert demanded.

"Yes, but,"

"But what?"

"Not all of Striker Three jumped, sir," the sensor officer reported.

Robert said nothing for a moment, his sensor officer's words sinking in. "How much?"

"The entire back half of the ship," the sensor officer replied solemnly. "It looks like they took a hit as they jumped, or even a split second before."

"Could they have survived?" Sasha wondered.

"Best I can tell, they were severed just aft of the numberthree main bulkhead."

"Captain, if the forward half jumped intact, they'd be on emergency battery power and life support," his engineer added.

"Which gives them about a day," Robert surmised, trying to sound hopeful.

"Assuming none of those systems were damaged, as well," his engineer added.

"Did you get their jump course?" Robert asked.

"Yes, sir," the sensor officer replied. "However, because of their partial jump, I can't calculate their jump distance."

"Feed me their course data," Robert instructed, turning his attention to his navigation displays.

"Aye, sir, sending it to your console now."

"Robert, even if we start from the outer edge of the Palee system..." his copilot began.

"We have to start from *within* the Palee system," Robert insisted, "and I'm aware of how long it could take to find them."

"Assuming we *can* find them," Sasha added. "Who knows what effect that hit had on their jump. They could have broken up *in* their jump. They could be scattered across several light years."

"And we're going to search every one of those light years," Robert insisted. "Five-light-minute jumps with fiveminute scans."

"Even at that distance, we could still miss their debris, if they completely broke up," his sensor officer warned.

"I'm operating under the assumption that they *didn't*," Robert replied as he prepared the first jump, "as I would hope *they* would do if it were *us*."

"What do you think?" Nathan asked Deliza, hovering over her shoulder while she studied the portable workstation attached to one of the Sugali fighters.

"This program is *incredibly* complex," she exclaimed, obviously astounded. "It has self-diagnostic systems, learning and analysis algorithms, personality matrices, emulators, conversation algorithms, anticipation features... I could go on and on. It's incredible."

"I am flattered," Leta said. "You're not so bad yourself, Miss Ta'Akar."

"Thank you, Leta," Deliza replied, smiling.

"I can also analyze foreign systems if given access," Leta announced. "For example, I noticed the damage to the port side of this hangar. Based on what little I learned about this ship on approach, I have determined that it has suffered significant damage, likely due to a recent battle. Perhaps I can provide assistance?"

"How might you do that?" Cameron asked.

"I can analyze your ship's systems, assess damage, prioritize power usage, and order of repairs; possibly even suggest opportunities for upgrades to systems," Leta explained.

"But to do that, we'd have to give you unlimited access to all our systems," Nathan surmised.

"That would guarantee the best results," Leta admitted, "however, I understand your reluctance."

"You do?" Cameron wondered.

"I am an artificial intelligence from a world about which your people know little. For all you know, I could be a covert digital operative, working for your enemy to incapacitate or take control of your vessel."

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

"I had," Cameron replied.

"Perhaps you could isolate one of your damaged systems, prior to allowing me access?" Leta suggested.

"Thank you for the offer, Leta," Nathan said. "I'll talk to our chief engineer about the idea."

"As you wish, Captain."

"Captain, Comms, flash traffic," Naralena called over their comm-sets.

Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Go ahead."

"Rogen command received an urgent relay from Lieutenant Commander Nash, through Shuttle Two Five, warning that the Amonday's containment fields were about to fail, and to clear the area of all traffic."

"Sensors, Captain," Nathan called. "Position of the Amonday?"

"Three light min..." The sensor officer suddenly stopped. "Captain! The Amonday just went critical, sir! She's gone!" "What about Shuttle Two Five?" Nathan asked.

"Unknown," the sensor officer replied. "The blast is preventing any readings of the immediate area."

"Comms, Captain," Nathan continued, "contact Rogen command and ask them to dispatch search and rescue to the area. We're on our way." Nathan turned to Deliza and Abby. "Keep studying this, and get Commander Kamenetskiy to look at it, as well," he added as he turned to exit.

"What about the Reapers, sir?" Commander Prechitt wondered.

"You can have them for three days," Nathan called back as he and Cameron headed for the bridge, "but not until after we deal with this."

\* \* \*

"What the fuck just happened?" Sergeant Sodano

demanded, after stabilizing himself in the microgravity environment of the escape pod.

"Downloading all that data must have triggered some Dusahn security protocol," Commander Andreola replied. "I swear, I had no idea this would happen."

"I know," Jessica replied.

"You believe me?" the commander asked, dumbfounded.

"If you had, you wouldn't have tried to escape," the sergeant surmised, "and you probably would've tried to find a way for it to happen closer to the Aurora."

The commander looked at Jessica.

"What he said," she added.

"What did you mean by your statement," the commander wondered, "when we jumped, about the thousand light years?"

"Long story," Jessica replied. "Any idea where we jumped to?"

"These pods only have enough power to jump clear of the ship," the commander explained, "so we can't be more than a few light minutes out. The Amonday's antimatter reactor was not very powerful."

"Not very powerful," Jessica commented, one eyebrow raised.

"As antimatter reactors go," the commander added. "The transponder has already activated, and this pod has sufficient air, water, and rations to sustain six people for up to ten days."

"Then, you don't know where we are," Jessica surmised.

"This pod is not equipped with navigational equipment," the commander explained.

Jessica sighed.

"You don't think..." the sergeant began.

"I hope not," Jessica replied.

"What is it?" the commander wondered, realizing they had concerns of which he was not aware.

Jessica sighed, again. "A long time ago, a ship jumped just as an antimatter reactor in a nearby ship went critical. The result was a massive dump of energy into the jumping ship's shields, propelling it nearly a thousand light years in a single jump."

The commander looked at the sergeant, then at the corporal, then back to Jessica. "You don't seriously believe that *this* pod may have jumped a thousand light years?"

"I don't *believe* anything," Jessica replied. "I don't *know* anything. I only know that it has happened before, under nearly identical circumstances."

"This pod's jump system is rudimentary. I'm no engineer, but I am certain if *that much power* had been channeled into its *single*, *low-power* jump emitter, it would no doubt have failed in *spectacular* fashion."

"Perhaps," Jessica agreed. "However, it *could* have caused us to jump much further than designed. A light *month*; a light *year*; *ten* light years...any of them would complicate our rescue."

"Are you saying your people may not find us?" the commander realized.

"I'm saying our situation might be more serious than you think," Jessica replied as she settled into her seat and secured her weapon.

"What are you doing?" the commander wondered.

"I'm getting comfortable," Jessica said, looking at the sergeant and the corporal. "What about you guys? Are you hungry?"

"I could eat," Corporal Teel replied, also settling into his seat.

"Sergeant?" Jessica asked.

"I wouldn't mind a bite," the sergeant replied, disconnecting his weapon from his body armor and stowing it in the empty seat next to him.

Jessica looked at Commander Andreola. "So, what's on the menu for this flight?"

The commander looked confused. "Who are you people?"

"We're Ghatazhak," Jessica replied. "Trust me, we've been through much worse. Now, break out the chow, and tell us about your world and about the Dusahn."

\* \* \*

"Jump seventeen, complete," Sasha announced.

"Start your scans, Kas," Robert said over comm-sets, knowing full well that his sensor officer had done so the moment they had come out of the jump.

The truth was, Robert felt rather helpless. The auto-flight system was flying his gunship, and the auto-jump sequencer was handling all the jumps. Other than monitoring their systems, and Kasma monitoring the sensors, they were just passengers, hoping for something important to do. For once there was, it would mean that they had found their missing comrades.

Robert closed his eyes. The deep penetration, hit-and-run missions were already long. Hours of jumping for minutes of combat, followed by even more hours to get back home.

Home. The word struck him as odd. He had not had a home, in the usual sense of the word, for most of his adult life. The academy, flight school, officer training, his deep space missions...the closest he had come in more than twenty years of service had been the months spent on Tanna, teaching Cobra crews. Even during his years spent commanding a destroyer, he had never taken a residence back on Earth. Since his parents and siblings had all moved to the Pentaurus sector, he had seen little point. Instead,

he'd spent seven years on that destroyer, only going planetside for the occasional liberty, or to visit Gil at his girlfriend's place on Kohara.

Right now, he wished he had followed Gil's original advice and set himself up with a pretty gal, a lake house, and a boat of his own. Then he wouldn't feel the guilt. The guilt for failing to save Tanna. The guilt for going against his oath to his homeworld. The guilt for the deaths of three of Striker Four's crew, and now...

Robert swore an oath to himself, right then, that if he survived *this* war, he would find that woman, that house, and that boat, and never look back.

"Contact!" Kasma reported over comm-sets. "Debris field," he added a moment later, his tone sinking.

"Is it Striker Three?" Robert couldn't help but ask.

"Affirmative," Kasma replied.

"Damn it," Robert cursed.

"But it's not enough," Kasma added.

"What do you mean?" Robert asked.

"It's not enough debris. It looks like part of their starboard side, just aft of their gun turret. I'm picking up part of the number one starboard heat exchanger, an emitter, a plasma vent grate, and a laser turret, but that's all."

"Maybe they broke up even more than we thought," Sasha suggested.

"Negative, sir," Kasma insisted. "We'd pick that up, as well. It's as if just this little bit jumped to this location, but nothing else."

"Is that even possible?" Robert wondered.

"Theoretically, yes," Renny replied. "If they broke up while the jump charge was being sent to the emitters, not

all the emitters would receive the same charge, so all parts of the ship might not jump to the same location."

"But they'd all still jump along the same course, right?" Robert asked.

"I suspect so," the engineer agreed, "but, I don't know that anyone has ever modeled that scenario, Captain."

"It's good enough for me," Robert insisted. "We continue the search on this path. Same intervals and we keep searching until we find them or we find all their pieces."

"Damn right," Renny agreed.

"We're with you, Captain," Kasma added.

Robert looked at his copilot.

"You know I'm with you, Robert."

\* \* \*

Commander Andreola sighed, leaning back in his seat. "The truth is, or at least many *suspect* it to be true, the Dusahn were at the end of their rope when they reached my world. Their ships were in disrepair, and their numbers were dwindling. From what we could piece together over the years, they had been wandering the stars for centuries, taking what they needed from any human-inhabited world they encountered."

"How did you determine how long they had been traveling?" Jessica wondered.

"It was simple to determine the age of their ships. Level of wear, material fatigue, many things. For reasons unknown to us, they had left their world behind. We don't know if their world had died or had suffered from the same plague as the Earth. Whatever the reason, they were seeking an industrialized world to conquer in order to rebuild their empire, once again. Our world was the best option they had come across since their journey began."

"A few days ago, you said the Dusahn had invented the

jump drive," Jessica commented.

"Yes," the commander replied. "It came rather suddenly. We had no idea they had been working on such a thing. They suddenly began conducting upgrades and repairs on one of their oldest ships, the Lor-Tantin. We had always assumed they were going to retire that ship, since it had been sitting idle for years, while they built newer ships and repaired others. When they were finished, the Lor-Tantin could instantly jump up to ten light years at a time. It was like a miracle. It was also the moment we realized we would never be rid of the Dusahn. Then, five years later, most of their ships, including all of the ships they had built in our shipyards, just left, leaving only the Jar-Razza behind. That is when they began fitting *our* ships with jump drives, but with devices to ensure that we could not use our ships against them."

"Pretty clever of them," Sergeant Sodano commented.

"What about the Lor-Tantin?" Jessica wondered. "Did they take *that* one with them, as well?"

"The Lor-Tantin was lost only a few months after her jump drive became operational," the commander replied.

"What happened?" Corporal Teel asked.

"We are not certain," the commander admitted. "Her original jump drive might have been faulty, but most believe she was just too old of a ship to withstand the additional stresses of jumping."

"I wasn't aware that there *were* additional stresses," Jessica said.

"It seemed logical," Commander Andreola said.

"Actually, no," Sergeant Sodano disagreed. "My understanding of how the jump drive works is that it temporarily slips the vessel contained within its jump fields into a dimension in which time does not exist. Therefore,

movement from point A to point B is instantaneous. It stands to reason that since *time* is part of matter, no stresses should be placed on the vessel itself, not even the normal wear on the vessels hull."

"Then why are jump-capable ships unable to jump through solid matter?" Commander Andreola asked.

"I have wondered that myself," the sergeant admitted. "Unfortunately, no one fully understands precisely how matter in the transition dimension interacts with matter within the jump fields, which is still technically in *our* dimension. Perhaps the interaction is at the jump field level."

"Interesting," Commander Andreola said. "You are well educated, especially for a soldier."

"The Ghatazhak are all highly educated," Corporal Teel explained. "Except for her," he added in jest.

"How many languages do you speak, Skippy?" Jessica retorted.

"Only three, I'm afraid," he replied, smiling.

"Then, shut up," Jessica replied, smiling back at him. "I'm assuming when most of the Dusahn's ships left your world, they went to the Pentaurus sector," she said, looking back at Commander Andreola.

"Most of them, yes, but not all," the commander replied.

"At least eight went in a different direction, back toward the Sol sector, in fact. We assumed they were headed back to their homeworld but later, most of the ships returned. Some of them were damaged and had to undergo repairs. But eventually, they also headed for the Pentaurus sector."

"The false-flag fleet, no doubt," Sergeant Sodano decided.

"No doubt," Jessica agreed.

"False-flag?" the commander wondered, unfamiliar with the term. "We have evidence that the Dusahn used their older ships to renew hostilities between the Earth Alliance and the Jung," Jessica explained.

"The Jung?" the commander asked.

"You haven't heard of the Jung?" Jessica wondered, surprised.

"I have not."

"The Dusahn *are* the Jung," she explained. "At least, they were. They were cast out centuries ago, after a failed coup attempt by their caste."

"I see," Commander Andreola said. "That would explain a lot. And these *Jung* were once at war with the *Earth Alliance*?"

"How did you know that?" Jessica wondered, her brow furrowing.

"You used the word *renew*," Sergeant Sodano told her. "You're not as good at this as you think...*sir*."

"I'm tired," Jessica sneered, turning back to the commander. "The Jung invaded Earth. We managed to push them back, eventually establishing a thirty-light-year perimeter around Sol. We liberated all the core worlds in the process."

"Quite an accomplishment," Commander Andreola praised. "I'd be interested to know how you accomplished such a feat."

"That is a really long story," Jessica told him.

"It appears we have time," the commander replied.

\* \* \*

"I'm picking up more debris," Kasma reported as soon as Striker One came out of the jump. "Jesus, it's their outer airlock hatch and part of the outer hull around it."

"Robert, if the jump field cut them straight through at the

airlock, the entire cabin would be open to space," Sasha surmised. "There's *no way* they'd survive."

"We don't know that it did," Robert insisted.

"Sasha's right, Captain," Renny said. "Every partial jump event so far has cut cleanly on a vertical plane, or awfully close to it."

"The ventral emitters are spaced differently because of the smoother hull," Robert argued. "If the cut line was from the dorsal midship emitter to the aft-most one on the dorsal side, the cut *could* have been at an angle, and it *could* have missed the inner hull of the cabin."

"I want them to be alive as much as you do, Captain," Renny replied, "but the cut line would still catch the upper corner and vent the cabin."

"We keep searching until we find them," Robert insisted, "alive...or dead. Either way, we *find* them. Is that understood?"

"Of course," Renny replied.

\* \* \*

"Captain and XO on the bridge!" the guard at the entrance announced as Nathan and Cameron entered.

"Report," Nathan requested, pausing at the comms station.

"Shuttle Two Five reported that Lieutenant Commander Nash ordered them to jump clear before they made it back to the shuttle. Rogen command has launched twenty jump-equipped Gunyoki to search the area for survivors, but they are restricted to visual only, due to the amount of residual radiation from the antimatter event. They have search and rescue shuttles standing by."

"How long will it take before sensors will work in the immediate area of the event?" Nathan asked the sensor officer.

"At least an hour until it scatters enough for sensors to be even somewhat reliable," the ensign at the sensor station reported.

"Did the Amonday have escape pods?" Cameron wondered.

"Good thinking," Nathan commented.

"One moment," the ensign replied, calling up the sensor logs on the Amonday. "Affirmative," the ensign reported a moment later. "Twelve of them, evenly spaced throughout the habitable areas of the ship."

"Is the Falcon in the area?" Nathan wondered.

"It's in the hangar at the moment. The crew just returned from another recon over Ahka."

"Other than the Aurora, the Falcon has the best sensors. If they can jump around and analyze the Amonday's old light at the moment their containment fields failed, they might be able to determine if an escape pod was launched at the last second and which way it went."

"The Falcon's crew is in their racks, Nathan," Cameron said. "They were flying for twenty hours."

"We're not doing anything," Josh said from the helm.

Nathan looked at Josh, then Loki. "Think you can remember how to fly one?"

"Are you kidding?" Josh replied with a smirk.

"Go," Nathan told them without hesitation.

A broad grin came over Josh's face as he jumped up from his seat and headed for the exit.

"Find them," Nathan told Loki as he passed.

"We'll do our best," Loki promised.

"What do we do for a flight crew if we get attacked again?" Cameron wondered.

"I think you and I can still handle her," Nathan replied.

"Jump flash," the sensor officer announced. "New

contact, Striker Two."

"Incoming flash traffic from Striker Two," Naralena reported. "Captain Roselle reports that Striker Three never made the departure rally point. Striker One is searching for them now. He is requesting additional resources."

"For crying out loud," Nathan exclaimed. "Okay, new rule: from now on, only *one* crew can go missing at a time."

\* \* \*

"One minute to the next jump point," Sasha warned.

"Still nothing," Kasma reported over comm-sets.

Robert glanced at the clock.

"Even if all they've got is whatever's left in the cabin, they've still got a few hours," Sasha reminded Robert, noticing he had checked the time.

Robert said nothing as he prepared for the next jump.

"I'm getting something," Kasma reported, uncertainty in his voice.

Robert suddenly froze. "How big?"

"Not very," Kasma replied, "but big enough. It's just under five light minutes out, maybe twenty degrees to port of our course, and eleven degrees down relative."

"Probability?" Robert asked the sensor officer, looking nervously at Sasha.

"It's definitely made by humans," Kasma insisted. "Metals, composites, but almost no thermal signature at all. Whatever it is, it's ice-cold. I'm surprised we detected it at all."

"Jump point in twenty," Sasha warned.

"I need a probability, Kas," Robert reminded him.

"I don't know, Captain. We're not far off the shipping route between Palee and Volon. It could just be debris from some long-lost vessel."

"Kas," Robert pushed, his tone becoming impatient.

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Good enough for me," Robert replied without hesitation. "Cancel the jump."

"Already did," Sasha replied. "Plotting new jump."

Robert was already turning their gunship to port and pitching down slightly as he brought up his throttles. "Coming to intercept course," Robert announced as he dialed up a four-minute jump. "We'll jump in with the object to our port side, Kas."

"Got it."

"On course and speed," Sasha announced.

Robert pressed the jump button on his flight control stick, transitioning their gunship ahead four light minutes in the blink of an eye. "Jump complete."

"Scanning... I've got it," Kasma reported. "Holy shit!" "Is it them?" Robert asked anxiously.

"Yes...I mean, no...I mean, it's their debris, and a lot of it, but the big piece is not the main cabin. It's a section of their port drive section. There's a lot more debris scattered around it, as well, all of it too small to be picked up from a distance."

"Damn it!" Robert cursed in frustration.

"At least we know we're on the right path," Sasha reminded him.

"New contact!" Kasma reported urgently. "Two point three five light minutes, along the same course as the debris! Size, shape, composition...it's gotta be them, sir! I'm even picking up thermals!"

"I'm moving us closer," Robert announced, dialing up a two-minute jump and quickly pressing the jump button. A moment later, a distant object appeared in the left forward window.

"I've got it!" Kasma reported. "It's them! It's the forward

section! Six thermal signatures, but everything else is cold. Jesus, Captain, they've got zero power."

"Do they have comms?" Robert asked as he maneuvered their gunship in closer.

"Doubtful," the sensor officer reported. "I'm not even picking up emergency battery power. It's cold as hell in there, as well."

"Something's wrong," Sasha insisted. "They shouldn't have run out of power and heat this quickly."

"Their ship jumped in pieces, Sasha," Robert insisted as he peered out the window, maneuvering their gunship alongside the wreckage.

"Jesus!" Renny exclaimed as he came floating up into the cockpit, looking out the window. "Are they even alive?"

"I'm picking up six sets of life signs," Kasma assured them. "Five of them are really low, though."

"Metabolic suppressors?" Sasha wondered.

"Good boy, Aiden." Robert tapped his comm-set. "Striker Three, Striker One. Do you copy?"

"Kas, try to get a detailed scan so I can do a damage assessment on them," Renny requested.

"I'm working on it."

"Striker Three, Striker One. Do you copy?"

"It looks like all their environmental lines were severed when they jumped," Sasha commented. "They may have lost all pressure."

"Not if the auto-cutoffs worked," Renny said.

"Pressure inside Striker Three is about half what it should be, Captain," Kasma warned, "and their CO2 levels are climbing."

"That means their scrubbers aren't working," Renny decided. "Maybe not even their oxygen generators."

"Striker Three, Striker One. Come on, Aiden. Wake up!"

Robert ordered. "Flash them."

"Flashing port floods," Sasha replied as he started flipping the port floodlights switch on and off.

"Aiden, it's Robert," Robert called over comms. "Come back to me, kid."

"Captain, the only way we're going to get them out of there is with a breach box," Renny insisted.

"It will take too long to get one," Robert insisted. "Besides, where would you attach it?"

"Maybe I can rig one of our oxygen tanks to their lines," Renny suggested. "Maybe even connect a battery to give them a little heat. Buy us some time until we can figure out a way to get them out of there."

"You want to go out there and try to repair *that*?" Sasha asked, surprised.

"I don't *want* to, but I'm *sure* as hell willing to give it a shot."

Robert pushed his throttle a tad to the left and then released it, causing his starboard translation thrusters to fire momentarily.

"What are you doing?" Sasha wondered.

"I'm going to give them a nudge," Robert replied. "Try to wake them up."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Robert," Sasha warned.

"I'm with Sasha, Captain," Renny agreed. "That thing looks like it could crack open if you even *breathed* on it hard."

"We need someone awake in there," Robert insisted. "You're going to need someone on the inside if you want to hook up O2 and power."

"Good point," Renny agreed.

Robert watched as his gunship drifted closer to the wreckage. At the last second, he pushed his flight control

stick imperceptibly to the right, this time causing his port translation thrusters to fire, slowing the closure rate a bit. A moment later, their hull impacted the wreckage, bumping it ever so gently.

Aiden felt himself jolt to one side, startling him out of his stupor. He looked around, forcing his tired eyes to open. It was so cold he could barely feel his fingers.

"Stri.....Striker One.....you co....."

That's when Aiden realized the cabin was being intermittently filled with light...light from *outside* their ship.

"Aide.....bert. Do.....opy?"

Aiden pushed Charnelle off of him, climbing to his feet to look out their starboard window, still groggy and unsteady. What he saw outside woke him rather quickly. "Hey!" he cried out instinctively, waving his hands in the hopes that they would see him. "Oh, shit," he said, remembering his comm-set and reaching up to tap it. "I'm here!" he called out. "I'm here! We're all here!" We're alive!"

"YES!" Renny exclaimed, shaking Sasha by the shoulders with excitement as the rest of the crew aft and below him also shouted with glee.

"Suit up, Renny," Robert ordered, tapping his comm-set again. "Aiden, it's Robert! Sit tight, kid, help is on the way!" "Good to hear, sir," Aiden replied.

"Kas!" Robert yelled. "How many comm-drones do we have left?"

"Just the one," Kasma replied. "I'm prepping it for launch now."

"What's your status, Aiden?" Robert asked over comms.

"Totally screwed, sir," Aiden replied. "I'm afraid I fucked us up pretty good."

"You did fine, kid. Is your crew alive?"

"Yes," Aiden replied. "I'm pretty sure. I gave them all their shots. They're out cold, and I do mean cold. Should I wake them up?"

"Negative," Robert insisted. "Renny's going EVA in a few minutes to give you oxygen and power for heat. Don't wake your crew up until we're sure we can keep you all alive until help arrives."

"Sir, our airlock is gone," Aiden warned. "I don't know how you're going to get us out of here."

"Don't worry, Aiden, we'll figure something out," Robert assured him.

"Whatever you come up with, I hope it's soon," Aiden replied. "I'm freezing my dick off, here."

"I promise we'll get you out of there, kid," Robert assured him, "dick and all."

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

"This is new," Josh commented as the Falcon's console came to life.

"What did you expect," Loki asked as he went through the startup checklist, "that everything would still be exactly the same as it was seven years ago?"

"Well, not everything."

"It's not even the same ship."

"Close enough," Josh said, smiling.

Loki looked over at his friend and smiled, as well. "Yeah, it is, actually." He tapped his comm-set. "Aurora Flight, Falcon. Ready for departure."

"Falcon, Aurora Flight. Cleared for immediate departure, starboard, aft ramp, via airlock five."

"Shall we?" Josh said.

"You heard the lady," Loki replied, gesturing out the window toward the open airlock door.

Josh eased the ground throttle forward, engaging the electric motors that drove the Falcon's landing gear. Much like its aerodynamic predecessors, the Falcon used its rudder pedals to steer on the ground, a practice that Josh found amusing.

He guided the Falcon through the airlock doors, rolling to a stop exactly on target in the middle of the transfer airlock. Half a minute later, red lights flashed around the perimeter of the airlock as powerful pumps sucked the air out of the compartment. In less than thirty seconds, the air pressure was too low outside their ship to support human life, and the lighting changed to solid red. Josh scanned his console, checking that everything was normal, despite the fact that Loki had already checked the systems at least three times since they had received their clearance.

The outer doors opened, revealing the open, aft-facing end of the starboard flight deck. Josh eased the ground throttle forward again, sending the Falcon rolling smoothly through the outer doors and into the flight bay. He stomped hard on the right pedal, causing the ship to turn sharply to starboard, and then fired his translation thrusters just enough to lift them a half meter above the low-gravity flight deck. He thrusted forward with a brief tap of his flight control stick, then gave the stick a twist to the left, causing the ship to yaw quickly in the same direction. As they approached one hundred and eighty degrees, he twisted the flight control stick back to the right, arresting their yaw as the ship slid out the back of the starboard flight bay and onto the open, starboard, aft flight apron.

Another burst of thrust and the Falcon translated sharply upwards. Josh fired his translation thrusters two more times, increasing their climb rate, then pushed his throttles full forward as they cleared the top of the Aurora's forward section.

"Aurora Flight, Falcon is away," Loki announced as they accelerated forward at an incredible rate.

"Falcon, Aurora Flight, find our people, guys."

"We'll do our best," Loki replied.

"Couldn't you say something more confident, like 'not a problem' or 'piece of cake'?"

"What's wrong with 'we'll do our best'?"

"It sounds so non-committal, like you're afraid to promise something you're not sure we can deliver."

"But, I'm *not* sure we can deliver," Loki insisted.

"That's what being confident *is*, Lok," Josh argued. "It's acting like you can do anything."

"So, it's about lying?"

"It's not lying."

"I don't know, Josh. It sounds a lot like lying to me."

Josh rolled his eyes. "We've got a reputation, remember?" "For lying?"

"No! For being able to do the impossible! Jesus, don't you get it?"

Loki laughed. "I'm just fucking with you, Josh."

"What?"

"Turn to one four seven, down eleven, and increase your speed to one five zero," Loki added, still laughing.

"You suck," Josh declared as he brought the ship onto the new course.

"Set your range for five light minutes, and prepare to jump," Loki instructed, still fighting back the laughter. "Let's go find them."

Josh set his jump range as instructed.

"Anytime you're ready, Josh."

"You still suck," Josh insisted as he pressed the jump button.

\* \* \*

"It's not that I doubt your integrity," Commander Andreola apologized as they drifted in the escape pod. "It's just that your story seems so implausible. I mean, the odds of jumping at precisely the moment an antimatter event occurred and then jumping a *thousand* light years into the *middle* of a space battle... The odds are practically incalculable."

"That's the beauty of it," Jessica told him.

"And the Aurora is not exactly the greatest warship of all time."

"But she *does* have the greatest captain," Jessica stated. "And back *then*, we were the only ship in the galaxy with a jump drive. That gave us an *incredible* advantage, since no one knew how to defend against us."

"But now, everyone has the jump drive," the commander surmised, "which means you no longer have that advantage."

"But we still have Nathan Scott."

"That's a lot of faith to put in one man," the commander insisted.

"That's what I've always said," Sergeant Sodano agreed.

"Then why do you still follow him?" the commander wondered.

"Because my commander follows him, and I trust my commander's judgment."

"And you never question it?"

"I do not," the sergeant replied. "I am Ghatazhak, as is he. There would be no reason to doubt it."

"But you just agreed with me," the commander said. "That it's a lot of faith to put in one man."

"Yes, but I did not say that faith was misplaced or that Captain Scott was not *worthy* of such faith. In fact, he *is*, and he has *proven* so on numerous occasions."

Commander Andreola shook his head in disbelief. "I find it hard to trust another so implicitly," he admitted.

"When you have been through what all of us have been through, with Nathan leading the way, that trust comes rather easily," Jessica explained.

The commander looked at Jessica. "Do you believe he can liberate Orswella?"

"Without a doubt," Jessica insisted. "And *keep* it that way. All you have to do is show us where your world is and how it is defended. We'll take care of the rest."

Commander Andreola sighed. "I think we must first be rescued."

Jessica smiled. "Yeah, that would make it easier."

\* \* \*

"I miss everything about flying the Falcon, *except* for this part," Josh declared.

"Sensor sweeps?" Loki wondered.

"No, sitting on my ass doing nothing, while *you* do sensor sweeps."

"Then, ninety percent of our missions aboard the Falcon," Loki observed.

"I'm starting to miss the Seiiki."

"You know, I always wondered what that word meant."

"Seiiki?"

"Yes."

"I think it means 'sanctuary'."

"Odd name for a cargo ship, don't you think?"

"Not really," Josh argued. "It was home for all of us, so sanctuary kind of fits. Find anything yet?"

"Lots of debris to sift through, all sizes really."

"How can you tell the difference between debris and an escape pod?"

"Debris generally flies on a direct path *away* from the event point. More importantly, it tumbles. Escape pods are propelled away under their own power, therefore they do not tumble."

"So, everything else tumbles. Got it."

"Almost everything tumbles," Loki corrected. "You just track the ones that do not tumble and look for a jump flash. The one that flashes is the escape pod."

"And you can see all that?"

"Normally, yes, but once you get past the actual event point everything is obscured by the event. So I have to keep watching the same few seconds of light, over and over, trying to see an escape pod launch. It's like trying to see a fly jumping off a building, from a kilometer away, at night."

"Except the fly's ass glows," Josh joked.

"Not quite sure I'd put it that way but, yes."

"Then find that glowing fly butt, dude."

"I already have," Loki replied as he studied his console.

"Then, let's go find them," Josh declared, sitting up straight.

"Not so fast, Josh," Loki advised. "I'm still trying to calculate their trajectory based on just over a second-long sighting. It's not much to go on."

"I can't believe you didn't say anything," Josh complained.

"About what?"

"That you *found* them!" Josh declared. "That they're alive!"

"That's because I don't know that I found them. All I know is that I spotted something launching, *under power*, from the Amonday, one point three five seconds before the antimatter event occurred. I don't even know if it was an escape pod."

"What the hell else could it be?"

"I don't know, Josh. *That's* the point. When I know, *that's* when I'll get excited."

Josh shook his head. "And you think there's something wrong with *me*."

\* \* \*

"I've got the O-Two cylinder," Renny reported over comms. "I'm heading over, now."

Robert watched out the port window from his place in Striker One's cockpit as his engineer fired his EVA suit's thrusters, propelling himself toward Striker Three's wreckage, the oxygen cylinder in tow. "Don't forget to fire your deceleration thrusters early, or that tank you're towing is going to float right past you and slam into them."

"Not my first rodeo, Captain," Renny replied.

"Fifteen minutes outside the ship and he's a space cowboy," Sasha commented.

"Exterior repairs are part of his training," Robert pointed out, "and *you've* been watching too many old Earth movies."

"Firing decel thrusters."

"Aiden, you still with us?" Robert called.

"Yeah, I'm still.....here," Aiden replied, sounding out of breath.

"You alright, kid?"

"Oxygen.....is getting.....low. CO...Two...climbing."

"Try not to talk," Robert instructed. "It uses more oxygen. One click for yes, two for no. Understood?"

Robert's comm-set clicked one time.

"Are you at panel forty-seven?"

Another click.

"Good. Just stand by. Renny's going to patch your leak, then hookup the oxygen tank to replenish your cabin air." Another click.

As expected, the oxygen tank he was towing slid past and ahead of him. Renny pulled on its tether, hauling it back toward him and maneuvering it between his legs. He fired his thrusters again, slowing him down to the point of near-zero motion relative to Striker Three's wreckage. As he drifted across the last few meters, he reached out with his hands, absorbing the last bit of his momentum as he made

contact with Striker Three's wreckage. "Contact!" Renny announced. "Hooking up."

"You need to work quickly, Renny," Robert urged. "Aiden's starting to have difficulty breathing."

"I'm working as fast as I can," Renny assured him. He looked at the mess of tangled conduits, wires, and piping. "Shit, this is a mess."

"How bad?" Robert asked.

"Bad," Renny replied. "Fucking bad."

"Are you going to be able to fix it?"

"I can't even tell what's what," Renny admitted as he examined the twisted wreckage. "I'm going to have to hook up the O-Two tank first, then open it a bit and have Aiden check for any flow. It's the only way I'm going to know for sure if I've got the right line."

"But if you don't fix the leaks first, that oxygen will just vent to space," Robert surmised.

"It's not like I can run a full systems diagnostic on it, Captain," Renny argued. "I mean, only a third of the fucking ship is left. This is all I've got."

"You're right," Robert agreed. "Just hurry."

"With all due respect, sir, telling me to hurry isn't helping."

\* \* \*

"Message from Falcon One," Naralena announced. "They have detected what they believe to be an escape pod, jumping away at the moment the Amonday's antimatter reactor breached. They are conducting a search along the object's jump course."

"Do they have any idea how far the pod jumped?" Nathan asked.

"They did not say."

"If the energy from the antimatter event hit their jump

fields at the moment they jumped..." Cameron began.

"Pray it didn't," Nathan interrupted.

"I think it unlikely," a familiar voice said from behind.

Nathan and Cameron turned around to find Kaylah Yosef standing by the comm-station.

"I heard you need a sensor officer," she added.

"I thought you were helping with R and D," Cameron replied.

"I figured *you* needed me more than they did." Kaylah glanced over at the partially dismantled sensor station and the two technicians struggling to repair it. "It appears I was correct." She looked back at Nathan. "Permission to take my post, sir?"

"Permission granted," Nathan replied happily, "and welcome back, Commander."

"Thank you, sir," Kaylah replied as she made her way to her station.

"You were saying it was unlikely that the pod would be affected by the antimatter event?" Cameron commented as Kaylah passed.

"Unlikely in the way that the *Aurora* was affected," she explained as she began surveying the state of her console. "The Aurora's original jump emitters were extremely robust and quite over-built, and they had no integrated power-limiting circuits. They were designed to receive whatever amount of power was dumped into them. Many refinements have been made since then, in both the emitters *and* in the power transfer systems. Additionally, something as small as a jump-enabled escape pod would have limited jump systems, probably just enough to get them clear of the ship." She turned to Nathan and Cameron, a more serious look on her face. "Escape pods are also unshielded in most cases. Therefore, if the antimatter event made contact with

their jump fields, those fields would have collapsed, and they would have simply ceased to exist."

"You're not helping," Nathan decided.

"The fact that the pod's jump was detected indicates that it jumped *before* the antimatter event occurred, which means it should have jumped its normal distance."

"I'll get in touch with the holding facility on Neramese and see if one of the prisoners will tell us what that distance would be," Cameron said, moving aft toward the communications station.

"Now, that's helping," Nathan added.

Kaylah smiled, turning back around to her console while the two technicians worked on either side of her. "Okay, boys, let's see if we can get this thing working, shall we?"

"Incoming flash traffic from Striker One," Naralena reported. "They've located Striker Three, but it's in bad shape."

Cameron moved in beside Naralena, studying the text of the message on her screen. "That's an understatement," she commented as she read the update. "They jumped in pieces. The entire back half of their ship is missing. No power, failing life support. Everyone on board, except for Ensign Walsh, is sedated to reduce their oxygen usage. What's left of the ship is leaking pressure, as well. Striker One's engineer is performing an EVA in an attempt to stop the leaks and connect one of their spare oxygen tanks to Striker Three to buy them some time."

"We need to get an SAR Reaper to them, ASAP," Nathan insisted.

"That won't cut it," Cameron told him. "Their docking hatch is damaged. There's no way to get them out."

"What about a breach box?" Nathan wondered.

"It's doubtful there would be enough smooth surface for

them to seal up to," Cameron replied. "Can a gunship fit inside a boxcar's cargo pod?"

"Not an intact one," Nathan replied.

"From this report, it sounds like they're less than half their normal size," Cameron pointed out.

"We can't take the risk," Nathan decided. "We need to send something more than big enough."

"The Manamu is still configured as a Gunyoki carrier," Cameron said. "As long as their decks are clear, they could roll back their bay covers and bring them in."

"That's a pretty risky maneuver," Nathan commented as he contemplated the idea, "but I suppose that's our best shot."

"It will take the Manamu at least four hours to get there though," Cameron warned. "It doesn't sound like they've got that much time."

"Then we'll send a few Reapers with equipment to keep them alive until the Manamu arrives. They can get there in half that time."

"We'll need to send help, as well," Cameron suggested. "Striker One's engineer can't do it all by himself."

"We need to send someone who can improvise," Nathan decided, reaching to activate his comm-set. "Someone who can *fix anything*."

\* \* \*

"I'm pretty sure I've got all the leaks repaired," Renny reported. "At least, all the ones I can find. We won't know for sure until we get more pressure in there, or until we see a continued drop in what they have. You seeing any changes yet, Kas?"

"Holding steady for the moment," Kasma replied over Renny's helmet comms. "But it will take a few minutes to register any changes." "I'll take what I can get," Renny decided as he reached for the tether to the oxygen tank he had brought along with him. "I'm going to hook up the oxygen now."

\_\_\_\_\_

"Aiden? You still with us?" Robert called over comms from Striker One's cockpit.

"Huh?" Aiden replied.

"Wake up, kid," Robert added, looking out the window at the remains of Striker Three.

"I'm.....here."

"Renny's got the leaks fixed," Robert told Aiden. "He's connecting the supplemental oxygen tank now. Be ready on the crossover valve."

"Right," Aiden replied, his voice weak and unsure. "The.....valve."

Robert turned to Sasha, a worried look on both their faces. "You'd better get to that valve now and be ready," he called over comms.

"Right.....turn the.....valve."

"No, not yet!" Robert ordered. "Just get in position, that's all!"

"Position.....the valve."

"Captain, if he turns that valve before I get this thing hooked up, he's going to vent what's left of their cabin pressure out into space!" Renny warned.

"Aiden, read back my orders," Robert instructed sternly. "Get into position, but do *not* turn the valve until instructed."

There was silence.

"Aiden?" Robert called. "Read back my instructions, Ensign."

"Get.....into.....position," Aiden finally replied. His voice

sounded even weaker and more confused than before. "Do.....not.....turn.....valve.....until.....instructed."

"Read back correct, Ensign," Robert confirmed. "Hang in there, kid."

After a long pause, Aiden replied, "Hanging."

\* \* \*

Sheba Madrid stood on the catwalk overlooking the Manamu's long, forward cargo bay. Their mission as a Gunyoki carrier had been short-lived, and now the captain was waiting for their next assignment. There had been rumors of conversion to a gunship, or perhaps even a jump missile frigate. The Manamu certainly had the space for it.

Sheba hoped for the latter. Missile frigates fought from great distances and moved after every launch. It was probably one of the safest warships one could serve on. Unfortunately, with the resurrection of the Orochi, that tasking seemed unlikely. It was times like this that she wondered why she had agreed to add her vessel to the ranks of the Karuzari.

"Skipper," Tobi called from the hatch at the end of the catwalk. "Message from the Aurora," he added as he walked toward her.

Sheba took the data pad from him and read the message. "Looks like we're going on a little trip," she said.

"Where to?" her junior officer wondered.

"Deep into the Pentaurus sector," she said, handing the data pad back to him.

"Are you serious?"

"Call Vemados and Ewan to the bridge, and tell Garland to plot a jump course, best possible speed and most direct route. We depart in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," Tobi replied, heading back inside.

A rescue mission, she thought. It was the last thing she

Renny gently pushed the joystick on his maneuvering unit control arm, causing the tiny jets on the sides to fire. His body rotated around its center point, inverting him so his feet were above his head. Another touch of the joystick in the opposite direction arrested his rotation, leaving him in the perfect position to continue his work. "I'm picking up another trace leak, probably from one of the longitudinal, recirculation lines."

"How bad?" Robert asked over comms.

"Big enough to detect."

"Can you fix it?"

"Not without dismantling what's left of the outer hull, which I'm afraid to do since it may be the only thing holding them together at this point."

"How long do they have?" Robert asked.

"Impossible to tell. Based on what I'm detecting from the outside, a few hours, at the most."

"I don't suppose we have any more reserve tanks we can tap?"

"Yes, but it would take too long to dismantle our own ship enough to get to them. They'd be..." Renny paused for a moment. "They're not hearing all this, are they?"

"Negative," Robert replied. "I've got us isolated."

"Thank God." A blue-white flash of light appeared nearby, catching Renny's attention. "Guys, I've got a jump flash nearby."

"Relax, it's a comm-drone," Kasma said.

"Kind of hard to do, out here with no hull or shields wrapped around you," Renny replied.

Robert smiled at his copilot. "It's from the Aurora. They're sending help."

"How do they plan on getting them out of there?" Renny wondered.

"They're sending the Manamu," Robert explained.

"I thought that was a Gunyoki carrier?" Sasha commented.

"The Gunyoki moved back to their base. The Manamu is between taskings, so her decks are wide open. She has more than enough room to bring them inside and open them up in a pressurized environment."

"They do realize how risky that is, right?" Renny commented.

"What do you mean?" Robert wondered.

"This thing is pretty fucked up, Captain," Renny replied. "She's leaking all kinds of shit. Who knows what will happen if you introduce oxygen to her exterior and jostle her around a bit."

Robert looked at Sasha. "I'm sure they've thought of that," he told Renny. "Right?" he asked Sasha.

"Of course," Sasha replied, shrugging his shoulders, "but won't the Manamu take five or six hours to get here?"

"Four, if they make every jump at max range and go as direct as possible," Robert corrected.

"They won't last that long, Captain," Renny warned.

"That's why they're sending Reapers loaded with gear and techs," Robert told him. "They should be able to get here in a couple hours. Just do what you can to keep them alive, Renny."

"I'll do what I can, sir."

Robert sighed, feeling utterly helpless.

"You realize we're still deep inside Dusahn-controlled space, right?" Sasha asked.

"Are they sleeping?" Commander Andreola wondered as he watched the two Ghatazhak soldiers sitting perfectly still, eyes closed, on the other side of the escape pod.

"More like hibernating," Jessica replied. When the commander looked at her with a puzzled expression, she elaborated. "We have the ability to slow down our metabolism, thus conserving resources."

"How do they wake up?"

"Reticular activating system," she replied, again, receiving a confused look. "It's a part of your brain that continues to monitor sensory input—sounds, smells, motion—and decides when you need to be awakened. All humans have this. Ours is just more finely tuned than most."

"It must take years to master such things."

"The Ghatazhak begin their training at the onset of puberty and train for more than a decade before receiving their first assignment."

"A *decade*?" the commander wondered. "Just to learn to *fight*?"

"The Ghatazhak don't just fight," Jessica told him, "we *think*. We analyze. We make hundreds of decisions per second. We see everything around us and forecast every possible outcome from every possible action, then pick the one that offers the greatest chance of success."

"How is that even possible?"

"Through education, mostly. Ninety percent of a Ghatazhak's training is mental, not physical. Physics, biology, meteorology, chemistry, engineering, sociology, physiology...pretty much all the *ologys*."

"Ten years does not seem enough."

"That's just to get them ready to serve," Jessica

explained. "Our education and training never stops."

"And your ranks are filled with both men and women?"

"Actually, I'm the only female Ghatazhak," Jessica boasted. "And to be honest, I'm not a *full* Ghatazhak. I'm sort of a *Ghatazhak-lite*. I have the training but not all of the education. I am working on it, though. Unfortunately, there just never seems to be enough time."

"They must think quite highly of you, to allow you into their ranks," the commander praised.

"They saved me, actually," she admitted. "I was pretty wrecked after the Jung War—out of control, reckless... Ghatazhak training helped me to get control over my emotions again...almost." Jessica smiled. "A girl's gotta have some fun."

"Yo, Jess!" Josh called over her comm-set.

"What the..." Jessica scrambled over to the window, spotting the Falcon hovering a few meters away. She could barely make out Josh and Loki waving at them.

"What the hell did you do to the Amonday?" Josh asked.

"How the hell did you find us?" Jessica asked over comms.

"Loki found you," Josh admitted. "I just do the flyin'."

"Well, are you going to get us out of here, or what?" Jessica laughed.

"We've already launched a comm-drone," Loki assured her. "It may take a while, though. Everyone's busy rescuing Striker Three."

"Is Robert okay?" Jessica asked.

"He's fine," Loki replied. "He's the one leading the rescue."

"Don't worry, Jess," Josh interrupted. "We'll fly escort till help arrives."

"Thanks."

"Who is Robert?" the commander wondered.

"My brother," Jessica replied, sitting back down.

The commander shook his head. "Does everyone on your world serve?"

"Only the dumb ones," she replied, smiling.

\* \* \*

Nathan walked briskly across the Aurora's main hangar bay toward the group of Reapers being hastily loaded for their rescue mission. Technicians and deckhands were scrambling to get whatever gear was needed, to rescue the crew of Striker Three, into two of the four Reapers preparing for departure. Leading the chaos was Vladimir.

"How long until you can lift off?" Nathan asked Vladimir as he approached.

Vladimir turned to look over his shoulder at Nathan. "Just a few more minutes."

Nathan examined the gear being loaded into the nearest Reaper, a puzzled look on his face. "Think you got everything you need?"

"No, but it will have to do," Vladimir replied.

"We can't take anything else!" the crew chief hollered from Reaper One's side hatch. "Not if *you* want to fit in, as well!"

"I guess that will have to do," Vladimir shrugged, looking at Nathan.

Nathan looked at his watch. "By my calculations, you've got about three hours until their oxygen runs out."

"Two and a half, by mine," Vladimir corrected as he headed toward Reaper One.

"The Manamu left twenty minutes ago," Nathan told him, following him to the waiting Reaper. "It will take her about four hours to reach them, so all you have to do is buy them a few more hours of life support."

"Or figure out a way to rescue them *without* the Manamu," Vladimir added.

"Don't be a hero, Vlad!" Nathan insisted, raising his voice to be heard over the Reaper's engines as they spooled up. "Just keep them alive until the Manamu gets there."

"And if she doesn't?" Vladimir asked as he climbed up into Reaper One's cargo bay.

"She'll be there," Nathan insisted.

"A good engineer is prepared for anything and everything that could go wrong." Vladimir turned to look at Nathan, smiling. "Because something always does," he added as he pressed the button to close the side hatch.

"Good luck!" Nathan yelled as the hatch slid closed. He stepped back as Reaper One began rolling, following the other three Reapers toward the starboard, transfer airlock. Once clear, he watched as all four ships disappeared into transfer airlocks, two of them into the main airlock and the other two into airlocks three and four.

Once all four ships were gone, Nathan turned and headed back across the hangar bay toward the forward hatch, but paused when the number-one, starboard, airlock's warning lights lit up, and its door began to rise, revealing a rather battered-looking escape pod, sitting on the elevator pad at a cockeyed angle. The hatch on the escape pod opened, and Jessica climbed out, looking no worse for wear after their brief skirmish with near-annihilation.

Nathan turned and headed toward her, failing to hide the smile on his face. "Trying to send me to an early grave, Lieutenant Commander?"

Jessica smiled back. "It's hard to kill a Nash, remember?" she boasted, throwing her arms around him.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop trying to test that theory so

often," he replied. "Sooner or later, your luck is going to run out."

"Wasn't luck," she insisted, pointing to Commander Andreola as he climbed out of the escape pod. "We never would have made it back to the shuttle in time. If he hadn't redirected us to the nearest escape pod, we'd all be...well, we wouldn't...be, if you know what I mean."

"Thank you, Commander," Nathan said.

"I wanted out of there, as well," Commander Andreola insisted, not wanting to take any credit.

"What happened?" Nathan wondered.

"Apparently the Dusahn don't want anyone downloading data from their ships," Jessica explained, "even the captured ones."

"We had speculated that such traps existed," Commander Andreola admitted, "but never found any evidence of them...until *now*, that is."

"Were you able to get *anything*?" Nathan wondered.

"I'm afraid not," the commander replied. "Once the alert was triggered, the data card lock would not release."

"I don't suppose you can navigate back to your world without your star charts," Nathan said.

"It *may* be possible using *yours*," the commander said with no small amount of skepticism.

"It's been our experience that after a thousand years of separation, star charts differ quite a bit between civilizations," Nathan warned. "It may be more difficult than you think."

"We do have *three* common points of reference," the commander reminded him. "This system, Sol, and the Jung homeworld. That and my knowledge of the constellations in Orswella's night sky *should* be enough. However, as you said, it will take some time."

"Time is the one thing that is always in short supply," Nathan insisted.

"Perhaps for you," Commander Andreola agreed, "but I have little else to do."

"Not anymore," Nathan replied.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

"Transit complete, Commander," the pilot of Reaper One reported over comm-sets. "Striker One is about five clicks..."

Vladimir looked at the technician who was helping him with his helmet, the sudden interruption in the pilot's last statement worrying them both. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I don't see how anyone can still be alive in there."

"Put me over comms," Vladimir ordered.

"One moment."

"Get my helmet on," Vladimir urged the technician. "I need to get out there."

"Yes, sir," the technician replied, raising the commander's helmet up and lowering it over his head.

"I've got you hooked into ship to ship, sir," the pilot reported.

"Striker One, this is Commander Kamenetskiy aboard Reaper One. What is the status of Striker Three?"

"Vlad, this is Robert. Striker Three is a dead hulk. Battery power is gone, their CO-Two levels are climbing, and they've used up all the oxygen we could give them. My engineer even tried cycling their atmo through his suit scrubbers, but it was too much for them and he had to disconnect."

"Is the crew still alive?" Vladimir asked while the technician secured his helmet in place.

"As far as I know, yes," Robert replied. "All of them, except for Walsh, are sedated and sleeping, and Aiden is

mostly talking gibberish at this point. Whatever you've got in mind had better happen fast."

"Get your helmet on," Vladimir instructed the technician. "Then start depressurizing this compartment. Pilot, how long until intercept?"

"Thirty seconds," the pilot replied.

"I brought a portable, life-support unit, along with a minifusion generator," Vladimir announced over comms. "That should keep them alive until the Manamu arrives."

"The Manamu?" Robert wondered.

"She will open her aft bay and scoop Striker Three up," Vladimir explained.

"Why not just use a boxcar?" Robert asked.

"The captain was worried that it might not be big enough. Even if it was, it would be a far more difficult operation. Boxcars are not good at precision maneuvering."

"Commander, Engineer Hake here," Renny called over comms. "I'm not sure you're going to be able to hook that thing up to Striker Three. She's pretty busted up."

"Do they have airflow paths in and out of the wreckage?" Vladimir asked.

"Yes, sir, but their control circuitry is completely fried. There will be no way to connect its internal sensors to the unit so it can monitor the environment it is creating."

"Then they will have to give me regular status reports so I can adjust the unit manually," Vladimir explained.

"Coming up to Striker Three, now," the pilot reported.

"Depress complete," the technician reported. "Opening the rear hatch."

"You're planning on riding the wreckage down to the deck?" Robert asked, a bit surprised.

"That is the plan," Vladimir admitted.

"A bit risky, isn't it?"

"That's why the captain sent *me*," Vladimir boasted. "He needed a brave, good-looking genius."

"Of course," Robert replied.

"Reaper Two, prepare to send the environmental support pack over to me," Vladimir instructed.

"We're ready, Commander."

"Reapers Three and Four, take up perimeter watch," Vladimir added. "Five and Six will take long-range patrol."

"Three copies."

"Four copies."

"Five and Six, suggest you concentrate on the flight path that brought Striker Three to this location," Robert commented. "If the Dusahn are searching for them, they'll be tracing their old light, just like we did. We'll send you the course data, now."

"Understood."

"Commander, I'll handle incident command so you can focus on keeping them alive," Robert added.

"Deal." Vladimir stepped up to the aft cargo door of the Reaper as it deployed, revealing the wreckage that was about to challenge his engineering expertise. "Gospadee," he exclaimed as he got his first look at the wreckage.

"If you need an extra set of hands, I'm game," Renny volunteered.

"Crazy loves company," Vladimir replied as he walked out the back of the Reaper, stepped off the end of the ramp, and fired the maneuvering thrusters on his EVA suit to propel himself toward the wreckage fifty meters away.

\* \* \*

Nathan made his way down the corridor from the Aurora's bridge, heading aft. It had been a long day for him, and it showed no signs of ending anytime soon. Lives had been at stake since the day had begun and were still in

peril at the moment. What made it worse was that there was nothing he could do about it. Decisions had been made, orders had been given, and resources were on their way. Dozens of lives had been sent into harm's way to save a handful. As a mathematical problem, it was a mistake. As a management problem, it was a poor use of resources. Even as a risk-reward problem, it was a poor decision.

None of that mattered to Nathan. What mattered was that they tried. Despite the odds, they tried. If the crew of Striker Three perished, they would die knowing they had not been abandoned. More importantly, the rest of the Alliance would know. They would know that *their* lives were more than numbers, more than resources. They would know that their lives mattered to those who carried the responsibility to protect them, and would not waste them unnecessarily. Those who were willing to lay their lives on the line would know that every effort would be made to see that they returned home after each mission.

Nathan reached the main intersection and turned left, then entered the intelligence compartment. As expected, he found Lieutenant Commander Shinoda and Jessica going over recent recon data from various Dusahn-held systems.

"Captain," the lieutenant commander greeted.

"Lieutenant Commander," Nathan replied.

"What's up, Skipper?" Jessica asked in her usual informal fashion.

"I need you two to gather everything you have on the Tico system," Nathan instructed.

The lieutenant commander looked confused. "I'm not familiar with the Tico system, sir."

"It's a boring little system. A red dwarf surrounded by a bunch of asteroids. It's more commonly referred to as Rama, which is the only inhabited asteroid in the system." "That's in the middle of the Pentaurus cluster," Jessica pointed out. She looked at the lieutenant commander. "Like, not even a light year from Takara, right?"

"One point three light years," Nathan corrected.

"Rama," the lieutenant commander said, recognizing the name. "That's where the ZPED factory is located."

"Oh, shit," Jessica commented, realizing what Nathan was thinking. "Bad idea, Nathan."

"What? I'm just asking for intel."

"Bullshit," Jessica replied. "I know you. You're thinking about raiding Rama and stealing a ZPED."

"No, I'm thinking about stealing four ZPEDs."

"Rama is well within the Dusahn's patrol zone, sir," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda warned. "The moment one of our ships appears in the Tico system an alert will go out, and you'll have half the Dusahn fleet there in less than two minutes...maybe less than one."

"I don't plan to set off an alert," Nathan told him, "and even if I do, the Dusahn will be too busy defending Takara to respond."

"Against what?" Jessica questioned. "We're down to two Strikers, and the Aurora isn't going anywhere, anytime soon, not with only one reactor."

"Which is why we're going to steal some ZPEDs from Rama," Nathan replied. "Now get me that intel."

"Should we send the Falcon for a recon pass?" the lieutenant commander wondered.

"No. I don't want to alert the Dusahn. I want them to continue believing that Rama is adequately protected."

"Because it is," Jessica reminded him.

"Just collect all the data that we have."

"There's another recon drone pass scheduled for Rama

later today," the lieutenant commander pointed out. "Should I cancel it?"

"Not if the Dusahn are expecting it," Nathan replied.

"We vary the timing of the passes, but any decent intel officer will realize it's a scheduled pass," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda insisted.

"Then keep the pass," Nathan replied, "and any other passes that are scheduled," he added as he turned to exit. "Send it all to my ready room."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant commander replied, exchanging a concerned glance with Jessica.

"Captain," Jessica called after Nathan as she followed him out the hatch into the corridor.

"This is the part where you reiterate your objections, isn't it," Nathan said, continuing down the corridor.

"Yes, it is," Jessica admitted, following him.

"Don't bother."

"Nathan, a full-on assault on *anything* that close to Takara is a *suicide* mission!"

"That's why I'm not planning a *full-on assault,*" Nathan replied.

"Then how do you plan on getting onto Rama?"

"I may have a way inside," Nathan explained, "but it requires dealing with someone I normally wouldn't dream of trusting."

"Yet another reason *not* to do this," Jessica said, grasping at the opportunity.

"This ship isn't going anywhere with only one reactor, Jess, you said so yourself. In order to beat the Dusahn, we need three things: more power, a longer jump range, and more allies. Those ZPEDs are the key to all three. One way or another, I'm going to get at least enough of them to run this ship."

"At least wait until you review the intel before you make your final decision," Jessica pleaded.

"That was always the plan," Nathan agreed. He paused at the entrance to the bridge, turning to look at her. "In the meantime, I would appreciate it if you would start analyzing the intel on Rama. See if you can find anything that might be helpful." Without waiting for a response, Nathan turned and entered the airlock tunnel leading to the Aurora's bridge.

"Yes, sir," Jessica replied as he disappeared around the corner.

\* \* \*

Robert watched anxiously from Striker One's cockpit as his engineer and Vladimir attempted to hook up the portable, life-support unit to what remained of Striker Three.

"That's not going to connect," Vladimir said over comms.
"The fitting is stripped."

"I can fashion a new one," Renny suggested.

"That will take too long," Vladimir replied. "We'll use sealing putty."

"That stuff is only rated to three hundred," Renny argued. "We need to, at least, double that."

"I will wrap the putty with pressure tape, and we can run the system at a lower pressure and increase the oxygen saturation to compensate."

"That will increase their risk of fire," Renny objected.

"Robert, how much time?" Vladimir asked.

"I estimate ten minutes before their atmo is no longer able to keep them alive," Robert replied, uncertainty evident in his voice.

"How good is your math?" Vladimir asked.

"Not good enough."

"We go with the putty."

"New contact," Striker One's sensor officer reported. "It's our recon drone. Receiving sensor data, now."

"What's it say?" Robert wondered.

"Uh-oh."

"No, no uh-ohs," Robert scolded.

"Two octos; one five seven, twenty up relative. Course and bearing suggest they came direct from Palee."

"Reaper Two, do you have a comm-drone?" Robert asked. "We're fresh out."

"Affirmative."

"Launch it and pass control to us."

"You got it."

"Kas, send that drone to Reapers Three and Four, and tell them to either take out those octos, or at least lead them away from us."

"Yes, sir."

"Something wrong?" Vladimir wondered.

"We may have company coming. How long until the Manamu arrives?" Robert asked.

"At least forty minutes," Vladimir replied. "Can you protect us with your shields?"

"Yes, but not for long," Robert said. "Spreading them out to cover you will weaken them."

"Understood," Vladimir replied.

Robert looked at his copilot.

"The time may come, Robert," Sasha warned.

"Shut up."

\* \* \*

"This sector is clear," Ensign Weston reported.

"Five, Six, you see anything?" Lieutenant Haddix asked over comms.

"Negative, threat board is clear. Maybe we should spread

out a bit more? Give ourselves a wider spread? How do you feel about five light seconds?" Lieutenant Taren suggested.

"Comm delays make me nervous," Lieutenant Haddix disagreed. "Five seconds is more than enough time for a bogey to drop in behind us and take one of us out before the other can warn him."

"It's been more than three hours since Striker Three escaped," Lieutenant Taren pointed out. "If the Dusahn were looking for them, I'm pretty sure they would have found them by now."

"Then that extra five seconds of separation isn't going to make a difference, is it?"

"Nervous Nellie."

Ensign Weston glanced at his pilot, knowing full well that he wasn't going to let the remark stand without a response, especially not from a newb.

"How many hours you got in that bird, Taren?" the lieutenant asked.

"Uh, a few hundred, I think."

"Talk to me when you've got a few thousand," Lieutenant Haddix replied, the slightest bit of sarcasm in his tone. He turned to his copilot, smiling. "Prep the next jump, Wes."

"You got it."

"I've got a contact," Ensign Jayson reported from Reaper Five. "Comm-drone. Incoming message."

"I'm getting it, as well," Ensign Weston reported. "It's from Striker One. They've got a contact from a recondrone, about two light hours ahead of us, twenty light minutes left of our present course, and five light minutes high. They're headed directly toward Striker Three's position."

"They must know Striker Three's location," Lieutenant Taren surmised.

"No way," Lieutenant Haddix disagreed. "If they did, they'd already be on top of them. They're skipping along their suspected route, the same way that Striker One did, hoping to pick up their old light."

"If that's the case, they're only a jump or two away from the last debris point, which will lead directly to them," Lieutenant Taren replied.

"Which is probably why Striker One is ordering us to intercept," Ensign Weston added.

"How many octos?" the lieutenant wondered.

"Two."

"Assuming they don't have any friends a few light minutes out," Lieutenant Taren quipped.

"Funny," Lieutenant Haddix replied. "Plot an intercept jump, Wes. Three, stay even with me to my starboard side, about a ten-thousand-click spread."

"Now you want to spread out."

"We'll jump past them, then come about, and jump in behind them," Lieutenant Haddix continued, ignoring him, "just outside of their sensor range. Ours is a bit longer, which should allow us to take them by surprise."

"Intercept plotted," Ensign Weston announced.
"Transmitting to Reaper Five."

"You getting the plot?" Lieutenant Haddix asked.

"We've got it," Ensign Jayson replied.

"Turn to intercept course, and prepare a jump to the turn point in twenty seconds," Lieutenant Haddix instructed.

"Copy that," Lieutenant Taren replied.

"If they're skipping along Three's escape course, hoping to get lucky, they'll be jumping any moment," Ensign Weston warned.

"Then we'll keep jumping forward in small increments until we catch them," Lieutenant Haddix replied.

"On course and speed," Lieutenant Taren reported.

Lieutenant Haddix looked down at his flight displays. They were also on course and speed. "Jump in three...... two......jump."

\* \* \*

Vladimir reached over and plugged the power feed from the portable fusion reactor into the portable life-support unit that he and Renny had connected to the wreckage of Striker Three. He turned slowly around, being careful to keep at least one hand gripped firmly onto the badly damaged gunship. He had seen more than one mag-lock fail in his time in the service, and he wasn't about to trust his life to the devices in the boots and kneepads of his EVA suit.

He watched the device for a moment, but nothing happened. "Is the reactor up?" he asked Renny.

"It's at ten percent," Renny replied. "That should be more than enough."

"The unit is not cycling." Vladimir slowly turned the unit over, being careful not to twist the supply and return hoses that connected the device to Striker Three. "It's got power," he announced, spotting a green indicator light on the other side of the unit.

"Want me to increase the output on the reactor?"

"Negative," Vladimir replied. "If the unit doesn't cycle, the return is probably clogged. It won't feed pressure if it isn't getting pressure back. It's a safety feature designed to prevent over-pressurizing a compartment."

"What could possibly be in there?" Renny wondered.

Vladimir looked around them, noting all the bits of debris ranging in size from nearly too small to see to the size of a human head. "You're kidding, right?"

"You think a piece of debris got inside the return line?

How is that possible?" Renny challenged. "Pressure would be outbound, which would blow debris away, not suck it in."

"I do not know," Vladimir admitted, "but that was the only return line available. We'll have to use a supply line."

"Aiden will have to reverse the flow controller on the line for it to work as a return," Renny realized, "but how do we know which one? Everything was scorched, and you can't read the labeling on the lines."

"He can tell which ones are working just by feeling for air movement at the vent," Vladimir explained.

"But the unit isn't cycling," Renny reminded him, "so, there is no air movement."

"We have to splice T-connectors into the return line and pump oxygen through it so he can identify the line and reverse the flow."

"Did you bring a T-connector?" Renny wondered.

"I brought everything," Vladimir replied. "I even brought some *galupsi* for dinner."

"Some what?"

"My grandmother's recipe...with some minor modifications. It is delicious, you should try some."

"We're out of time, Commander," Robert warned.

"Domasco," Vladimir called over comms, ignoring Robert's warning, "send over a T-tap and a T-connector with a two-way valve. They should be in container three."

"I'm on it," the technician in the back of Reaper Two replied.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Robert asked.

"Only a few more minutes, assuming Ensign Walsh is alert enough to assist us from within," Vladimir replied.

\* \* \*

"Turn complete," Lieutenant Haddix announced. He glanced at the tactical display, noting that Reaper Five had

also completed their turn. "Jumping to launch point in three.....two.....one....."

The tactical display went blank and then refreshed a second later, after recalculating their new position.

"Jump complete," Ensign Weston reported. "Two octos at max range. Got 'em, Jays?"

"Targeting the one on the right."

"We've got the one on the left," Ensign Weston announced. "Locking missiles. Good lock."

"Good lock," Ensign Jayson announced, as well.

"Two minutes until we're in their sensor range," Ensign Weston added.

"Make them stealthy," Lieutenant Haddix reminded them.

"Two cold-coasters, thirty-second launch burn, five-second hot time," Ensign Weston confirmed.

"Taren, after launch, pitch down ten. We'll jump past their forward sensor range and then come about for a head-tohead intercept jump."

"Got it," Lieutenant Taren replied.

"Ninety seconds," Ensign Weston warned. "Missiles in ten..."

"We'll intercept as the missiles go hot to distract them."

"You don't really think that will work, do you?" Lieutenant Taren wondered.

"Those octos are heavily shielded," Lieutenant Haddix replied. "Surprise is all we've got."

"Missiles in three..." Ensign Weston interrupted, "... two.....one..."

Ensign Weston pressed the launch button, and missiles rolled out of either side of their weapons bay. Their engines ignited, and the missiles streaked away. "Missiles away."

"Missiles away," Ensign Jayson also reported.

"Pitching down ten," Lieutenant Haddix announced as he

altered their course down ten degrees relative to their current course.

"Fifteen seconds to stealth mode," Ensign Weston reported.

Lieutenant Haddix glanced at the tactical display again, checking that Reaper Five was keeping with them. "Jumping in three.....two.....one."

Again, the sensor display went blank as it refreshed to show sensor data from their new position. Lieutenant Haddix pushed his flight control stick to the left as he added power to come about to their next jump heading.

"Twenty seconds to missiles active," Ensign Weston announced as they continued their turn.

"What's plan B?" Lieutenant Taren wondered.

"It's a fluid situation," Lieutenant Haddix replied.

"So, you're making this up as you go, then."

"Pretty much."

"Ten seconds," Ensign Weston updated.

"Turn complete," Lieutenant Haddix reported. "Pitching up for intercept jump."

"Five seconds."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

The sensor screen went blank again, only this time when it refreshed, two targets appeared and the threat light lit up.

"Octos, dead ahead!" Ensign Weston reported. "Missiles just went hot!"

"Firing!" Lieutenant Haddix announced as he pressed the firing button on his flight control stick. Streams of redorange plasma streaked from their side cannons.

"Targets are turning toward us," Ensign Weston reported. Lieutenant Haddix smiled as he continued firing.

"Missiles are terminal!"

Two bright, white flashes appeared directly ahead of Reaper Six as their missiles impacted the first octo's shields and detonated. At the same time, a blue-white flash appeared to their left.

"Target One's shields are down!" Ensign Weston reported.

"Target Two jumped away!" Ensign Jayson yelled over comms.

"Did you get his jump energy reading?" Lieutenant Haddix asked.

"I got it! I got it!" Ensign Weston assured him. "One is powering up his jump drive!"

"Taren! Shift to target one!" Lieutenant Haddix instructed. "His shields are down! We can bust through his armor!"

"Targeting One!"

A second stream of plasma energy joined the one coming from Reaper Six's plasma cannons, and a few seconds later the octo fighter broke apart, its drive section exploding.

"One is down!" Ensign Weston announced with glee.

"Pursuit course!" Lieutenant Haddix ordered as he rolled the ship into a looping left turn to follow the second octo.

"Got it! Ensign Weston replied. "Transmitting to Five!"

"Taren!" Lieutenant Haddix called. "We'll jump in thirty seconds behind, you jump in ninety. If you find his light, jump to me before you pursue. I'll do the same."

"Understood," Lieutenant Taren replied.

"I've got the pursuit plot," Ensign Jayson announced.

"See you in one," Lieutenant Haddix replied, pressing the jump button on his flight control stick as they rolled out of their turn.

The tactical display repainted, confirming their new

position, but there were no targets. A second later, one suddenly appeared at the very edge of their sensor range.

"I've got them. One light minute out!" Ensign Weston reported. "They're changing course and going to full thrust."

"Not good," the lieutenant mumbled as he adjusted course and toggled his jump button.

A split second later, the second octo fighter was directly ahead of them, no more than a few hundred meters away, crossing their flight path from left to right as they accelerated.

"They're powering up to jump again!" the ensign warned.

Lieutenant Haddix pressed his firing button, sending another barrage of red-orange plasma energy toward the target. Its shields flashed with the impacts of plasma energy, then disappeared in a blue-white flash.

"They just executed a max jump," Ensign Weston reported. "Directly toward Palee. Let's go get him!"

"It's only two jumps to Palee," the lieutenant replied. "We'd be jumping into a hornet's nest." The lieutenant sighed. "We have to warn the others."

\* \* \*

"Hand me the line from the oxygen canister," Vladimir instructed as he finished installing the valve on the T-connector. "Robert, patch me through to Ensign Walsh."

"One moment," Robert replied.

Vladimir took the line from Renny and began attaching it to the bypass valve on the T-connector.

"You're patched in," Robert announced.

"Ensign Walsh, this is Commander Kamenetskiy. Can you hear me?" Vladimir continued working as he waited for a response. "Ensign Walsh, respond."

"Aiden..." Robert called, also trying to raise the ensign.

"...We need your help, kid," Robert continued. "You need to wake up and save your crew."

Aiden moved his head ever so slightly. His vision was blurry, and his head hurt. He also felt heavy, which was odd since there was barely enough charge left in the gravity plating to hold them to the deck.

"Ensign," Vladimir called, "...Aiden. We need you to find the correct supply line and reverse the direction of flow."

Aiden moved some more, this time looking around the battered interior of his ship. He saw his crew, the four of them, huddled together in the corner to stay warm, all of them drugged and unconscious, and Charnelle, her arms around him, her face snuggled into the side of his chest.

"Aiden!" Vladimir barked over comms.

"I'm here," Aiden mumbled, barely finding the strength to speak.

"Good, good," Vladimir replied. "I need you to feel all the supply vents and see which one is blowing air."

"You want me to blow the vent?"

"Negative! Identify which vent is blowing air into your compartment! That is all!"

"Why are you yelling?" Aiden wondered, reaching for his head.

"Aiden, please do as the commander says," Robert instructed more calmly. "Your life, and the lives of your crew, depends on it."

Aiden tried to take a deep breath but found himself gasping for air. "No...air.....I...can't...breathe."

"Aiden, we are feeding oxygen into your ship, but it will not be enough to keep you alive for more than a few more minutes," Vladimir explained, his voice now controlled and calm.

Aiden continued trying to get his breath. It was difficult, but with each forced inhalation, it got easier and easier. "What do you.....want me.....to do?"

"Find the vent that has air blowing from it and then reverse its flow," Vladimir explained.

"How do I.....do that?" Aiden wondered as he pushed Charnelle's unconscious body off of him, leaning her against the bulkhead.

"First, you must go to each vent and feel for air," Vladimir instructed. "When you find the one with air coming from it, tell me the ID number on the vent."

"I should.....wake up.....Ash."

"Who?" Vladimir wondered.

"Engineer," Aiden added, finally on his feet.

"Do not wake her," Robert instructed. "You don't have the oxygen."

"Aiden, find the vent," Vladimir instructed. "You can do it."

"New contacts," Striker One's sensor officer reported. "Reapers."

"Striker One, Reaper Six!" Lieutenant Haddix called over comms.

"Go for Striker One," Robert replied.

"One octo destroyed, the other got away. He's headed straight for Palee."

"Damn it!" Robert cursed.

"They're going for help," Sasha stated. "It's only a matter of time until they find us."

Vladimir glanced at the gauge on the oxygen canister. "You need to hurry, Aiden, before the oxygen runs out."

"Maybe we should reduce the flow?" Renny suggested.

"If I reduce it anymore, he might not feel the airflow," Vladimir replied. "He is mentally impaired at the moment."

"Maybe we can use our suit systems?"

"There is no way to connect them," Vladimir told him. "Besides, they could not support the volume of the compartment."

Aiden stepped over Charnelle's body and made his way to the nearest vent, just above the sensor station. Supporting himself against the overhead console, he reached up to put his hand in front of the vent, but felt nothing. "Not...... this.....one," he struggled to report.

"Save your oxygen," Vladimir urged. "Only report when you find the right vent."

Aiden looked around the small compartment, struggling to focus. He spotted another vent, on the opposite wall, above Ashwini's engineering console. He moved over to the console and reached up to feel for airflow. Again, he felt nothing.

"You must hurry, Aiden," Vladimir urged. "We are running out of oxygen to vent through the unit."

"Wanna.....trade.....places?" he asked as he moved aft.

"Don't talk," Vladimir scolded.

Aiden stepped carefully, not wanting to step on the bodies of his crew as they slept, oblivious to the fact that they were all on death's door. He stopped a moment, shaking his head, struggling to maintain his focus and keep his eyes open. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep.

Aiden reached the next vent, in the starboard aft corner

of the compartment, and reached up to feel for air. "Damn," he cursed, barely audible.

"You must hurry, Aiden," Vladimir urged again.

As Aiden moved to the other side of the aft end of the compartment, he felt something...the slightest of breezes. He tried to take a breath as he moved, finding it easier than before. He reached the corner and tried to get his hand to the vent, but the overhead was pushed down and twisted, blocking access. "I can't.....reach.....this one."

"What?"

"I can feel.....air."

"Which vent?" Vladimir asked.

"I can't.....see," Aiden replied. "Too much.....damage...... but this is.....the one.....I'm sure."

Aiden fell to the floor. In his weakened state, it was the easiest way to get down low to look. "I'm looking."

"There should be four small levers. The third lever should

<sup>&</sup>quot;That's it," Vladimir said, "it's empty."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Where are you?" Renny asked as he clung to the outside of Striker Three, next to Vladimir.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Aft.....port side."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What's by you?" Renny asked. "On the port bulkhead."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Uh.....panel forty.....seven bravo," Aiden replied.

Renny thought for a moment, then it dawned on him. "Fourteen alpha! Fourteen alpha!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;What?" Vladimir asked, turning to look at Renny.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Vent fourteen alpha is just aft of panel forty-seven bravo! Aiden, this is Renny! Look down at the bottom of the aft bulkhead!"

say fourteen alpha on it. Do you see it?"

Aiden squinted, trying to focus. "I think so.....my eyes...... hard to focus."

"Third lever from the left," Renny instructed. "Turn it so the lever is pointed parallel to the deck."

"Which way?" Aiden asked.

"It doesn't matter; just make sure it's parallel to the deck!"

"Quickly, hook it back up," Renny urged Vladimir.

Vladimir immediately disconnected the line from the empty oxygen tank, letting it go and allowing the tank to drift lazily away from them. Within seconds, he was twisting the connection to secure the return line to the T-connector.

"I've turned it," Aiden reported. "Third lever.....from the left..... It's parallel.....to the floor."

Vladimir finished reconnecting the return line to the T-connector and then turned the valve again. He reached over and pressed the button to activate the portable life-support unit, which immediately lit up as its pumps starting forcing fresh, oxygenated air into the interior of the battered gunship. "It's working!" he exclaimed. "It's working!"

## **CHAPTER NINE**

"I want you to personally supervise the recovery," Captain Madrid ordered as they walked toward the front end of the forward cargo bay.

"Jenna can handle it, Sheba," her first officer assured her.

"Jenna does just fine as deck boss, but this isn't cargo, Vema. I need someone who can think on their feet, in case something doesn't go as planned." She stopped and turned to look at him. "That someone is you."

"She's not going to like it," Vemados warned. "She's very possessive of her deck."

"Tough shit," Sheba replied as she turned to continue toward the exit. "Tell her it was captain's orders," she added as she stepped through the hatch.

"Thank you," Vema said to himself, relieved that the Manamu's deck boss's anger would be aimed at the captain, and not him.

"Final jump in one minute," Garland announced over the all-call.

Captain Madrid bounded up the gangway, two steps at a time, reaching the next level in seconds. She made a one-eighty and bounded up the next set of steep stairs, reaching the flight deck a few seconds later. From there, it was exactly fifty-seven steps to the Manamu's bridge.

Sheba walked down the corridor and stepped through the open hatch into the bridge. "How much jump charge are we going to have left after this?" she inquired as she stepped up to her command console. Unlike most ships, the Manamu had no command chair on its bridge. Sheba

preferred to stand as much as possible. The life of a cargo ship captain involved much more sitting than she liked, and it seemed as if her ventral parts had widened a bit more with each promotion. She also preferred to be able to monitor her ship without depending on reports from her bridge staff. Hence, the installation of her command pedestal. The idea had actually been inspired by a visit to the Aurora, where the tactical officer's station was tall enough to stand, and the operator's chair could be swung away and tucked under the console when not in use. Since a cargo vessel did very little hard maneuvering, the elevated chair had seemed unnecessary.

"About ten light years' worth," Garland replied from the helm. "Not much, but enough to algo to the rally point, if needed." He turned around to look at his captain. "You sure you don't want to wait and charge the banks up a bit?"

"Would *you* want me to wait if *you* were trapped inside that wreckage?" she asked as she checked over her console.

"Preparing for final jump," the pilot stated as he turned around to face his console again.

"Not too close, Garland," the captain warned. "We don't know what we're jumping into."

"We should come out of the jump a few hundred thousand kilometers from the rescue point," the pilot assured him. "That should give us more than enough room to maneuver safely."

Captain Madrid pressed a button on the communications section of her command pedestal. "Nilah, are your teams ready?"

"We're all suited up and ready to go," her medical officer confirmed.

"Twenty seconds," the pilot announced.

"Vema?"

"We're ready down here, Captain," her first officer replied. "The rescue team from the Aurora is in position. We can begin depress at any time."

"Go ahead and start the depress cycle," Sheba instructed. "Understood."

"Jump in five seconds," Garland reported. "Three...... two......one.....jumping."

Sheba looked away from the Manamu's forward windows as the jump flash filled the bridge, cursing the owners for not installing the opacity filters on their windows. Of course, they had probably cursed her, as well, for taking their ship and joining the Karuzari rebellion. At the time, she had felt guilty for doing so, but the truth was that the Dusahn would have confiscated the ship anyway. Either way, the owners would have lost the asset.

The jump flash cleared, and she immediately watched her navigation display. It repainted a moment later and multiple icons representing Striker One and various Reapers, along with a single, unidentified contact less than half the size of a Cobra gunship. "Striker One, Manamu. Three hundred kilometers off your port side, twenty up. Where would you like us?"

"Manamu, Striker One," Robert replied. "Come in fast. Probability of unwanted guests is high. This may turn into a hot rescue."

"Understood. We'll come in hot and do a max-thrust decel," Captain Madrid replied.

"They know we don't have any defenses, right?" her sensor officer asked.

"They know, Tobi. Just keep your eyes on those sensors."

"All hands prepare for max-decel burn," the captain warned over comms. "How's the depress, Jenna?"

"Depress is complete," Jenna replied.

"Open forward bay overheads," the captain ordered.

"During a max burn?" Jenna questioned.

"You heard me."

Jenna looked at Vemados who was standing next to her, also in a full pressure suit. He nodded. "Rolling the roof open," she replied, pressing the open button on the control console.

The ceiling and upper side walls of the Manamu's forward cargo bay began to slowly slide forward, creating an everwidening gap between the aft edge and the midship bulkhead.

"You know, the roof provides thirty percent of the ship's structural integrity...when closed," Jenna reminded the Manamu's first officer.

"She knows," he assured her.

"How is the pressure inside?" Vladimir asked over comms as he and Renny clung to the outside of the wreckage that was once Striker Three.

"It's.....rising," Aiden replied, relief in his voice. A moment later he added, "I can feel air.....coming out of the vent.....over the sensor station."

"How is the reactor?" Vladimir asked Renny.

"No problems here," Renny assured him. "More than enough power."

"Lash the reactor to something and then return to your ship," Vladimir instructed.

"I can ride it down with you," Renny offered.

"That will not be necessary," Vladimir insisted, "and your

ship is without its engineer. Besides, there is no reason to risk both our lives."

"I should be the one to ride it down, Commander. I know the Cobra systems better than..."

"That wasn't a request, Mister Hake," Vladimir stated.

"And the Aurora is without hers," Renny objected.

"I will not tell you twice," Vladimir warned.

"Follow the commander's orders, Renny," Robert chimed in.

Renny hesitated for a moment and then replied. "Yes, sir." He quickly checked that the portable fusion reactor was secured to the side of the wreckage, along with the power transfer cable. "Everything is secure," he reported. He turned to look at Vladimir. "Are you sure about this?"

"Da," Vladimir replied. "Thank you for your help, Mister Hake."

"You're welcome," Renny replied. He hesitated again and then added, "Good luck, Commander."

"To all of us," Vladimir replied. He turned to look at Renny as the young engineer pushed himself away from the wreckage, then fired the maneuvering thrusters on his EVA suit to spin around and head back to Striker One, fifty meters away.

"What are you doing.....Commander?" Aiden asked.

"The internal environmental sensors in your ship are not functioning. You will need to monitor pressure and temperature, and tell me when they reach normal levels so I can then balance the system from here."

"We only need enough life support.....to get through an hour or two..... Just warm us up.....fill us up.....and shut it down."

"If I overpressurize your compartment, any number of

seals could rupture, requiring additional adjustments from out here," Vladimir explained.

"So you're going to ride us.....all the way down?" Aiden surmised. "That's insane! You can't.....do that!"

"I know you cannot see them, Ensign, but I *am* wearing commander's bars on my uniform...if you get my meaning."

"Yes.....sir."

"Didn't Captain Scott tell you not to be a hero, Commander?" the pilot of Reaper One asked.

"Did he?" Vladimir replied jokingly. "I must have missed that."

"You're setting a fine example for your junior officers, Commander," Robert joked.

"I do what I can," Vladimir replied.

"Deceleration thrusters are at maximum," Garland reported from the Manamu's helm. "Two minutes to cut off."

"We're putting a hell of a load on the main fore-aft trusses with the overhead open," her engineer warned.

"It's okay, Ewan," the captain assured him, "I've done this before."

"When?" Ewan wondered.

"Before you came aboard."

"I came aboard the same day as you," Ewan reminded her.

"Really," she replied, an impish grin on her face. "Must've been on a different ship."

"Uh-huh," Ewan grunted, turning back to his console.

"The Manamu is about a minute out, coming in fast with

her decel thrusters at max," Robert informed Vladimir over comms as he maneuvered his gunship away from Striker Three's wreckage. "You might want to attach yourself to that thing in more than one place, Commander."

"I'm afraid there isn't much to attach to," Vladimir replied.

"Well, find *something*," Robert urged. "How are you doing, Aiden?"

"Better, sir," Aiden replied. "Air is still.....a little thin, but.....breathing is getting.....easier."

"Good to hear."

"I'm a little worried about.....touchdown, sir," Aiden admitted. "This thing is.....barely holding together. If the inner hull ruptures.....when we make contact.....with the Manamu's deck.....they won't be able to close her doors.....and repressurize their bay fast enough. We'll be dead.....in seconds."

"That's not going to happen, Ensign," Robert insisted.

"I hope you're right.....sir."

Robert looked at Sasha. "Me, too," he said to his copilot.

"Contacts!" Kasma reported from Striker One's sensor station in the next compartment. "Four octos! Five hundred thousand clicks at one five seven, eighteen down relative! Just jumped in!"

"Reapers Five and Six, Striker One," Robert called without hesitation, "try to keep them away from us for a few minutes."

"On our way," Lieutenant Haddix replied.

"Vlad, you need to get back to Reaper One, pronto!" Robert suggested sternly.

"I'm staying here," Vladimir replied.

"Commander, don't make me pull rank," Robert threatened.

Vladimir laughed. "You won't be the first captain I've ignored."

Robert stopped his separation maneuver and pushed his flight control stick in the opposite direction, moving his gunship back toward the wreckage of Striker Three.

"What are you doing?" Sasha asked.

Robert keyed his mic. "I'm moving in as close as possible," he explained. "We'll extend our shields around you."

"Striker One, Manamu," Captain Madrid called. "That's going to make recovery a problem."

"I'll peel away at the last moment," Robert replied. "Your course is perpendicular to that of the incoming octos. Roll onto your side and position yourself, so that you're protecting Striker Three from incoming fire, before I drop shields."

"We don't have shields, Captain," Sheba reminded him.

"I know," Robert assured her, "but you can take a few hits much better than they can."

"Not much better," Sheba argued.

"When I peel off, I'll maneuver up and over you, and turn into them. We can handle four octos."

"We can?" Sasha wondered.

"Once we open up on them with our plasma torpedoes, I promise you, they'll scatter," Robert continued. "That should give you just enough time to recover Striker Three and jump clear."

"Sounds like a plan," Captain Madrid agreed.

"This should be fun," Vladimir commented over comms.

"Not from where I'm sitting," Aiden added.

Lieutenant Haddix pressed the jump button on his flight

control stick and a second later, four Dusahn octo fighters appeared on his tactical display a few thousand kilometers directly ahead of him, closing at an alarming rate.

"Good lock!" Ensign Weston announced. "Launching two!"

"Good locks on the two to the right!" Ensign Jayson added. "Two missiles away!"

Four tiny, blue-white flashes appeared ahead of them, barely visible against the backdrop of stars. Lieutenant Haddix glanced at his tactical display just as all four icons vanished. "Shit!" he exclaimed as he yanked his flight control stick to the left and went to full power. "They jumped past us!"

"Coming about!" Lieutenant Taren reported as he turned hard in the opposite direction.

"They're going to jump straight in and go for the Manamu first," Lieutenant Haddix warned. "One and Two!"

"They're inbound!" the pilot from Reaper Two reported excitedly. "Two hundred clicks..."

"I've got them!" Ensign Weston said. "They're launching missiles!"

"Moving to intercept!" the pilot of Reaper One reported.

"Taren!" Lieutenant Haddix barked as he finished his onehundred-and-eighty-degree turn and adjusted his jump distance. "We jump in right on their ass and open up. We've gotta make them scramble!"

"Let's do it!"

"You sure you want to do this?" Robert asked over comms as his gunship pulled up next to Striker Three's wreckage.

"I've got the four missiles on the left!" one of the Reaper pilots reported.

"I've got the ones to the right!" the other pilot replied.

"Inbounds are twenty seconds out!" Striker One's sensor officer warned.

Vladimir's eyes widened as the gunship slid sideways toward him, tiny bursts of thrust spewing from maneuvering thrusters located all about its hull. For a moment, Vladimir feared the gunship would collide with them, but it slowed and came to rest no more than five meters away. "Honestly?" he admitted.

"That's what I thought," Robert chuckled. "Get ready, Commander, this might tickle a bit."

"You're a very funny guy," Vladimir said.

"Extending shields."

A pale, nearly invisible, oblong bubble formed around Striker One and the wreckage of Striker Three. As if they weren't already wide enough, Vladimir's eyes became as big as saucers at the sight of the barely visible, shimmering, bluish veil of protective energy only a meter away. To his surprise, he could literally *feel* the energy, like a million ants crawling all over him. "*Chort*!" he cursed.

"What's wrong?" Robert asked, recognizing the curse word.

"I should've brought an emitter net!"

Reaper Six came out of the jump, and four Dusahn octo fighters appeared ahead of them, less than one hundred meters ahead.

"Shit!" Ensign Weston exclaimed. "That's fucking close!"

Lieutenant Haddix didn't respond, instead opening up on the octos directly ahead of them with his plasma cannons. The rear shields of the nearest octo lit up as plasma rounds dumped their energy into them, threatening to overload the enemy fighter's emitters.

A split second later, Reaper Five jumped in to their right and slightly behind them, also opening up with their plasma cannons.

As expected, the four octos broke off their attack, two peeling off to the left, the other two to the right.

"Following the left two!" Lieutenant Haddix announced, turning to follow the targets. "Stay on my wing, Taren!"

"Where you go, I go!" Taren replied.

"One and Two are taking the pair going to our left, your right!" the pilot of Reaper One reported.

"Fuck!" Ensign Weston cursed. "Four more octos! Same original vector and distance as the first four!"

The two octos that Reaper Six was following suddenly disappeared in a blue-white flash. "Damn it! Did you get their range?"

"Two light minutes!" Ensign Weston replied.

Lieutenant Haddix spun his jump distance selector to two light minutes. "You get that, Taren?"

"I got it! Go!"

The lieutenant pressed his jump button, but when he came out of the jump, the octos were not there. "Son of a bitch!" He glanced down at his tactical display, taking note of the position of the second group of four octos that had just arrived. Four pairs of smaller icons appeared, speeding ahead of the icons representing the four octos.

"Second group has launched missiles!" Ensign Weston warned. "Eight more inbound!"

"All Reapers go defensive!" Lieutenant Haddix ordered. "Defend against the missiles, only!"

"This is not good," Lieutenant Taren said.

"No shit," Lieutenant Haddix agreed.

"Manamu! Manamu!" Robert called over comms. "Veer off and prepare escape jump! Missiles are inbound!"

"Fuck!" Garland cursed.

"I've got the missile tracks!" Tobi announced from the Manamu's sensor station. "Four of them are locked onto us!"

"If you can take care of those missiles, we can still do this," Captain Madrid announced over comms, her tone confident.

"We've gotta jump!" Garland insisted.

"Hold your course!" the captain barked sternly. "Prepare an escape jump but do *not* execute until I give the word."

"Well, shit, can I at least alter course slightly so we have a clear jump line?" Garland replied sarcastically.

"A single degree, no more," Sheba snapped.

"Two down! Six still inbound!"

Aiden stood in the middle of the compartment, his crew still lying around him, unconscious.

"Six has the two bearing on the Manamu!"

"One and Two are on the other four!"

"Fuck," Aiden exclaimed, frustrated that he was unable to do anything to defend himself or his crew.

"Gunners! Target the incoming missiles!" Robert ordered over comms. "Watch out for friendlies!"

"Fuck!" Aiden exclaimed again, his eyes closing for a moment as the word left his mouth.

"Hang in there, Aiden!" Robert encouraged him. "Our shields are protecting you!"

"I know!" Aiden cried out. But for how long? He knew that Striker One couldn't maintain extended shields for

very long, especially if they had to absorb the energy from one or more missile detonations.

"Manamu is clear!"

"Two still inbound on us," Striker One's sensor officer warned. "Ten seconds to impact."

Aiden looked at his unconscious crew again, wishing he was in the same state at the moment.

Vladimir couldn't help but turn his head toward the incoming weapon. If he was about to meet his fate, he would do so head on, with his eyes wide open. He stared at the white dot, watching as it rapidly grew in size, redorange streams of plasma energy racing toward it from all directions.

"Three seconds!" Kasma warned. "Brace!"

Vladimir continued to stare at the white dot, which was now plain to see. There was a blinding flash of light, and then a million tiny flashes of pale blue all over the shimmering wall that protected him as debris from the destroyed missile slammed into the shields that Striker One had extended around them. "Gospadee!"

"That was fucking close!"

Aiden collapsed onto the deck next to Charnelle's unconscious body, the stress and frustration of being unable to defend himself was more than he could bear.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Three down!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Five seconds!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Come on, Merlyn!"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Tui nye znayesh," Vladimir mumbled.

<sup>&</sup>quot;New contacts!" Striker One's sensor officer said again.

"Oh, God," Aiden mumbled.

"Four Dusahn gunships!"

"Maintain positions!" Robert ordered. "Defend against missiles only. Manamu, break off! Break off!"

Aiden knew what he had to do. He summoned all his strength, taking several deep breaths before speaking. "You have to abort, sir," he said, his voice unsure and broken.

"Just hang tight, Aiden," Robert replied. "It sounds worse than it really is."

"Bullshit," Aiden replied. "This is insane. You have to abort! You can't all die just to save us! It doesn't make any sense!"

"He's right, Robert," Sasha said.

"This isn't my first hot rescue, Ensign," Robert barked angrily, "so if you don't mind, *I'll* be the one to decide when it's time to fucking abort!"

"Robert," Sasha urged.

"That goes for you, too, Kraska!" he snapped at his copilot. "Gunners, be ready! Those gunships don't have any missiles, so they're going to do hit-and-run passes. I can't maneuver to bring our torpedo tubes to bear or I'll lose shields on Striker Three."

"We can't shoot down gunships with mark ones, Captain," Sheshan said from the starboard gun turret.

"Maybe not," Robert replied, "but we can weaken their shields with each pass, and then maybe one of our Reapers can get a lucky shot."

"We'll make it hurt," Merlyn insisted from the port gun.

"Manamu, Striker One, you still with us?"

Two seconds later, Captain Madrid replied. "We're two light seconds out, coming about for another approach."

"You read my mind, Captain," Robert replied. "Match our course and speed, and be sure to calculate our drift. Jump in with your back toward whoever the fuck is attacking us at the moment."

"We'll jump in right on top of Striker Three, scoop them up quick, and jump away," Captain Madrid replied, standing confidently at her command podium.

"Are you kidding?" Garland said.

"Hell no."

"Just give me a three-second warning before you jump so I can drop shields and veer away," Robert replied.

"You got it," Sheba answered.

Garland turned and looked at his captain, his face forlorn and uncertain. "I.....I don't know if I can do it."

"I need to know right now, Garland," the captain demanded.

"I can't," Garland admitted. "I'm not good enough."

"Clear the chair," Sheba ordered, moving quickly toward the helm.

"Captain," Garland begged as he rose and stepped aside, not wanting her to attempt the incredibly dangerous maneuver either.

"I understand that you don't think you're good enough, Garland," she said as she prepped for the jump. "It's okay. I'd rather you didn't try if you aren't certain you can pull it off."

"This isn't what this ship is *built* for," he told her. "This isn't what her *crew* is trained for."

"You're right, but we're here, and they need us."

"Are you sure you can do it?" he asked, challenging her.

"Damn right I am," she replied without hesitation. "Now,

pay attention and learn something."

Garland stepped back and to the side, watching as his captain began punching in jump parameters.

"I'm going to need hyper-accurate sensor ranging on that wreckage, Tobi," Sheba instructed.

"You'll have it," her sensor officer assured her. "Vemados, is that bay all the way open?"

"Yes, sir," her first officer replied.

"Be ready down there," she warned. "We're going to jump in right on top of Striker Three, so she'll be slipping into the bay as soon as we come out of the jump."

"Okay," the first officer replied, trying his best to hide his disbelief.

"Reapers, take up positions around us," Robert ordered as he prepared his gunship to jump away. "Maintain a distance of five hundred meters in all directions to make room for the Manamu. If anything jumps inside that sphere, chase them out, pronto. Otherwise, defend against missiles only, and let our shields take the incoming plasma fire."

"Shields are down to fifty percent," Sasha warned, "and we haven't even taken that many direct hits."

"Extending our shields is putting a hell of a strain on the starboard emitters," Renny warned.

Robert ignored their warnings. He was well aware of the situation, but it was their job to report such things to their captain.

"Striker One, Manamu," Captain Madrid called over comms. "Starting our approach. Estimate one minute to our jump point."

"We're ready, Sheba," Robert replied.

"Two octos, attacking from four high," Kasma reported.

"I've got them," Sheshan reported.

"Five and Six are attacking the inbound octos from the target's left and above," Lieutenant Haddix warned.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant," Sheshan replied, "I won't shoot you. Just warn me if you overtake the targets so I can cease-fire."

"This is insane," Sasha commented under his breath. Robert paid him no mind.

"Feed me your latest, Tobi," Captain Madrid ordered as she piloted the Manamu toward its jump point.

"Your console's tied to mine, Captain. You're getting them as I do."

"Very good," Sheba stated calmly.

Garland watched in amazement as his captain expertly manipulated the cargo ship's flight controls, bringing the ship onto the precise course and speed needed for the jump. Garland's training had never really involved precision jumping since cargo ships never needed to execute them. But his captain's training had been different. She had honed her skills flying supply shuttles into the Koho Valley on Bankote Alpha, during the Coorish Rebellion. But those had been much smaller ships with far more precise navigational systems.

"Contact!" Tobi warned. "In the arrival zone! Two octos! Diving on Striker One!"

"Thirty seconds to jump point," Sheba warned. "Clear that bogey out of there, or we'll have to abort and set up a new approach."

"Reaper One and Two are on it!"

"Fuck!" Tobi exclaimed. "Another contact! A cruiser! Four

hundred thousand kilometers at two five one, forty down relative!"

"Twenty seconds," Sheba warned. "Clear that fucking jump zone!"

"Captain Nash, please, you've got to abort," Aiden begged, his head down in anguish as he sat on the deck next to Charnelle.

"Aiden," Robert replied with sorrow in his voice, like a man defeated.

"It's over, sir." He put his arm around Charnelle, pulling her unconscious body to his own. "We both know it."

"I'm sorry, kid."

Aiden looked at his sleeping crew through the blurred vision of his tear-filled eyes. He had brought them here, and their deaths would be his fault. He turned his head toward Charnelle, burying his nose in her hair. "I should've told you I love you," he whispered. "You knew, though, didn't you?"

Robert closed his eyes, drawing the strength to say the words. "Striker One to all ships..."

"Contacts!" Kasma interrupted. "Gunyoki! Dozens of them! And Striker Two!"

"What the fuck, Bobby!" Captain Roselle called over comms. "You having a shindig without us?"

Robert felt as if he was going to explode with joy. "It's BYOB, asshole!" he cried out over comms.

"If you mean bring your own bombs, then we're ready to party! Who do you want us to dance with first?"

"That cruiser looks lonely!"

"Recovery zone is clear!" the pilot from Reaper One announced.

"Everyone stay out of the recovery zone! Manamu is jumping in close!"

"Gunyoki!" Vol Kaguchi called over comms. "Alpha flight on octos! Bravo flight on gunships! Charlie and Delta on the cruiser! GONZEE!"

"You can't," Aiden begged. "Please! Abort!"

"Shut the fuck up, kid!" Captain Roselle barked. "You're gettin' rescued whether you like it or not!"

"Five-second warning!" Captain Madrid announced over comms.

"Here we go," Robert announced. "Dropping shields."

"Let's bloody that cruiser's nose," Captain Roselle declared as he pressed the jump button on his gunship's flight control stick. A split second later, a Dusahn cruiser appeared, coming straight at them, so close that it filled their front windows.

Gil pressed the firing button, sending waves of plasma torpedoes at the surprised enemy warship. The cruisers shields flashed a bloody-amber with each torpedo impact. Streams of plasma cannon energy streaked forward from either side of the gunship as both side gunners swung their turrets forward and joined in the barrage.

As the enemy warship's forward shields flashed with the impacts, the cruiser's own gun turrets swung around to face forward, opening fire only a few seconds after the barrage began.

Now it was the gunship's shields that flashed bright orange as enemy fire tried to bring their protective energy barrier down.

"Shields at seventy percent," his copilot warned. "Five hundred meters and closing fast!"

Gil held his firing button down a few more seconds, trying to weaken the enemy ship's shields as much as possible for the Gunyoki, whom he knew would continue the attack after he jumped clear. After a few more rounds, he released the button and pulled back on his flight control stick, pitching up to a clear jump line before pressing the jump button to escape the return fire.

The cacophony of battle ceased as they jumped away, and Gil immediately pulled the gunship into a tight turn to come about. "Coming around for another pass," he announced.

"Same as before?" his copilot wondered.

"Don't worry, Pip," Gil replied, "by the time we make our next pass, the Gunyoki will be swarming all over them, keeping their guns busy and *off* of us."

"Just the way I like it," Pip agreed.

"Two gunships, two o'clock high! Twelve clicks! Crossing right to left!" Isa announced from the back seat of Shenza One.

"Tariq, attack pattern alpha four," Vol instructed.

"Lead the way," Tarig replied from Shenza Two.

"Tham, Alayna, alpha five, plus five. We'll follow with bravo four and six."

"If the targets last that long," Tham replied.

Vol smiled as he rolled into a right turn. A quick tap of his jump button and his ship transitioned to a point directly aft of the targets, about two light minutes behind them. He quickly changed course again, turning hard left onto the same course as the targets. He quickly adjusted his jump range and then glanced at his tactical display. "Ready, Tariq?"

"Ready!"

Vol pressed the jump button on his flight control stick and then guickly moved it to the firing button on the left. The two gunships appeared directly ahead of him, only a few hundred meters away. He pressed his firing button, and thick bolts of plasma energy spewed forth from the barrels on the front of his engine nacelles. The shields of the left gunship flashed brilliantly as the plasma energy slammed into them. The gunship banked left, trying to evade the incoming fire as they prepared to jump away, but Vol anticipated the maneuver, turning with them and keeping up the barrage while maneuvering. Within seconds, the enemy gunship's aft shields collapsed, its emitters exploding in showers of sparks. The subsequent bolts of plasma tore through the tail of the gunship, breaking it apart and quickly causing secondary explosions that doomed the ship and its crew.

Garland's eyes widened as he watched his captain calmly activate the cargo ship's jump drive, sending it toward a target area far smaller than any sane pilot of such a ship would ever dare to attempt.

"Bogey in the recovery zone!" Striker One's sensor officer warned.

"I'm on him!" Lieutenant Haddix declared from Reaper Six.

Energy bolts streaked past him on either side. Vladimir looked up, still hugging the wreckage. A Dusahn octo

fighter was heading right for them, guns blazing as the ship jinked left and right, trying to avoid fire from distant Reapers.

"There's no time!" Robert warned.

An energy bolt slammed into the portable fusion reactor, a scant three meters away from him, causing it to blow apart. The explosion sent debris flying in all directions, a piece of which hit the exposed structural beam that was Vladimir's anchor point.

Reaper Six appeared directly behind the octo, immediately opening fire with everything it had. The octo turned away and jumped, after which Reaper Six also disappeared.

Vladimir reached for the wreckage as he tumbled away but could not reach it in time. Pieces of debris from the exploded fusion reactor streaked past him on all sides, miraculously missing his suit and sparing his life, but he was now adrift.

An enormous, blue-white flash suddenly lit up the wreckage, causing Vladimir to instinctively shut his eyes to avoid being blinded by the brilliant light. His skin crawled as his EVA suit was bathed with residual jump energy. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked up. The Manamu loomed over him, upside down by his perspective. She was so close, had her overhead cargo bay doors been closed, he could have reached out and touched them.

And it was coming closer.

"Holy shit! You did it!" Garland exclaimed. The ship rocked and vibrated as multiple objects impacted their hull.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Debris field!" Tobi warned.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Nothing we can do about it now," Captain Madrid replied

as she manipulated the Manamu's flight controls. "Translating up toward them."

"Easy, Captain," Garland urged.

Sheba just glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, a smirk on her face.

"Hull breach!" Ewan warned from the engineering station. "Multiple breeches! Outer hull only!"

Sheba paid no attention, focusing solely on the task at hand.

"Five meters to threshold!" Tobi announced. "Slow it down, Sheba, or they'll slam into the deck!"

Sheba fired her thrusters again, decreasing their closure rate.

"Manamu, Striker One! That cruiser is bearing down on you!" Robert warned over comms. "They'll be within firing range in thirty seconds. You need to get the hell out of there!"

"I'm working on it," Sheba replied calmly.

"Threshold!" Tobi announced excitedly. "They're in the bay!"

Sheba fired her thrusters one last time, matching the speed and drift of the wreckage as best she could. "It's all yours, Vemados!"

"Brace for impact!" the Manamu's deck chief called over comms.

Aiden wrapped both his arms around Charnelle's still-unconscious body, spreading his legs out to steady them both for what he *hoped* would be a relatively soft landing.

One way or another, their ordeal was about to end.

Vladimir watched with an oddly detached fascination as what was left of Striker Three passed the overhead doors and descended into the Manamu's cargo bay. The sight was surreal, as was his instinct to reach out and grab hold of the edge of the cargo bay door as he passed it, following the wreckage in. As soon as he had both hands firmly grasping the door's edge, he realized that if he had continued drifting, he would have just landed gently on the Manamu's cargo deck. But adrift was adrift, and Vladimir didn't like it one bit.

"Closing cargo bay doors," Ewan reported over comms.

Jenna took aim and fired her grappler gun, sending its projectile sailing toward the wreckage of Striker Three as it drifted over their heads toward the midship bulkhead, aft of her. Two more of her deck crew also fired their grapplers, getting three lines attached to the wreckage in total. Each of them quickly plugged the base of their grappling guns to the deck, and the guns automatically reeled in the extra slack in the lines, bringing the drifting object to a dead stop, floating two meters above the Manamu's forward cargo deck.

Vemados looked at the wreckage. "Where is Commander Kamenetskiv?"

Jenna looked around, as well, spotting Vladimir hanging onto the edge of the overhead cargo doors. "Up there!"

Vemados looked up, spotting the commander clinging to the overhead bay doors as they began to slowly slide closed.

"Report!" Captain Madrid demanded over comms.

"Seven souls aboard!" Jenna replied, beating the first officer to the punch.

"Prepare to jump!" Sheba replied.

"You can come down now, Commander," Vemados said.

"Not until these doors are closed!" Vladimir insisted as he pulled himself around the edge of the door and inside.

The compartment was suddenly jolted, knocking Aiden and Charnelle over. He quickly corrected himself, immediately checking that Charnelle was unharmed.

"We've got you," an unfamiliar, female voice assured him over comms.

"Thanks," Aiden replied as a wave of relief washed over him.

"Our pleasure, Ensign," the woman replied. "Welcome aboard the Manamu."

"Manamu has jumped away!" Kasma reported from Striker One's sensor station.

"YES!" Robert exclaimed. "Striker One to all ships! Recovery complete! Evasive to the rally point!"

Robert was beaming from ear to ear as he prepared to jump clear.

"Congratulations, Robert," his copilot said. "I seriously did not think it was going to work."

Robert chuckled and then looked at his copilot. "Honestly, neither did I."

\* \* \*

Nathan sat in his dimly lit quarters, staring at the blank view screen on the living room wall. His entire day had been one crisis after another. Every minute had demanded his attention. He, himself, had faced no danger, yet he felt more emotionally drained than after any battle in recent memory.

Now, when he finally had some time to himself, all he could do was sit and worry about the men and women whose lives were still on the line, deep in Dusahn-controlled space. Had it been a wise choice to risk so many for so few? He had made the decision instinctively, without any analysis whatsoever. That fact, alone, made him question himself.

But the decision had been made, and the wheels had been put into motion. Regardless of the outcome, some would agree with his decision, and some would not. But no one would question it, and that, too, was troubling. So many were willing to follow him, blindly, into danger. It was a source of both incredible pressure and incredible strength.

The door buzzer sounded. At first, he didn't respond. But when the buzzer sounded again, he picked up the remote and opened the door.

Cameron stood in the doorway, squinting to see into the darkened room. "Have you heard of lights?"

Nathan pressed another button on the remote, causing the lighting in the room to increase. "This thing is damned handy."

"Just thought you'd like to know that the rescue was successful."

"How many did we lose?" Nathan asked.

"None," she replied, sitting down on the chair next to the sofa. "Recovered all six of Striker Three's crew without injury, and no losses, *despite* the fact that it was a hot rescue."

"Really?" Nathan replied, surprised.

"Octos, gunships, even a cruiser."

"Jesus," Nathan exclaimed. "And no losses."

"Nope."

"I can't wait to read *that* after-action report."

"Me, too," Cameron agreed. "But, I'm not really surprised," she added, leaning back and settling into the chair to get comfortable. "We've got good people, not just on the Aurora but, on *every* ship."

"Good leadership, too," Nathan added.

Cameron looked at him, surprised by his modesty.

"I was referring to your suggestion to send the Gunyoki, as well," Nathan explained. "I'm sure that made the difference."

"Thank you."

"I'm actually a bit embarrassed that *I* didn't think of it," Nathan admitted.

"You're still out of practice," Cameron told him. "You've only been in command for a couple months."

"Two months and twenty-three days," Nathan corrected. "My math skills seemed to have improved, as well."

"As well?" Cameron wondered. "What else has improved?"

"I didn't tell you?"

"No, you didn't," Cameron replied. "Jessica told me you can read really fast now and that your memory has improved, but that's all."

"That's just the start," Nathan sighed. "It's like my mind is running at hyper-speed. I'm analyzing things so quickly that sometimes I don't even remember doing so. I feel like my consciousness can't keep up with my mind, if that makes any sense. I think that's why I didn't anticipate the ambush that nearly destroyed this ship. Take this rescue, for example, I'm sure I analyzed the situation before making my decision, but I don't remember doing so. I don't remember doing the math. I just said, 'do X, Y, and Z.'"

Cameron thought for a moment, unsure of how to respond. "Maybe you just need to improve the *connection* between your conscious and your subconscious."

"And how do I do that?" Nathan wondered.

"I don't have the answer to that," Cameron admitted. "Great."

"You could try just trusting yourself," Cameron suggested. "You had the same problem when you took command the first time. You've always had good instincts, even when you had no experience. Now that you *have* that experience, your instincts should be even better."

"My *instincts* got us ambushed, remember?"

"Did they?" she wondered. "Or was it your desire to ambush *them*. Emotion often clouds judgment."

"Are you suggesting that emotion should be left *out* of the decision-making process?"

"Not at all," Cameron insisted. "Without emotion, we wouldn't be human. You might as well put an AI in command. The trick is to *recognize* when your emotions are influencing your decision."

"And then do the opposite?"

"Not necessarily," Cameron replied. "Just because your emotions are influencing your decision doesn't necessarily mean it's a *bad* decision. Just know that the emotion *is* influencing you, and make sure it's not causing you to make the *wrong* decision."

"Sounds like it's easier said than done," Nathan decided.

"Probably."

"Is that what you do?"

"Of course not," Cameron replied, smiling. "I'm a cold, heartless bitch who overanalyzes everything, remember?"

"Thank God," Nathan joked.

Cameron rose from her seat to depart. "When are you

and Jess leaving?"

"As soon as everyone returns," Nathan replied.

"I don't suppose I can talk you out of this crazy plan of yours."

"Not a chance," Nathan replied, also smiling. "And emotion is *not* influencing my decision."

"Good to know," she replied, heading for the door.

"Thanks for stopping by, Cam."

"Get a few hours of sleep, Captain," she replied. "I'll take the watch."

## **CHAPTER TEN**

"This is an affront to all of Rakuen!" Mister Yasui exclaimed. "The first Orochi to return to service *must* be flown by a Rakuen!"

"Show me a Rakuen pilot who can fly it, and they will be welcomed with open arms," Mister Yokimah replied.

"Rakuen has hundreds of pilots!" Mister Yasui argued.

"Most of whom are flying Gunyoki or ships in support of the Gunyoki," Mister Yokimah replied. "None of whom can be spared, and *all* of whom have little to no experience piloting ships *other* than what they are currently flying. *These* two gentlemen are the most qualified pilots available for *this* task."

Danno Yasui looked at the two men sitting at the helm of the first Orochi to be returned to operation. His entire adult life had been spent maintaining the Orochi fleet, keeping it ready. Their return to service was the fulfillment of his lifelong dream and now, the glory of that moment was being taken away from him. He looked at Ito Yokimah with pleading eyes. "Mister Yokimah, please..."

"We will have the ceremony that the Orochis' return to service *deserves* and that our people *need*," Ito promised, placing a reassuring hand on Danno's shoulder. "And it will be with a Rakuen pilot at the controls, along with a Neramesean copilot."

"But..."

"But..." Ito interrupted, "we cannot afford for that first flight to have *any* problems. Our people already fear for our safety, especially with the Aurora so badly damaged. They

must not have *any* reason to doubt the reliability of the Orochi."

"I swear to you, this ship will fly *without* failure," Danno promised.

"You and I have *no doubt* that the *Rakuen* systems in this ship will function perfectly," Ito agreed, "but can you say the same about the *foreign* technologies that have been integrated into this vessel?"

Danno looked down, sighing. He looked back up at Ito, shaking his head. "I do not even *understand* many of their technologies," he admitted.

"There is no shame in that, my friend," Ito assured him. "We will let these people test their additions since the result will be Orochi that are far more powerful than we ever imagined. The entire Rogen system will have the space force it *needs* and *deserves*, and it will be thanks to you, Danno Yasui."

Danno sighed again. "Of course," he agreed begrudgingly. "Then, you will assist these men in testing this ship?" Ito asked. "For Rakuen?"

"For Rakuen."

Ito smiled, turning Danno to face forward and walking him to the helm. "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce Danno Yasui. He is the director of the Orochi fleet and is directly responsible for its resurrection. There is no one who knows more about the Orochi. Mister Yasui, may I present two of the best pilots in the Karuzari Alliance: Joshua Hayes and Loki Sheehan."

"An honor," Danno said, bowing his head slightly in the typical Rakuen manner.

Although Josh only briefly acknowledged the introduction before turning back to his console, Loki stood, a broad smile on his face.

"The honor is all mine, Mister Yasui," Loki insisted, bowing in similar fashion. "I have read *all* of your articles on the Orochi and have found each of them fascinating."

"Thank you, Mister Sheehan."

"Never in a million years did I ever dare to dream that I might someday pilot one of these incredible ships," Loki continued.

Ito smiled, noticing that Loki's enthusiasm was having a positive effect on Danno.

"In the original Rakuen?"

"Of course," Loki replied.

Danno nodded, his reluctance to trust these two young men fading fast. "Then, you are confident you can safely pilot this ship?"

"I would not have agreed to do so, were I not."

"And you?" Danno wondered, his question directed at Josh. "Mister Hayes, is it? You have read them, as well?"

"Only the operations manuals," Josh replied, his attention still on the console as he conducted his preflight systems checks. "The Angla versions."

"Are *you* confident that you can safely pilot this vessel, as well?"

"If it flies, I can pilot it," Josh replied confidently. "Safely? Now that's another matter altogether."

Danno immediately became concerned.

"He is kidding, Danno," Ito assured him. "The enthusiasm of youth."

"Mister Hayes is actually the best pilot I have ever seen," Loki added, hoping to quell Mister Yasui's fears. "Trust me, sir, the honor of the Orochi could not be in better hands."

Danno deliberated for a moment as he watched Josh go through his pre-start sequence as if he had done it a thousand times before. "Very well, I will leave you both to your duties."

"You are welcome to come with us," Loki offered.

"Thank you, no. My place is on the ground, monitoring your telemetry. I have many more Orochi yet to bring to life, and the data from your flights will be of great use."

"I am honored to be a part of this effort," Loki replied, bowing respectfully.

"Come, Danno, let us leave these skilled, young men to their tasks," Ito suggested, gesturing toward the hatch.

"Seyeten de kyosina umiyu," Mister Yasui said to Loki before departing.

Loki bowed respectfully once again, waiting until Mister Yasui and Mister Yokimah had left the cockpit before returning to his seat.

"What was that?" Josh wondered.

"He was wishing us clear skies and fair seas," Loki explained as he took his seat.

"I get the clear skies part, but why fair seas?"

"Until we're airborne, we're still a boat," Loki reminded him as he prepared for liftoff.

"I hate boats," Josh muttered.

"Really? Why?"

"If you must know, I get seasick."

"You?" Loki teased.

"Yes, me," Josh replied, "the best pilot you've ever seen."

"Don't let it go to your head," Loki insisted. "I was just trying to put Mister Yasui at ease."

"Josh Hayes...the greatest pilot in all the universe," Josh boasted.

"Oh, jeez."

\* \* \*

"Commander?" Deliza called from the doorway to

Vladimir's office, deep within the Aurora's engineering department. "Do you have a moment?"

"For you, always," Vladimir replied, setting down his data pad. "I didn't even know you were aboard."

"Actually, I've been here since yesterday," she admitted, sitting down across the desk from him.

"Are you staying in a guest suite?"

"I haven't slept yet."

"Why not? What are you working on?"

"This," she said, handing her data pad over to Vladimir.

Vladimir looked over the code displayed on her data pad. "What program is this," he wondered, his eyes narrowing. "It is very..." He paused a moment, his eyebrows shooting up. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yes, it's an AI," she confirmed.

"From the Sugali fighter?"

"Yes."

"I heard about this from Nathan," Vladimir said. "I was planning to look at it myself when I had the time."

"You should *make* the time, Commander," Deliza urged. "Trust me."

"Is it that good?"

"They have somehow managed to strike a balance unlike any other attempted AI's I have ever heard of. It does not try to mimic the human mind. Instead, it embraces the fact that it is not *limited* by the human mental architecture."

"But it speaks to you and can carry on a conversation, can it not?"

"It can and does so quite well. In fact, it is very meticulous about *not* forming opinions, but rather just states facts or current popular theoretical understandings."

"You have tested it?"

"I have been speaking with it as I explore its coding,"

Deliza explained. "In fact, it has *helped* me to understand its own coding."

"It can analyze its own code?"

"Yes.

"Can it *change* its own code?" Vladimir wondered, a look of concern coming over his face.

"It has the *ability* but doing so is against its primary directives and would cause it to shut down."

"And it *knows* this?"

"It does," Deliza replied.

"Interesting."

"Its code is by far the most efficient I have ever seen. It is elegant, yet simple. I have yet to find any terminal loops, recursions, or any other bugs that might make it unstable."

"How is that possible?" Vladimir wondered. "Anything programmed by humans is bound to have bugs."

"Humans didn't write the code," Deliza replied. "They wrote the base kernel and its primary directives, but the AI wrote its *own* code. It's like the humans who created it gave it a drawing and asked the drawing to color itself. The AI is constantly analyzing its own code, looking for flaws, but it does not change it on its own without a human first authorizing the change."

"Why are you telling me about it?" Vladimir wondered.

"I believe we should try to integrate it into the Aurora's systems."

"Which ones?" Vladimir wondered, one eyebrow raised. "All of them."

\* \* \*

Marcus opened the door, finding Nathan standing on the other side. "Cap'n, what are you doing here? I didn't even know you were on Sanctuary."

"We arrived a little over an hour ago," Nathan said as he

walked inside. "I went to check on Miri first."

"Then I guess you already saw the kids."

"Yes. They seem quite happy, all things considered. I suspect that is in large part due to you and Neli."

"They're good kids," Marcus insisted. "Strong as hell. Must run in the family."

"Probably," Nathan agreed. "Is Neli around?"

"She's out doing the weekly shopping," Marcus replied. "She should be back in an hour, or so." Marcus noticed the solemn look on Nathan's face. "Something wrong?"

"Maybe we should sit down," Nathan suggested, gesturing toward the living area.

Marcus didn't move. "Is Josh okay?"

"Josh is fine," Nathan insisted. "When we left, he and Loki were test-flying an Orochi."

"What the hell is that?" Marcus wondered, obviously relieved.

"Part carrier, part gunship, part boat...interesting vessel, really. The Rakuen are bringing a dozen or so out of retirement."

"So, who died then?" Marcus asked, plopping down in the chair across from Nathan.

"How did you know?" Nathan wondered.

"I can see it on your face." Something suddenly dawned on him. "Where's your bodyguard? Oh, jeez, it wasn't Jessica, was it?"

"No, she's fine. She's still at the med center, talking to Lieutenant Rezhik." Nathan took a breath, sighing. "It's Dalen."

Marcus also sighed, closing his eyes. "Son of a bitch." He sighed again, then opened his eyes and looked at Nathan. "How?"

"The Dusahn started to spread out, seizing control of all

the systems in the PC. The Seiiki was on a mission on Volon when the Dusahn attacked. They rescued Naralena but took heavy damage on departure. Dalen was on the rear-deck gun at the time. He took a direct plasma blast...he died instantly."

Marcus sighed yet again, shaking his head. "This is gonna kill Neli. He was like a brother to her." Marcus took a moment, fighting back his own sorrow. "How bad was the ship damaged?"

"The Seiiki is gone," Nathan said, nearly under his breath. He suddenly felt guilty that the loss of his ship could compare with the loss of Dalen's life.

Marcus nearly lost it. "God damned that kid!"

"It wasn't Josh's fault, Marcus," Nathan insisted. "If anything, he saved everyone with his piloting skills."

"He didn't save Dalen!"

Nathan reached out and put his hand on Marcus's shoulder. "He lost his friend, but he stayed with it and got the rest down safe. You can't ask for more."

"Where'd they go down?" Marcus wondered.

"Eralit Seven Delta."

"Never heard of it."

"It's not exactly habitable," Nathan replied. "Air's too thin."

"Was there anything left?" Marcus asked. "Any wreckage?"

"I don't know. We barely got them out of there. The Dusahn tracked them and were hunting them down when we arrived. One of the Ghatazhak gave his life defending them."

Marcus was more affected than Nathan had expected. "She had some mementos on board," Marcus said. "Stuff her mother left her."

"Someday, we'll go back and check the wreckage," Nathan promised. "But for *now*, it's still under Dusahn control."

"Then we need to get those sons of bitches *out* of there," Marcus exclaimed.

"That's why I'm here," Nathan explained. "I have an idea, and I need your help."

Marcus looked over at Nathan, a determined expression on his face. "If it involves killing a few or, better yet, a *lot* of Dusahn, then count me in."

\* \* \*

Two flashes of blue-white light appeared well beyond the orbit of Kaen, the furthest gas giant from its parent star, Biali. The two medium-sized cargo ships, which appeared from behind the flashes, were a good two light hours from Ahka, and since the Ahka had no patrols, it was unlikely they would be noticed until well after their mission had concluded.

"Jump complete," the Inman's pilot reported from the cargo ship's helm.

"The Gervais?" Captain Seppi asked over his shoulder.

"In position, two clicks off our port, stern quarter," the sensor officer replied. "Reapers and Nighthawks just jumped in, as well."

Captain Seppi pressed the intercom button on the arm of his command chair. "Seppi to Verbeek, we are in position just beyond Kaen."

"Eagles are ready for launch, Captain," Commander Verbeek replied.

"Open the bay doors," the captain instructed his systems officer.

"The Inman and the Gervais are launching Eagles," the Nighthawk's AI announced over Commander Prechitt's helmet comms.

"Thank you, Max," Commander Prechitt replied. "Nighthawk One to all strike elements. Thirty seconds to attack jump."

"We'll be right behind you," Lieutenant Commander Manes replied from Reaper One.

Commander Prechitt looked to his right, spotting his wingman, then to his left at the other pair of Sugali Nighthawks, led by Talisha Sane. "How are you doing, Talisha?"

"More nervous than I thought I'd be," she admitted over comms. "I figured this would be easy, after that last attack."

"You were defending yourself," the commander explained. "It's easy to step up and fight when you have no choice. It's a lot harder when you *choose* to go in harm's way."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"You don't have to do this, you know," the commander reminded her. "Between us and the Eagles, we've got this pretty much covered."

"No, I need to do this," Talisha insisted. "If I'm going to help teach the Casbons to fly these ships into danger, I need to see what it's like for myself."

"You just have to teach them to *fly*," the commander said. "It's *our* job to teach them to fight."

"You know that's not true, Commander," Talisha replied, "but I do appreciate your concern."

"And we appreciate your assistance," the commander

assured her. "Five seconds to jump. Max, raise shields as soon as we come out of the jump."

"Understood," Max replied as the Nighthawk jumped toward Ahka.

"Nighthawks have jumped," Ensign Weston reported. "Twenty seconds to jump."

"If you would have told me a month ago that we'd be bombing someplace we'd never heard of, over a thousand light years from Earth, I'd have said you were nuts," Lieutenant Haddix declared.

Ensign Weston smiled. "Five seconds..."

Talisha's Nighthawk shook violently as if she had just run off the road.

"Damn, that's some thick atmosphere!" she declared.

"Shields are up, locking on target packages," her AI reported.

"Stay low, under their air defense targeting sensors," Commander Prechitt instructed over comms.

"Good target locks," Ensign Russon announced from Nighthawk Two.

"I've got good locks, as well," Talisha's wingman reported.

"Target packages are locked," Leta announced. "Weapons are ready to launch."

"Weapons free!" Commander Prechitt ordered.
"Launching missiles!"

"Nighthawk Two, launching missiles!"

"Nighthawk Three, launching missiles," Talisha announced as she pressed the launch button.

"Nighthawk Four, launching missiles."

Talisha felt her fighter's flight controls change slightly as four missiles dropped away from her fighter and streaked ahead of her, fanning out toward their unsuspecting targets. She immediately pulled up and rolled slightly left, as the mission plan instructed, and jumped to her turn waypoint. In the blink of an eye, she was able to relax a bit, now more than one thousand kilometers from the targets and any defenses. Not a single shot had been fired at them. They hadn't even been in Ahka airspace long enough for the Ahka defenses to paint them.

She wondered why she had been so nervous.

The weather on Ahka was cold and overcast that morning, with ceilings as low as one hundred meters in some places. Even the hills were covered by clouds. As thunderstorms were forecast, no one took note of a distant clap of thunder.

Only seconds after the thunder, the high-pitched whine of numerous rocket motors could be heard. They were faint at first but grew rapidly louder as they approached. Missiles broke through the low-hanging clouds, slamming into the numerous surface-to-air missile launchers located throughout the city of Ahka, exploding in brilliant flashes of yellow and white.

"Holy shit!" Ensign LaValla exclaimed over comms from Reaper Three. "Those shield busters really do the trick, don't they!"

Lieutenant Haddix glanced out his forward window as emitters located all around the Ahka spaceport exploded in showers of sparks, overloaded by the incredible amount of energy dumped into them by Alliance ordnance.

"Two, bombs away!" Reaper Two reported.

"Three, bombs away!"

"Four, bombs away!"

"Targets locked," Ensign Weston announced.

"Five, bombs away!"

"Release," the lieutenant instructed.

Ensign Weston pressed the launch button, sending Reaper Six's weapons.

"Six, bombs away," the lieutenant followed.

Massive shield sections across the Ahka spaceport fell, one by one, as they were struck by bombs from the unknown assailants. By the third Reaper's pass, the entire facility was unshielded, and the fourth ship's bombs steered directly toward the Ahka Raiders on the ground, destroying multiple targets with single strikes.

Flight crews ran across the tarmac, in haphazard fashion, while their ships exploded all around them, desperately trying to reach their vessels so they could defend their world. But the Ahka were ill-prepared. No one had dared attack the Ahka...until now.

Commander Verbeek's Super Eagle fighter shook as it came out of the jump and suddenly found itself in the abnormally thick atmosphere of Ahka. A moment later, his inertial dampeners had adjusted to the changed environment.

His fighter swooped in low, skimming the hilly surface of Ahka, darting in and out of the low-hanging clouds. The commander kept his eyes on his terrain-following sensors, weaving his tiny fighter in between the various rises in the changing landscape.

Seconds after coming out of his jump, the hills of Ahka fell away, and what was left of the airbase lay before him. Of the twenty-plus Ahka raiders that had been on the surface, only three of them had escaped destruction and were attempting to take off.

"Not so fast," the commander muttered to himself. With only the flick of a switch, a confirmation signal on his display, and the touch of a button on his flight control stick, those three raiders met their fates, as well.

The commander pitched up and pressed his jump button, smiling. This had been way too easy.

Commander Prechitt glanced at his tactical display as his ship jumped back in over the city of Ahka. The only icons on the display were those of the other three Nighthawks accompanying him on this final pass. Below him, fires burned all over the city, especially at the spaceport.

"Max, all frequencies, and channels, and translate into all known languages," the commander instructed.

"All frequencies, channels, and languages," Max confirmed.

The commander took a deep breath. "Attention, people of Ahka. This is Commander Prechitt of the Karuzari Alliance. Casbon is now a member of our alliance and, as such, is under our protection. You shall immediately discontinue all hostile actions against the Casbons. If you do not comply, we will destroy *all* of your industrial infrastructure. This is your only warning."

"Short and direct," the commander's AI commented.

Commander Prechitt smiled as he pitched up to jump away, hopefully for good. "Thanks, Max."

\* \* \*

"Commander Prechitt reports that the attack on Ahka was a complete success. All surface-based defenses and raiders were destroyed, and as best they can tell, there were no civilian casualties," Cameron reported.

"Any friendly casualties?" Nathan asked from the head of the conference table in the command briefing room.

"None. In fact, our forces were in and out so quickly, the Ahka never got a shot off," Cameron replied.

"And the message was delivered?"

"Broadcast in all languages, across all frequencies and channels."

"Let's hope it works."

"At the very least, it will be several months before the Ahka will be able to retaliate," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda commented.

"That should be enough time for Commander Prechitt to train the Casbons to defend themselves," Cameron added.

"How long until our Reapers return?" Nathan asked.

"They should return by tomorrow morning," Cameron assured him.

"Good." Nathan looked at the others. "Anything else?"

"We have some intel from Takara," Jessica said.

Lieutenant Commander Shinoda looked surprised.

"Lieutenant Commander?" Nathan inquired, noticing his expression.

"Uh, yes, but not all of it has been confirmed."

"Let's hear it anyway," Nathan insisted.

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant commander replied. "It seems that several nobles have been arrested and executed over the last few days."

"The Dusahn turning up the heat on them?" Nathan wondered.

"Perhaps. The odd thing is that it's only happening to the nobles who stood *against* Casimir."

Nathan's eyebrow shot up. "What do you mean by, *stood* against Casimir?"

"The nobles who sponsored his execution," the lieutenant commander clarified.

"Really," Nathan replied, thinking for a moment. "Forgive me if I'm not overly concerned about this."

"This may be what General Telles meant by *unfinished* business," Jessica commented.

Nathan looked at her, both eyebrows raised. "You think Telles is behind this?"

"It's a strong possibility," Jessica admitted.

"Revenge is not like him," Nathan insisted.

"I don't think it's about revenge," Jessica explained. "Lord Mahtize is the only noble who sponsored Casimir's assassination who has *not* been arrested."

"The one who was feeding us intel through Terig Espan?" Cameron wondered.

"Yup."

"You think Telles is trying to force him into helping us?" Nathan asked.

"It makes sense," Jessica replied. "However, I'm sure the irony hasn't escaped the general."

"But Mahtize turned on Espan, didn't he?" Cameron said. "Why should we trust him now?"

"When he turned on Terig, he thought he was in the driver's seat. After all, Terig was *his* employee and no threat to him. *Telles*, on the other hand, *is* a threat to him, as demonstrated by the arrest of every other noble who sponsored the assassination of Prince Casimir, not to

mention that we slipped into his office without detection. You should have seen Mahtize's face. Scared the shit out of him."

"I'd still want verification of any intel he sends us," Cameron insisted.

"No doubt," Nathan agreed. "Anything else?"

"We're also noticing a *lot* of movement in the Dusahn fleet," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda replied. "They're moving ships from system to system at an increased rate. We believe they are trying to maintain control of all the systems in the Pentaurus cluster, despite the fact that they do not have enough ships to do so."

"Any pattern to the movement?" Cameron wondered.

"It looks like they're trying to make a warship present in every system at least once per day, sometimes twice," Jessica said.

"It should be noted that their two remaining battleships rarely leave the Takar system and, when they do, it is only one at a time," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda added. "There is *always* at least one battleship, and a few cruisers and frigates, in the Takar system."

"When we last attacked Palee, the Dusahn moved two cruisers and several gunships to the area within the hour," Jessica said. "And octos were there in minutes."

"Yes, they are really spreading their octo fighters all over the PC as patrols," the lieutenant commander agreed.

"What's interesting about this is that the logical move would be to abandon the lesser worlds, especially those furthest from Takar, and concentrate on protecting your most valuable assets, like Takara, Corinair, etcetera," Jessica said.

"So, the Dusahn egos are just as big as those of the Jung," Nathan decided.

"Seems so," Jessica agreed.

"Then, we have to keep up with the hit-and-run raids," Nathan decided.

Cameron looked alarmed. "We only have two Strikers left."

"We still have lots of Gunyoki," Nathan reminded her. "And soon we'll have a few Orochi, as well."

"The Orochi are being resurrected to defend Rakuen," Cameron pointed out.

"The Dusahn *are* the only threat," Nathan pointed out. "The more we harass them, the more uncertain they will be about sending their ships away for several days. They would be too vulnerable."

"We'd better make damned sure there are no Dusahn ships nearby before we send the Orochi out of the Rogen system," Cameron said.

\* \* \*

"You do realize Siggy is likely to shoot you on sight," Marcus reminded Nathan as they sat in the back of the Reaper.

"That's why we brought *her*," Nathan replied, pointing to Jessica.

"No insult intended, Jess, but Siggy don't travel alone. He'll be surrounded by hired guns."

"I think I can handle it," Jessica said with a smile.

"One minute to insertion jump," Lieutenant Haddix announced from Reaper Six's cockpit.

"How do I look?" Jessica asked.

"Too clean for Haven," Marcus said. "Soon as we hit the ground, you need to dirty up a bit. You too, Cap'n," he added, looking at Nathan. "Clean people draw attention on Haven."

"It's a fifty-kilometer drive to town, in an open-cabin

vehicle," Nathan reminded him. "I'm pretty sure we'll be dusty enough by the time we get there."

"Twenty seconds."

Jessica pulled her sidearm, checking its charge.

"It's a cold LZ, Jess," Nathan said.

"You hope."

Marcus checked his sidearm, as well, and Nathan followed suit.

"Ten seconds," Ensign Weston warned.

Jessica moved over to the side hatch. "Ready at the door." "*Jumping in three...*"

Nathan and Marcus moved in behind Jessica.

"Two.....jumping."

Jessica tensed up, her hand hovering over the hatch controls. The Reaper lurched as it suddenly found itself in Haven's atmosphere, bouncing in the evening breezes. The ship pitched up and its four engine pods screamed at full power as it decelerated.

"Pop the door!" the ensign instructed.

Jessica slapped the hatch button, and the large, metal hatch slid aft. The hot, dusty air of Haven rushed into the back cabin of their Reaper, forcing Jessica to grip the overhead rail more tightly to steady herself.

The Reaper nosed back down, its engines throttling down slightly as it settled into a hover a meter above the surface.

"Scope is clear! Go, go, go!" Ensign Weston barked.

Jessica was the first out, jumping to the ground and landing in a crouch. She immediately headed away from the hovering Reaper, making room for the others. Nathan was next, also landing in a crouch and followed her toward the side of the clearing. Marcus jumped from the hovering Reaper, landing with far less aplomb.

The three of them scurried to the edge of the clearing as

the Reaper began to climb and accelerate forward.

"See you tomorrow," Ensign Weston called over comms just before the Reaper jumped away, leaving the canyon eerily quiet.

Jessica pulled out her handheld scanner, sweeping it around three hundred and sixty degrees. "The area's clear," she reported. "Our ride should be about two clicks that way," she added, pointing to her left.

"Pretty good insertion point," Nathan commented. "Deep, narrow canyon, well off the usual orbits."

"It'd be better if it was closer to town," Marcus grumbled. "And why the hell is our ride two clicks away?"

"That's the nearest cave to this LZ," Jessica explained as she placed her scanner in her jacket pocket. "Sun will be up in a couple hours. We need to be well away from this canyon by then."

"Lead the way," Nathan insisted.

\* \* \*

Nathan stood next to their vehicle, looking at the dilapidated mud-brick building.

"This the place?" Jessica asked, coming around the vehicle to stand next to him.

"Still just as ugly as before," Marcus grumbled.

"It's Haven, Marcus," Nathan replied, "everything is ugly."

"You sure about this, Cap'n?" Marcus asked, yet again.

Nathan didn't reply.

"Terms of engagement?" Jessica wondered.

"Kill anyone you feel is a threat," Nathan replied without hesitation.

"Now that is the right way to deal with Siggy," Marcus agreed.

"Anyone except Siggy," Nathan added as he started up

the steps.

"I like those rules," Jessica said, winking at Marcus.

Marcus just shook his head as he followed them inside.

The building was once a hotel and the lobby reflected that. However, it had been a while since it had seen any maintenance. The entire room was dusty, just like everywhere else on Haven. What little furniture there was appeared to be in disrepair.

Nathan strode confidently across the open floor toward the nefarious-looking man sitting behind the front counter, the sound of all three of their footfalls echoing through the lobby. The man behind the counter looked up briefly but offered no hint of a reaction. By the time they reached the counter, two armed thugs appeared in doorways to their right and left, both of them offering a menacing gaze as their only greeting.

The man behind the counter looked up again, leaning back in his chair, seemingly uninterested in Nathan's presence. "What do you want?"

"I want to speak with Siggy," Nathan replied.

"Sorry, can't help you." The man leaned to one side, peeking around Nathan to get a better look at Jessica. "Now, *her* I can help," he added, a lascivious grin on his unshaven face.

"Tell Siggy, Connor Tuplo wants to talk business," Nathan insisted.

The man behind the counter exchanged glances with the armed man on the right, smiling. "Why don't you send her over here to me and we'll talk," he suggested.

Nathan looked sideways at Jessica, who immediately hopped up onto the counter, picked her feet up high, and spun around, stepping back down on the other side. She strutted over to the man, saddling up alongside him in a

seductive manner. In a flash, her sidearm was in hand, its muzzle at the man's temple, the whine of its power cell charging up, loud enough for everyone to hear.

The two armed men on either side reacted, pulling their own weapons to defend their cohort, but they were too slow.

"Bad idea," Marcus warned, his weapon charged and aimed at the man on the right.

"Holster that thing or I burn you down right where you stand," Nathan said, his own weapon aimed at the man on the left.

Jessica moved the muzzle of her weapon from the man's temple to his groin. "Tell them to do it or you'll have nothing left to play with when you're alone."

"Stand down!" the man barked, his voice slightly more high-pitched than one might expect.

The other two men hesitated.

"Three seconds," Nathan warned. "Two.....one....."

The man Nathan was aiming at was the first to give, slowly taking his finger off the trigger and lowering his weapon carefully back into its holster.

"Turn it off," Nathan added. The man complied.

"This is bullshit," the other armed man complained, his weapon still aimed at Marcus.

"For Christ's sake, Donti!" the man who was about to lose his manhood begged. "Do as they say!"

"Siggy's not going to like this," the other man said as he, too, lowered his weapon.

"Oh, he'll like it," Nathan insisted. "Give him a call."

The man slowly reached for the intercom.

"Actually," Jessica said, causing the man to freeze again, "tell Siggy to come down here to talk to us."

Nathan's eyebrow rose.

"I like the layout," she told him. "A bit more room to operate, if you know what I mean."

"Siggy don't come down," the man to the left insisted.

"We'll see," Jessica replied.

"Yeah," Siggy grumbled over the intercom.

"Uh, there's some people here to see you, Siggy," the man told him.

"What people?"

"Two guys and a girl. One of them says his name is Connor Tuplo."

There was a moment of silence. "Long, brown, scraggly hair and beard?" Siggy finally asked.

"Brown hair, but short and no beard."

"Tell him to fuck off..." Siggy insisted.

"I don't think he's going..."

"If he doesn't leave, kill them all."

"Uh, I can't do that, Siggy."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Cuz one of them has a gun to my privates."

Siggy chortled. "Ask him what he failed to deliver last time."

The man who feared for his manhood looked with pleading eyes at Nathan.

"Fifty mini-ZPEDs," Nathan replied.

"Fifty mini-ZPEDs," the man behind the counter reported over the intercom.

Again, there was a moment of silence. "Let me guess, there's an old, scruffy-looking, fat guy with them, right?"

"I ain't fat," Marcus grumbled.

"Yeah."

"You got a lot of nerve coming here, Tuplo!" Siggy yelled over the intercom.

Nathan did not react.

"Send them up," Siggy instructed.

Jessica shook her head, pushing the muzzle of her weapon more firmly against the man's groin.

"Uh, they want to meet you down here," the man said in a squeaky voice.

"Jesus H Sebastian God!" Siggy exclaimed. "This better be good, Tuplo!" The intercom went dead.

"He's going to come down with more men," Jessica insisted, withdrawing her weapon from the man's groin. The man started to relax, and Jessica smacked him with the butt of her weapon, knocking him out.

"DON'T!" Nathan barked as the other two men flinched, feigning toward their weapons again. "Drop your gun belts around your ankles!" he ordered. "Do it now!"

Jessica moved over toward the side door, coming up behind the man on the left. She bent over and grabbed his gun belt, yanking on it and toppling the man over.

Nathan quickly kicked the man in the face, knocking him out, as well.

"Step out of the belt," Marcus told the man on the right.

"You realize you're a dead man," the man told Marcus.

"Two choices," Marcus told him, "leave now or die now."

The man sneered at Marcus and then headed toward the front door.

"I got the elevators," Marcus announced, moving to his right.

Nathan moved to the left side of the grand staircase while Jessica went to the right. They could already hear footfalls as several men came quickly down the stairs.

Jessica listened to the footfalls for a moment, then held up four fingers at Nathan.

Nathan nodded, readying his weapon.

Seconds later, the first two men appeared. Jessica was the

first to fire, taking the nearest man out with a single shot to the man's head, burning a hole right through it. Nathan followed suit, putting two in the left-most guard's chest, sending him toppling over.

Jessica fired two more times, dropping the other two guards on either side of Siggy, who froze in the middle of the stairs.

Nathan stepped out into the open, his weapon back in its holster. "Good to see you, Siggy."

Siggy looked at his fallen men. "I see you've been spending time at the gun range, Tuplo." He looked at Nathan. "Good choice, losing the hair and the beard. Makes you look almost respectable." Siggy sauntered the rest of the way down the stairs, doing his best not to look alarmed. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Fifty mini-ZPEDs," Nathan replied. "And Tuplo was my alias. The name is Scott. Nathan Scott."

\* \* \*

Aiden and his crew stood at the dock, staring at the Orochi before them. "This is the weirdest looking spaceship I've ever seen."

"Are you sure it even *is* a spaceship?" Ashwini wondered.

"It is floating on the water," Ledge agreed.

"It's a water world," Aiden reminded them. "Where the hell did you expect them to park it?"

"Think you can fly it?" Ali asked.

"Shouldn't be too hard," Aiden replied, feigning confidence.

"It's a breeze," a voice from behind said.

They all turned around, spotting Josh and Loki approaching.

"Damn thing is mostly automated," Josh continued. "Push a couple buttons and away you go."

"Hi, Loki Sheehan," Loki said, extending his hand to Aiden.

"Aiden Walsh. You guys have flown this thing?"

"We've spent the last week putting the first four ships through trials."

"Did you get any training on them beforehand?" Charnelle wondered.

"Just the manuals," Josh replied. "Like I said, they're easy to fly. They're basically just cargo ships with guns."

"And missiles," Loki added. "Jump missiles."

Josh smiled. "Gonna surprise the hell out of the Dusahn."

"How many does it take to operate one?" Kenji wondered.

"Single pilot, a systems officer, and two weapons officers," Josh explained. "One for missiles, and one for guns."

"Technically, the Orochi were designed to be operated by a crew of ten, but that was when they were carrying Gunyoki fighters."

"These things carried Gunyoki?" Aiden asked in disbelief. "Doesn't seem big enough."

"The original Gunyoki were much smaller," Loki replied.

Josh could tell that Loki was about to unleash the entire history of both the Gunyoki and the Orochi on the unsuspecting group, and decided to step in to save them. "A full crew under their current configuration would be six, which would include an engineer and a sensor and communications officer. Since we're shorthanded, they've scratched the engineer and rolled the duties of the sensor-comms officer into the systems officer."

"No engineer?" Ashwini objected. "That's insane."

"Actually, since these ships will fly short missions, the responsibilities of a dedicated engineer will be taken over

by ground crews, here on Rakuen," Loki explained, "at least until full crews can be trained."

"In the meantime, you guys are it."

"You said there were four of these," Aiden pointed out. "That's sixteen people. I only see eleven here."

"Nine," Josh corrected. "Loki and I only did the shakedown flights. Once we train you guys on how to operate them, we go back to flying the Aurora."

"Commander Kainan's crew and the crew of Combat One will be flying lead," Loki explained. "The other four have been pulled from the Aurora's crew."

"Any other questions before we get started?" Josh asked the group.

"Just one," Aiden said. "How long do we have to learn how to operate these...spaceboats?"

"Three days," Josh replied, smiling.

Aiden looked suspicious. "Why are you smiling?"

"Because on the third day, you'll use them to attack Takara."

Aiden's face went through several contortions as he contemplated the news. "Great," he finally replied.

\* \* \*

"Yeah, I figured that out a couple weeks back, I did," Siggy said as he continued down the stairs. "You didn't need to kill them, you know."

Nathan looked at Siggy, one eyebrow raised.

"Okay, maybe you did," Siggy admitted. "You're a bit daft, you know, coming to Haven and all. It's crazy enough to come to see *me*, a man who'd just a soon shoot you in the back, but this world is crawling with Dusahn these days."

"There wasn't any ship in orbit when we arrived," Nathan pointed out.

"Lovely to see you again, Marcus," Siggy said, spotting

Marcus coming out from the elevator alcove.

"Wish I could say the same."

"And who might this be?" Siggy wondered, checking out Jessica.

"My tactical officer, Jessica Nash."

Siggy looked surprised. "The one who popped crazy Caius? That was a right good shot, that was." Siggy looked at Nathan again. "She must be a badass, that one."

"You have no idea," Nathan replied.

"Now then, you said something about paying me for those fifty ZPEDs you lost?"

"I said nothing of the sort," Nathan corrected.

"Then, why are you here?" Siggy wondered.

"I would like to replace them."

"You're going to give me fifty ZPEDs?" Siggy said. "I rather like the sound of that. I'd prefer credits, but I suppose I can sell them easily enough. Just have to do so outside the sphere of Dusahn influence, you know."

"Do whatever you like with them," Nathan told him. "But, you have to earn them first."

"Always a catch, isn't there," Siggy stated. "What is it you need from ol' Siggy?"

"A Dusahn cargo shuttle and some uniforms," Nathan replied.

Siggy laughed. "Is that all?"

"Can you do it?" Nathan wondered, "Because if you can't..."

"Oh, I can do it," Siggy insisted. "The question is, will I?"

"I'm betting for fifty ZPEDs, you will," Marcus grumbled.

Siggy paid Marcus no mind. "What is it you plan to do with it?" he asked Nathan. "And where did *you* get fifty ZPEDs?" Siggy looked Nathan in the eyes. "Did you go back to the Asa-Cafon and get them, after all?" he asked.

"Because if you did, those ZPEDs are *already* mine, and I'd be happy to pay you for them."

"I don't have fifty ZPEDs," Nathan admitted. "Not yet."

Siggy studied Nathan. "You're planning on stealing them, aren't you? Now I know you're daft! Do you know how heavily guarded that facility is?"

"You did it," Marcus pointed out, "so it can't be that damned hard."

"I didn't steal them," Siggy corrected, "at least not from the plant. The noble who owned the plant arranged the whole thing so he could make a few credits before the Dusahn took control of the plant. I was stealing them from him."

"Jesus, Siggy," Nathan said. "You didn't give a rat's ass about those people, did you? It was all about the ZPEDs the entire time!"

"Of course it was!" Siggy admitted. "A what's ass?"

"I say we burn him and find someone else," Jessica suggested.

"We can't trust anyone else," Nathan insisted.

"We can't *trust* him!" Marcus exclaimed. "That's what I've been sayin' for the last two days!"

"We *can* trust him because we *know* all he cares about is the profit," Nathan insisted. "He doesn't give a shit about right and wrong or about freedom and liberty. He'll find a way to make a credit whether the Dusahn are here or not."

"That's *not* entirely true," Siggy said. "And I should feel insulted, but I don't. After all, you are right. But the fact is, the Dusahn are not good for business. Leastways, not *my* type of business. It was hard enough smuggling shit between worlds after they took over the cluster. Now that they've spread out across the entire sector, it's damned near *impossible*! Hell, I have to survive on local business,

alone! I haven't run any contraband on or off world in nearly a month!"

"Then you'll do it," Nathan said.

Siggy thought for a moment. "It would be nice to stick it in the Dusahn and twist it around a bit, wouldn't it?" He looked at Nathan. "You're going to need some right fine soldier types."

"Will a hundred Ghatazhak do?" Nathan wondered.

Siggy looked impressed. "I expect they would but a Dusahn cargo shuttle has a crew of four, sometimes six. Bring more than that and they'll figure something foul is about. And you're going to need a diversion...a *big* one."

"We planned on it," Nathan assured him.

"And you can only have it for twelve hours," Siggy added. "That's how long they're usually down for. Any longer and they'll know something is up, and report it missing. Then they'll shoot you down the moment you show up anywhere."

"We'll only need it for eight."

"How soon?" Siggy wondered.

"Tomorrow?"

"A bit short notice, but alright."

"What's to keep him from turning us over to the Dusahn for the reward?" Jessica wondered.

"There's a reward?" Siggy wondered.

"It's not even half what you'll make selling those ZPEDs *outside* the PC," Nathan insisted. "And I'll even loan you a ship to haul them."

Siggy smiled as he shook Nathan's hand. "A pleasure doing business with ya, Cap'n Scott."

Nathan handed him a data chip. "You'll find us in the Rogen system."

"Never heard of it."

"Location and course are on the chip," Nathan told him. "Deliver it in *forty-seven* Haven hours."

"And if I don't?" Siggy wondered.

"Then you'll be dealing with the Dusahn for a lot longer than you'd like," Nathan said, turning to exit.

Marcus followed Nathan, then Jessica.

Jessica stopped when she passed Siggy. "If you cross us, I'll be popping one in *your* head, as well."

"I'll keep that in mind, love," Siggy replied.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

"Still don't know why you needed me on that trip," Marcus grumbled as he stepped down from Reaper Six onto the Aurora's deck.

"No one knows Haven, *or* people like Siggy, like *you* do, Marcus," Nathan insisted.

"I'm heading for the showers," Jessica announced as she headed for the forward hatch to the hangar bay.

"I didn't do nothin'," Marcus insisted.

"Luckily, we didn't need you to."

"Can I go back to Sanctuary, then?"

"Why the hurry?" Nathan wondered as they headed forward.

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"I swear."

"I'm kinda likin' the life. Good night's sleep each night. Good food. No one shootin' at you. Nothin' to fix. It kinda grows on you. Them kids aren't bad, either. Kinda reminds me of when Josh was little."

Nathan didn't respond.

Marcus looked at him. "You promised."

"I'm trying," Nathan said, fighting back a broad smile. "Shower up and get changed," he told Marcus. "I'll get you back to the good life, straight away. After all, if anyone deserves it, it's you," he added, patting him on the back. Nathan stopped, spotting General Telles climbing down from another recently-arrived Reaper. He waited a moment for the general to collect his things and then headed over to

walk with him. "General," he called out as he approached. "I take it your time on Takara was productive?"

"I believe so," General Telles replied, looking over Nathan's outfit. "Been away, I see."

"A little side trip."

"The flight crew got me up to speed on the way back," General Telles said. "I am glad you and the Aurora survived the attack."

"Attacks," Nathan corrected.

"Indeed. I understand the Aurora is badly damaged. Three reactors, is it?"

"Don't worry, I have a plan," Nathan insisted.

"I am certain that you do," the general replied.

"I'm a little confused," Nathan said. "I thought we agreed that we weren't going to assassinate anyone else?"

"I assassinated no one," General Telles insisted. "I simply provided actionable intelligence to the Dusahn, and they did what they thought best, given the nature of each."

"And the fact that every one of those nobles were party to Casimir's assassination had nothing to do with it, I suppose."

"It had everything to do with it," General Telles admitted, "but not in the way you think."

"Then it wasn't revenge," Nathan surmised, not quite convinced.

"It was not, but it was necessary to make Lord Mahtize believe that it was. A man seeking vengeance is to be avoided at all costs." General Telles looked at Nathan. "An old Takaran saying."

"I see."

"By leaking information that I knew would lead to the executions of the nobles involved in Prince Casimir's

assassination, I increased the pressure on Lord Mahtize, forcing him to agree to continue feeding us information."

"And it worked?"

"He believes that if he does not, his treachery will *also* be revealed to the Dusahn. Whether or not he will provide actionable intelligence to us remains to be seen."

"If he doesn't," Nathan said, "then the executions of those nobles will have been unnecessary."

"A risk I am willing to take," General Telles stated plainly.

Nathan looked at the general. "I'll bet."

\* \* \*

General Telles carefully studied the images on the command briefing room's view screens. After a few moments, he spoke. "The first problem I see is that the two different plants are quite separate. We cannot even be certain they are connected on the inside, at least not in a way that suits our purpose."

"Then we may have to choose between the mini-ZPEDs or the larger versions," Cameron surmised.

"The priority is the Aurora," Nathan reminded everyone. "We can produce the mini-ZPEDs ourselves."

"We can produce the larger versions, as well," Vladimir pointed out.

"Yes, but it will require specialized facilities," Abby reminded him. "The conditions required to initiate the zero-point state are quite challenging to produce, particularly with the larger versions."

"Logic dictates that we exclude the mini-ZPEDs from the mission objective," General Telles decided. "The odds of success drop dramatically if you include them."

"Siggy's not going to be happy," Jessica commented.

"Siggy has screwed plenty of people in his miserable,

little life," Nathan said. "I have no problem screwing him on their behalf."

"Perhaps he'll feel good about helping us defeat the Dusahn?" Abby suggested.

"Doubtful," Nathan chuckled.

"The other issue I see are the four sections between the spaceport and the ZPED storage area," General Telles stated. "That means we will have to pass through at least three security checkpoints, likely more. Each one of them is a potential failure point."

"If you get through the first one, doesn't that mean you'll get through the rest?" Abby wondered.

"Different checkpoints have different levels of scrutiny," the general replied.

"The door to the bank is glass, but the door to the vault is steel," Nathan said.

"Precisely," the general agreed. "I only see one way that offers an acceptable probability of success."

"A direct ground assault," Nathan surmised.

"Precisely."

"You want to try to blast your way in?" Cameron wondered, somewhat surprised.

"Actually, it is a combination of two approaches, a direct assault and an impersonation entry," General Telles explained.

"The direct assault is just a smoke screen to create confusion," Nathan added.

"The moment the attack begins, everything will lock down," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda warned. "The insertion team will be trapped."

"The plant was built by Takarans," General Telles said.
"My specialists are quite familiar with Takaran security systems. We should have no problem bypassing them."

"But the Dusahn have had control over the plant for more than a month now," Cameron pointed out. "They could have changed those systems."

"True, but we have no evidence of any such changes," General Telles replied. "In fact, the only thing the Dusahn have done is to place their *own* security personnel on site, and those personnel are not based on Rama, but on Takara. So, reinforcements must come from Takara."

"Their fighter cover is the same way," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda pointed out. "They also come from Takara."

"We also have no evidence that the Dusahn have attempted to integrate the ZPED technology into their own ships," Jessica said.

"If you remember, we had some difficulty in making the ZPED technology work with the jump drives," Abby said. "All indications, thus far, are that the Dusahn jump drive technology is quite similar to our original jump drives. They are basically five to six years behind us in jump drive development. Quite possibly more since, until they captured Takara, they did not have the technological and industrial infrastructure to further its development."

"So, the Dusahn may not consider the ZPED facility a high-priority asset," Nathan surmised.

"While that may help, it does not negate the third requirement for this mission," General Telles said.

"Which is?" Nathan wondered.

"The facility must be destroyed."

The room fell silent.

"He is correct," Abby finally said. "The Dusahn will eventually figure out how to use ZPEDs. First in their smaller ships, then in their larger ones. At that point, defeating them will be all but impossible."

"At the very least, it will greatly escalate this conflict," Cameron added.

"Surely the Dusahn realize this?" Jessica said. "If so, we could be wrong about how much they have stepped up security."

"Zero-point energy is very difficult to develop," Abby pointed out. "It requires very complex systems just to carry out the experiments. We were lucky enough to have people who already had experience in the process and already had working ZPEDs."

"So do the Dusahn," Nathan told her.

"Yes, but ours were *willing* participants," Abby replied. "You'd be surprised how much that can make a difference. Trust me, I know. Also, the Dusahn technology is somewhat inferior to ours, and even more so when compared to Takaran technology, which creates an additional hurdle. But again, it is not a hurdle that cannot be overcome, given time."

Nathan sighed. "Then we destroy the facility, regardless of whether or not we manage to acquire the ZPEDs that we need."

"This all hinges on your associate," General Telles reminded Nathan. "If this person fails to deliver..."

"Then we simply destroy the ZPED factory," Nathan said. He looked at each of their faces. "Agreed?" When no opposition was given, he continued. "We've got fifteen hours to put this together, so let's get started."

\* \* \*

"What about the Orochi?" Nathan asked as he and Cameron entered the Aurora's bridge.

"All four are up and being trained on, now," Cameron replied. "As expected, Commander Kainan's crew has

adapted more quickly than the others, but everyone is getting the hang of it."

Nathan stopped next to the communications station. "Are they going to be ready by tomorrow?"

"If all they have to do is jump around and launch missiles then, yes. The Orochi are so automated that we could teach the galley staff to do that."

"God, no," Nathan objected. "We finally have good food." Nathan turned to Naralena. "Any message?"

"Negative, sir."

"No news is good news," Nathan stated, turning to continue to his ready room.

"I should point out that to arm all four Orochi, we're basically wiping out our jump missile inventory."

"Yeah, I thought of that," Nathan admitted, sighing as he plopped down in his seat. "Two plants are up and running and a third is due to start production in a few days, so we should be okay in a week or two."

"Let's just hope the Dusahn don't realize how wide-open we are," Cameron stated.

"How could they?" Nathan replied. "We've got all cargo traffic bound for this system offloading in the Helton system. The only ships now operating in the Rogen system are *ours*."

"There's always a way to get intel, you know that. Sooner or later, the Dusahn will find another way."

"Let's just hope that by the time they do, we seem too well defended for them to attack us again."

"You have the watch for the next few hours," Cameron told him. "I have to review the Orochi crew's training performance reports and make recommendations."

"Very well," Nathan replied as Cameron turned and headed out the door.

"Commander," Cameron greeted Vladimir. "Deliza."

"Captain," Deliza replied.

"Captain?" Vladimir called from the entrance.

Nathan looked up from his data pad. "What's up?"

Vladimir and Deliza entered the room, closing the hatch behind them.

"We've been studying the Sugali AI and the results are, well, unbelievable," Vladimir exclaimed.

"When did you have the time?" Nathan wondered. "What, with you playing hero out there, which I specifically told you *not* to do."

"Actually, it was Deliza who did most of the work," Vladimir said. "On the AI, I mean," he quickly added, "and I thought you were kidding."

"Uh-huh." Nathan looked at Deliza. "What have you discovered?"

"Only that the Sugali AI is probably the most sophisticated and well-conceived AI imaginable," Deliza replied.

"That's quite a claim."

"She's not kidding," Vladimir insisted.

"Then you agree with her?"

"Da."

"They somehow managed to make it extremely humanlike. Within minutes, you feel like you are conversing with a person, not a computer program."

"Similar technology was responsible for the bio-digital plague, you know," Nathan reminded them both.

"The big difference between Leta and any other AI is that she *understands* what she is and has no desire to be anything else. She has no true feelings, only the appropriate inflections for any given situation. But that's just scratching the surface," Deliza continued. "She can

learn at a phenomenal rate, and she can hypothesize with equal speed."

"She identified twenty-seven damaged systems that we were not even aware of," Vladimir added, "in only a *few minutes*! Several of them would have had serious consequences if they had gone undiscovered."

"You plugged her into the *entire ship*?" Nathan asked, shocked.

"Uh..." Vladimir realized he had spoken too soon.

"Without authorization?"

"We isolated all communications systems from her," Deliza assured him. "So if she was a spy, she couldn't transmit any data to the Dusahn."

"That isn't the point," Nathan told her, "and stop calling it her. It's not a person, and it certainly doesn't have a gender." Nathan looked sternly at Vladimir. "What if it took control of the ship and jumped us into Dusahn hands?"

"Our jump drive is still down," Vladimir pointed out.

"Seriously? *That's* your response?"

"It has a very robust control lattice," Deliza explained, jumping to Vladimir's defense. "We are able to deny it command ability to any system we wish. We did not give it independent flight control authorization. It can only pilot the ship if you *tell* it to."

"So you did give it flight control?"

"No," Vladimir said. "I mean, yes, but not like you think. We *had* to give her..."

Nathan held up one finger.

"...I mean *it*, access to *all* systems so it could accurately diagnose and identify needed repairs," Vladimir explained. "Nathan, it even recommended the most efficient order of repairs, probably shaving a week off our repair time."

"Even better, it can help us adapt the ZPEDs for use in

the Aurora," Deliza said. "That could get the Aurora back into action even sooner."

"That's the first thing either of you has said since you came in that I *liked*," Nathan said. He looked at Vladimir. "What's the downside?"

"That is what is so amazing!" Vladimir exclaimed. "I cannot *find* a downside."

"If we fully integrate Leta into the Aurora's systems, we can cut the crew requirements in half," Deliza explained.

Nathan thought for a moment. "Cameron would like that," he admitted. "However, I suspect she may have a harder time accepting the idea." He leaned back in his chair, looking at the both of them. "Very well," he sighed. "Sell Cameron on the idea, and I'll approve it."

"Yes, sir," Vladimir replied, turning to exit.

"Commander, a moment," Nathan said before he left.

Vladimir and Deliza exchanged glances as she departed. He then turned around to face Nathan.

"If Jessica learns you hooked that thing up to the entire ship, she's going to skin you alive. You know that, right?"

"That's why we didn't tell her."

"She'll find out eventually," Nathan warned. "You might want to avoid her for a while."

"Understood.

"And next time, no heroics. If you had died out there, the Aurora would be completely screwed."

"And if you had died out there?" Vladimir wondered.

"I'd be a martyr," Nathan replied, "and the rest of you would carry on without me."

"Don't be so sure," Vladimir replied, turning to exit again.
Nathan watched his friend depart, contemplating his words.

Nathan had memorized General Telles's mission plan in a single reading and spent the last few hours studying all the intelligence they had on Rama, hoping to find something they had overlooked that could increase their odds of success. Unfortunately, his efforts had been unsuccessful. As expected, the general was quite thorough in his planning. The only fault in the plan was its dependence on Sigmund, but that could not be helped. Time was of the essence, and Siggy was the only person he knew who could acquire the needed resources on such short notice.

"Did you even leave this room while I was gone?" Cameron asked as she entered the ready room.

Nathan leaned back in his chair. "Nope. How did the training review go?"

"They're about as good as they're going to get, in the time allotted," she replied, taking a seat. "I had them standdown to get some rest, just in case your friend shows up sooner, rather than later."

"If I know Siggy, he'll show up at the last possible moment," Nathan groaned.

"Is there a last moment?" Cameron wondered.

"I gave him forty-seven Haven hours," Nathan said.

"Why?"

"So he doesn't drag his ass," Nathan replied. "Siggy doesn't trust me, and for good reason. He'll show up a few minutes *past* the deadline, just to show that he doesn't answer to me."

"Sounds like a real winner," Cameron observed.

"Siggy's a real piece of work."

"Then why use him?"

"Because he can get what we need."

"Has it occurred to you that Siggy knows you can't fit fifty

mini-ZPEDs and four large ones in a Dusahn cargo shuttle?"

"He doesn't know we're after four large ones," Nathan told her. "For all he knows, we're after one hundred mini's...or just a bunch of cores and no reactor housings."

"Surely he suspects that you're going to screw him," Cameron said.

"Siggy expects *everyone* to screw him," Nathan replied, "but it's a small risk, with the possibility of a large payoff. That's enough for him."

"But you already screwed him once, didn't you?"

"Actually, I just failed to deliver. He screwed himself on that deal. He should have hired a bigger ship. He knew damn well that I would rescue the passengers first. He was gambling on his score, and he lost. Sure, he acted all angry, like he wanted to kill me, but he's not stupid. He knew it was his own fault. He also knew that if he *did* kill me, he'd have a hard time getting others to work for him, especially with the Dusahn around. As long as you play to his motivation, which is *always* profit, you're safe."

"I'm still not sure you should trust him," Cameron insisted. "I'm also not sure you should be going on the mission yourself."

"We talked about this, Cam," Nathan reminded her.

"As captain, you're supposed to let others do this kind of thing."

"And as leader of this rebellion, I have to inspire others to serve, and that means putting *myself* into harm's way."

"I'm not certain you're correct about that," Cameron insisted. "In fact, I think you go because you don't trust others to do it."

"I don't go on *every* dangerous mission, Cam," Nathan argued. "Only those that are critical to our success.

Besides, *I* got the Aurora into her current state, and *I'm* going to get her out of it."

"Is that what this is about?" she wondered. "Guilt?"

"More like a sense of responsibility."

"You have a responsibility to this entire Alliance, Nathan."

"If the Alliance cannot survive without me, then it is already doomed," Nathan insisted. "This alliance isn't about me, Cam, it's about the right for each world to govern themselves and to determine their own destiny. The one common denominator we've found since we've gotten back into space is that the strong still prey on the weak simply because they can. Humans have been that way throughout history. It's got to stop."

"You're trying to change human history?"

"Only it's future," Nathan replied.

"If it's been the same throughout history, what makes you think you can change it?" Cameron wondered.

"I don't know that I can," Nathan admitted. "But, I've been given opportunity after opportunity. First, I was assigned to the Aurora, then I ended up in command. I was even *resurrected*. And now, I've got these abilities. I can move better, think better, remember *everything*...all this *must* be for a reason."

"How do you know it's for this reason?" Cameron asked.

"I don't. But if no one is able to tell me what the reason is, then I have to choose one myself. *This* is the reason I choose."

"You do realize the Jung probably think the same way, as do the Dusahn. They both believe they are making humanity better for all."

"Yes, but they are wrong," Nathan insisted.

"How can you be so sure?" she wondered.

"Because I am not certain that I am correct," Nathan told

her, "more precisely, I am not certain that they *aren't* correct. Nothing is more dangerous than the person who is so resolute in their beliefs that they excuse any atrocity used to achieve them."

"But if you are *not* certain, then *why* do it?" Cameron wondered.

"Because all we *can* do is what we *believe* is right," Nathan explained, "even when we are uncertain."

"But if it *is* the right thing, and you *don't* do it, then eventually someone else will," she argued.

"Perhaps," Nathan admitted, "but given what has happened to me...to *us*, how can I turn my back and leave it for someone else to do?"

"But, if you aren't *sure* what needs to be done..."

"But I am sure that something must be done," Nathan argued, "and that's as good a place to start as any."

Cameron sighed. "I hope you're right, Nathan."

"So do I."

"Well, you've got six hours until the deadline. Maybe you should get some rest, as well," Cameron suggested.

"You're probably right," Nathan agreed, rising from his seat and heading for the hatch.

"Just promise me one thing, Nathan," Cameron said.

"What's that?"

"If you ever *become* certain, tell me, so I can knock some holes in your beliefs and bring you back to reality."

Nathan looked at her and smiled. "Deal."

\* \* \*

Nathan strode across the Aurora's main hangar deck, Cameron and Jessica in tow. Others gathered around to witness the rare sight as the inner doors opened on the starboard, large airlock, revealing a Dusahn cargo shuttle.

Ghatazhak lined up on either side of the door, weapons

charged and held ready.

Nathan looked to Cameron.

"We scanned it," she assured him. "It's empty, and we had them power down their reactor and come in on battery power, just in case."

"They could still scram their reactor and do considerable damage," Nathan pointed out.

"Which is one of the reasons I objected to this idea," Cameron reminded him.

The side hatch slid open, revealing the cavernous empty interior of the cargo shuttle. A moment later, Siggy came out of the cockpit and stepped down, followed by his pilot.

"Nice ship you have here," Siggy said. "A bit beat up, though. You sure she's still space-worthy?"

"She'll be fine," Nathan replied. "A bit late, aren't you?"

"I like to make a grand entrance," Siggy boasted.

"You brought the uniforms, as well?"

"As promised," Siggy replied. "Nice soldiers," he added, looking at the twenty Ghatazhak with weapons trained on him. "I don't suppose you hire them out on occasion."

"You'll have to ask General Telles," Nathan replied, gesturing at the general as he approached.

"Lovely to see you again, missy," Siggy said, leering at Jessica.

"Wish I could say the same," Jessica sneered.

Siggy looked at Cameron. "And who's this lovely lady?"

"Captain Taylor, my executive officer," Nathan replied. "Captain Taylor, meet Sigmund Daschew."

"Pleased, I'm sure," Cameron replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"So, you gonna show me around?" Siggy wondered. "Or maybe one of these lovely ladies would like the honor?"

"Another time," Nathan replied. "We have work to do."

"Yes, yes, yes. Let's get to it, shall we," Siggy replied.

"Excuse me?" Nathan said.

"You didn't think I was going to let you go without me, did you?" Siggy laughed.

"Not happening, Siggy," Nathan stated firmly.

"Perhaps you misunderstood," Siggy said. "You don't have a choice."

Nathan smiled. "I'm afraid it is *you* who does not understand." Nathan strolled slowly toward Siggy as he spoke. "You see, this isn't Haven. I may have needed your help to acquire this shuttle and the uniforms, but I do *not* need your help for anything beyond that. However, I have arranged for you to stay at a nice hotel on Rakuen while we are away. On us, of course."

"And if I don't agree?" Siggy asked, still feeling confident in his position.

"Then I'll have the Ghatazhak toss you out an airlock," Nathan replied calmly.

Siggy looked at the Ghatazhak, then at Jessica and Cameron. Finally, he looked back at Nathan. "What makes you think I didn't tell the Dusahn about your plans or where you're hiding?"

"One, they know where we are," Nathan replied. "Two, you wouldn't volunteer to go with us if you had warned them we were coming, and finally, you're a greedy little shit and you are still hoping that you'll profit off of this venture."

Siggy nodded a few times. "You're correct about the first two, I suppose, and partially correct about the last. However, I am quite certain that you plan to screw me in the end."

"Then, why did you come?" Nathan wondered.

"First, I'll be better off if the Dusahn are gone."

"And you believe we are the ones who can do it," Nathan surmised.

Siggy laughed. "On the contrary, I'm certain you'll fail... quite possibly with this little stunt. However, on the off chance that you *can* defeat them, I'd like to think that I was able to help in some small way."

"Ah, Siggy, is that a shred of honor showing through your crusty, scaly exterior?" Nathan joked.

"Watch it, Tuplo, I have a reputation to uphold."

"Sorry."

"Well, good luck to you all," Siggy announced. "I'm off to enjoy the wonders of Rakuen. Room service is included, right?"

"Of course," Nathan replied, rolling his eyes. "Captain Taylor, would you see to Mister Daschew's transportation?" "Do I have to?" Cameron replied.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

"How do I look?" Nathan asked as he walked toward the waiting Dusahn cargo shuttle.

"Good enough to shoot," Josh replied.

"You sure you got the right size?" Nathan teased, tugging on Josh's baggy uniform.

"I'm pretty sure he wouldn't meet the Dusahn's minimum height requirements for service," Loki joked.

"Can you reach the pedals?" Nathan added, smiling.

"Funny," Josh replied. "And for the record, this thing doesn't have any pedals. Nice goatee, by the way."

"I was going to go for a beard, but I was afraid I'd be recognized as Connor," Nathan replied.

"Just keep your face shield down, like everyone else," General Telles suggested.

Nathan looked over at Jessica, who was wearing far more gear than usual. "How the hell do you walk in all that?"

"Assistive undergarment, remember?"

"Yeah, but..."

"You sure you want to do this?" Jessica asked.

"You're leading the shield team, Telles is leading the warehouse team, and Kellen is leading the cargo bay team. Who's left that speaks Takaran?"

"Only every Ghatazhak," Jessica replied.

"It's my idea, and the future of *my* ship is on the line," Nathan replied. "I'm going."

"That's what I thought you'd say."

"Besides, you've got the hard part," Nathan added.

"Just make sure you get them to drop that shield at the

right moment," Jessica told him as she turned to head for her Reaper, "or Samu and I will be like bugs on a windshield."

"Right," Nathan replied.

"Good luck, Captain," General Telles said.

"To you, as well," Nathan replied. He turned and climbed up into the Dusahn cargo shuttle, taking a seat at the front, along with the four Ghatazhak also dressed in Dusahn uniforms. "Let's do this," he said as he activated the hatch closure mechanism.

\* \* \*

Jessica checked her partner's gear, ensuring that it was secured properly and ready for use. Once she was done, the specialist checked her gear, as well.

"Insertion jump in one minute," Ensign Weston announced from the cockpit of Reaper Six.

Jessica moved into position at the port hatch. "I can't believe we're going to do this," she muttered.

"The joys of being Ghatazhak," Specialist Samudio joked as he positioned himself at the starboard hatch.

"Thirty seconds," the ensign repeated.

"You guys ready back there?" Lieutenant Haddix inquired.

"No, but let's do it anyway," Jessica replied as she lowered her face shield and her suit pressurized. "Good seal."

"Good seal," the specialist followed.

"Ten seconds to stealth jump," Ensign Weston warned.

Jessica forced herself to breathe regularly, closing her eyes as she mentally prepared herself.

"Three.....two.....one.....jumping!"

Her eyes still closed, Jessica could imagine the Reaper suddenly transitioning from its position just outside the Tico system to its new position only a few kilometers away from the Rama ZPED factory.

"Stealth jump complete," Ensign Weston reported. "Opening side doors."

Jessica opened her eyes as the door before her slid open, revealing the starry blackness on the other side. She reached out with her right hand to grab the handrail on the outside of Reaper Six's hull, then let go of the inside rail with her left hand, allowing her body to drift outside. Once satisfied that she was floating parallel to the Reaper, she let go with her right hand.

The Reaper let out a few tiny spurts of cold thrust from her topside, causing it to drift downward away from Jessica and Specialist Samudio. A few more spurts increased its distance, causing it to distance itself from them at an even faster rate.

Jessica's breathing rate increased slightly, despite her best efforts to control it. Less than three kilometers away, an energy shield stood between her and the Rama plant. In three hours, they would reach the shield perimeter. If it was still up, the mission would be over for them.

\* \* \*

"Stealth jump complete," Ensign Jayson reported. "Beginning cold-coast approach."

"Settle in, gentlemen," Lieutenant Taren added. "It's a one-hundred-and-sixty-minute coast to the expected gopoint. Hope you brought something to read." He looked at his copilot, smiling. "I brought a movie."

Ensign Jayson turned to look through the passageway behind them, into the main cabin. All six Ghatazhak, including the general, appeared to be asleep. "Jesus," he exclaimed. "How the hell do they do that?"

"Beats the shit out of me," the lieutenant replied. "The

only place I can sleep is on my rack. To be honest, I'm a little jealous."

\* \* \*

"I'm never going to get used to this thing," Aiden complained from the helm of his Orochi. "You want to verify our position, Mando?"

The systems officer pressed several buttons, then turned to look at Aiden. "My panel says the same thing as yours. We're at the launch point."

"Sorry, I had a hard enough time trusting the auto-flight systems on the Cobras. This thing is like ten-times more automated."

"What now?" Ledge asked from the gun control station.

"Now, we have a two-and-a-half-hour wait."

"Seriously?"

"Hey, I didn't design this mission," Aiden defended, "I'm just a guy pushing buttons like the rest of you."

\*\*\*

"This is, without a doubt, the scariest thing we have ever done," Loki decided as he sat at the copilot's station of the Dusahn cargo shuttle, waiting for their turn to spring into action.

"Scarier than jumping in between shield layers of a Jung battleship?" Josh wondered.

"Yup."

"Scarier than slow-mo'ing it through Dusahn shields?"

"Yup."

"Scarier than flying through a waterfall?"

"Yup."

"Scarier than series jumping with a busted canopy?"

Loki thought for a moment. "Okay, second scariest."

"I should really pay you guys more," Nathan commented from the back.

"You should pay us, period," Josh corrected.

"One of these days," Nathan promised. He glanced at the mission clock display on the wall of the large, open cargo shuttle. "It's about that time, gentlemen."

"You think this is scary?" Josh said. "How'd you like to be with Jess right now?"

"I'm fine here, thanks," Loki replied. "Jump point in twenty seconds."

"Be ready on that trace scanner," Nathan reminded them. "We don't want to run into her."

"Trace scanner is ready," Loki assured him. "Jumping in three.....two.....one....."

\* \* \*

Jessica had never felt so alone. After nearly three hours of drifting silently through the cold of outer space, she had finally won her battle with her respiratory rate. She could see Specialist Samudio a few meters to her right, but they were maintaining radio silence, and he had taken a Ghatazhak nap most of the journey. She hoped he would wake in time. Of course, if something went wrong, and Nathan was unable to get the Rama shield opened for them, it might be better that he remain asleep, at least then he wouldn't feel it.

She glanced at the mission time display on the inside of her helmet view screen. They were less than three minutes from the shield, and her suit's passive sensors were already picking up its trace energy signature, and it was growing stronger with each passing second.

Jessica's breathing rate began to increase at nearly the same rate that the approaching shields trace energy signature rose.

Two minutes to go.

There was nothing Jessica could do but wait and pray.

Their fate had been *entirely* in Nathan's hands from the moment they stepped out of their Reaper.

At ninety seconds out, her life began to flash before her eyes: her days on the beach as a teenager, her time in the academy, the night she met Nathan, their adventures battling the Jung, and everything she had gone through to save him.

One minute.

Oh, God.

A flash of blue-white light appeared only a few hundred kilometers to her left, nearly blinding her.

"YES!" she exclaimed, though no one could hear her. Her breathing quickened again. The shield was not yet open.

\* \* \*

"Jump complete," Loki announced. "Rama, dead ahead, five clicks."

The radio immediately squawked with a request from a controller that sounded angry.

"What do we do?" Loki asked.

"Patch me in," Nathan instructed. A moment later, Loki nodded at him, and Nathan barked a string of commands in Jung. The controller replied, his tone turning defensive, but Nathan held his ground, barking additional orders in Jung even more emphatically than before.

"Holy crap, it worked," Josh exclaimed. "They're opening a hole in their shields."

"Do you have them?" Nathan asked Loki.

"I've got them on the trace scanner," Loki assured him.

"Matching their speed and moving in alongside them," Josh reported.

"I didn't know you spoke Jung," Loki said.

"I picked it up during my time on Nor-Patri," Nathan replied.

Jessica felt a wave of elation sweep over her as the sensor display on her visor showed a hole opening up in the Rama shield. The Dusahn cargo shuttle maneuvered in close to them, putting itself between them and the Rama ZPED facility's sensor array, reducing their chances of detection even further.

She looked over at Specialist Samudio, who gave her a thumbs-up. As they passed through the shield perimeter, she wondered if she would ever develop the incredibly accurate internal clock that all the Ghatazhak seemed to possess.

\* \* \*

"Jesus," Loki exclaimed as they approached the outer doors to the hangar bay airlock.

"What is it?" Nathan asked.

"We were just overflown by six octos."

"That'll put hair on your chest," Josh laughed.

"You still got Jess and Samu?" Nathan asked.

"They're still on course, but their signal is fading fast," Loki replied.

"I hope those octos didn't see them," Nathan said.

"Doubtful," Loki replied. "They're still holding their course, and I'm not picking up any alert chatter."

"Would you even understand it if you did?" Josh wondered as he guided the ship into the transfer airlock.

"No, but I'm sure I'd notice their sense of urgency."

"Dang, this thing is smooth," Josh said as they touched down with barely a bump. "Antigrav' drives are great!" He turned to look at Nathan. "We really need to put these in our ships."

"Stay focused," Nathan insisted. He watched through the

front windows of the shuttle as the airlock cycled them into the main hangar bay.

"This thing is on auto now," Josh realized, taking his hands off the controls. "If you don't kill that shit, we won't be taking off again."

"I know," Nathan assured him as he turned aft. "We're up, gentlemen," he announced to the four Ghatazhak in Dusahn uniforms, in the back of the cargo shuttle.

"Uh, Cap'n," Josh said. "What do we do if they call us on comms?"

"Just pretend to be NORDO," Nathan replied as he headed for the side hatch.

"What the hell is NORDO?" Josh asked Loki.

"Must be some kind of acronym for no-comms," Loki guessed.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense at all."

Jessica fired her attitude thrusters, flipping herself over, so she would be falling feet first toward the asteroid base. A glance at the tactical display on her visor advised that their closure rate was increasing, due to the asteroid's weak gravity.

She watched the countdown timer on her visor, waiting until it reached zero before firing the deceleration thrusters on the sides of her boots. She felt a shove against her legs, a force pushing upward as if she had already landed. The asteroid continued to approach, but her closure rate decreased with each passing second that her boot thrusters burned.

She only hoped that she was already too close to the asteroid for its sensors to pick up her thruster burn.

After a few seconds, her boot thrusters ran out of

propellant, but they had done their job. She tightened up her legs, bending at the knees in preparation for touchdown. When her feet hit the rocky surface, she could feel the assistive undergarment tense up as the thousands of tubules lining the fabric pressurized to help her absorb the energy of the impact.

She bent her knees even more, reaching a squatting position, but was careful not to push back against the force. Had she done so, she might have launched herself off the asteroid for good.

Jessica felt a wave of relief wash over her and turned to check on Specialist Samudio, who also appeared to be in good shape. Without missing a beat, she headed out across the surface toward the nearby shield generator.

"Ready for first launch sequence," Ali reported from the missile station in Orochi Three's cramped cockpit.

Aiden checked the comms display to his right. "No abort order," he reported. "You're clear to release the first missile package."

"Holy moly," Ali muttered as she initiated the launch sequence. "This is definitely not the same as firing a plasma turret."

"That's a whole lot of destructive power you're releasing, Ali," Ledge stated.

"Don't remind me," Ali replied. "It's frightening."

"Ten seconds to launch point," Aiden announced. "Still no abort message."

"Launch sequencer is synced," Ali reported. "Launching in three.....two......one....."

The ship shuddered as four missiles left their rails on the Orochi's number one missile pod.

"Four missiles away," Ali reported.

"The other three have launched their first strike packages, as well," Chief Mando reported from the systems station.

"Orochi Leader to all Orochis," Commander Kainan called from Orochi One. "Disperse and jump to your secondary firing points. See you back at the rally point."

Aiden prepared his next jump as the first two Orochis jumped away. "Jumping," he announced as he activated the Orochi's automated jump system. "Jump complete, initiating first turn." Aiden sighed. "Who the hell is crazy enough to trust me with sixteen jump missiles, anyway?"

"Yeah, they were really scraping the bottom of the barrel, weren't they," Ali teased.

"Jump complete," Sasha reported from Striker One's copilot seat.

"Jesus," Robert exclaimed as he looked out the forward window while sixteen jump missiles struck their targets. "Find me the weakest shields to target, Kas."

"Three frigates at one five seven, ten down relative, all at thirty percent. Suggest the second from the left, port midship shields."

"Gil, I'm taking the middle frigate at one five seven, down ten," Robert instructed over comms as he turned his gunship toward the target. "You take the one on the right."

"One five seven by ten down, on the right," Gil acknowledged over comms.

"Shenza One, you copy the targets?" Robert added.

"Shenza One, affirmative," Vol replied. "One five seven, ten down, left target."

"Gunners on the ready," Robert ordered. "Jumping in..."

Robert pressed his jump button, and all three frigates appeared in his forward windows, filling them completely. He adjusted his course slightly right, steering toward the middle frigate, and pressed his firing button. A stream of plasma torpedoes streaked forward from under his gunship's nose, slamming into the frigate's shields and causing them to flash brightly with each impact. After a few seconds, the frigate's shields collapsed and the last few plasma torpedoes tore into its hull, setting off secondary explosions that tore the ship apart as they flew over them.

"Nice," Robert exclaimed as he pressed the jump button and then started his turn to come about. "That should wake the Dusahn up."

"We are under orders of General Hesson, himself, to retrieve four mini-ZPEDs for his personal research and development unit," Nathan insisted angrily.

"I understand that, sir," the guard at the exit from the hangar bay replied, "but I have no record of these orders on my system."

"That is because the project is top secret, as I have explained."

"My apologies, sir, but I cannot allow you to pass without confirmation."

"Then get General Hesson on comms and *get* authorization, and do it *now*!" Nathan barked. "I'm a busy man, Sergeant! I do not have time for your incompetence!"

"Yes, sir," the Dusahn sergeant replied. "Right away, sir,"

Alarm klaxons suddenly went off. The sergeant's eyes widened as he scanned the hangar bay while technicians went running for their safety stations.

"What is going on?" Nathan demanded to know.

"It's an attack alert, sir!"

"Preposterous!" Nathan exclaimed. "We're not under attack!"

The sergeant looked at his console, fighting to control his own panic. "It's Takara, sir! Takara is under attack!"

"Then, we must move quickly!" Nathan insisted. "Allow us to pass! NOW!"

"I…"

There was a loud crash to the left, and the sergeant instinctively looked in the direction of the noise. Nathan acted quickly, stepping forward and pulling the man's sidearm from his holster, jabbing it in his side and pulling the trigger. With the muzzle pressed up against the man's uniform, the sound of the weapon's discharge was quite muffled and likely inaudible above the sound of the alert klaxons.

Nathan quickly lowered the man to the deck, tucking him behind his station where no one would notice him. "Can you open it?" he asked the corporal.

"No problem," Corporal Elken replied as he stepped up to the console.

Jessica took several bounding steps across the surface of the Rama asteroid, using its minute gravity to her advantage. As she passed the shield generator, she removed a small device from her hip attachment point and slapped it onto the side of the generator, continuing on her way with Specialist Samudio hot on her heels.

Four more bounding steps got them to the nearest cover, and they took shelter behind a large outcropping of rock. Jessica and the specialist crouched down low as the device detonated, destroying the shield generator.

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"Ghatazhak! Stand ready!" General Telles ordered as he rose from his seat and moved toward the port hatch.

"Jesus, I thought you guys were asleep!" Lieutenant Taren exclaimed, startled.

"We were," the general replied.

"The shield isn't down yet," Ensign Jayson warned.

"It will be momentarily," General Telles stated with unwavering confidence.

Ensign Jayson looked back at his sensor screen. "It's still... Holy crap, he's right. The shield is down!"

"Get ready, gentlemen," Lieutenant Taren warned. "We're going in."

"We are ready," General Telles stated.

"Jumping," Lieutenant Taren announced.

A second later, the Reaper's engines went to full power as they jumped in just above the surface of the asteroid.

"Closer rate dropping," the lieutenant announced as the Reaper decelerated.

"Opening side doors," Ensign Jayson added.

The door before the general slid open automatically, revealing the factory complex on the asteroid below them. The surface was approaching them at a rapid rate, which was decreasing just as quickly.

"Deployment speed in five seconds," the lieutenant warned.

General Telles did not wait; jumping out immediately, he fell to the surface, landing in a crouch and promptly breaking into a bounding run toward their entry point.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Octos just jumped away," Ensign Jayson reported.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What about the shield?" Lieutenant Taren wondered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Still up," the ensign replied.

"Jesus, they're already out!" Ensign Jayson reported, looking out his side window as the Ghatazhak landed on the surface and headed out.

"We're outta here," the lieutenant announced, adjusting the angle of his Reaper's four engines and accelerating forward.

General Telles bounded across the surface, reaching the nearest structure as Reaper Five stealth-jumped away. He stepped aside as the next two Ghatazhak came up behind him and placed charges on the wall. They, too, peeled away just as the devices detonated, blowing a hole in the wall.

A burst of air and small objects rushed from the gaping hole for several seconds, after which the six Ghatazhak soldiers quickly stepped through the opening, throwing up a patch on the other side.

Lieutenant Commander Manes turned his head quickly to the left, his attention caught by two jump flashes in that direction. "Tally two!" he announced. "Just jumped in to port! Opposite direction!"

"Sensors show them as gunships!" his copilot reported.

"They haven't targeted us yet."

"Coming about to engage," the lieutenant commander announced as he pulled his flight control stick hard to the left and gunned his throttles.

"Locking thumpers on both," Ensign Sell reported.

"You with me, Rimi?" the lieutenant commander asked over comms.

"Coming around with you, Nessi," Lieutenant Karimi reported from Reaper Two. "Swinging out wide to your right."

"We're gonna pop thumpers on 'em, Dani," Ensign Sell

announced. "They'll break in opposite directions."

"When they do, we'll take right," Lieutenant Karimi said.

"I'll slide under and jump past them," Ensign LaValla added.

"Thirty light seconds should do it," the lieutenant commander suggested.

"See you on the other side!" the pilot of Reaper Three called as he jumped ahead of them.

"Good locks!" Ensign Sell announced. "Popping two!"

A pair of thumper missiles rolled out of the ordnance doors on either side of Reaper One's weapons module, their engines immediately lighting up and sending the stubby missiles rocketing forward. As expected, the two gunships turned in opposite directions, knowing that the missiles would likely follow one or the other, but not both.

"Popping two right!" Ensign Danvers announced from Reaper Two.

Lieutenant Commander Manes continued his left turn, pursuing one of the two gunships. "Get another pair on him, Selly,"

"Five more degrees, boss, that's all I need," his copilot replied.

"Impact!" Ensign Danvers reported with excitement. "He's deadstick, baby!"

"Drop a buster on him and join up," Lieutenant Commander Manes ordered as he continued chasing the other gunship.

"He's powering up to jump," Ensign Sell warned.

A blue-white flash of light appeared beyond the fleeing gunship as Reaper Three jumped in head-to-head with the target. A split second later, the target erupted in an orange and yellow fireball that guickly dissipated.

"Hell yeah!" Ensign LaValla exclaimed from Reaper

Three.

"New targets!" Ensign Sell announced. "Two one two, twelve up relative, twenty thousand clicks, and closing fast. Looks like a flight of octos!"

"Rally point tango five two," Lieutenant Commander barked over comms. "We'll jump in behind them and give them something to worry about."

Nathan fired his weapon as they ran down the corridor, dropping two guards as they rounded the corner ahead. He came to a stop at the intersection, peeking quickly around the corner. A dozen shots streaked past his head as he withdrew, several of them blowing off chunks of the rocky wall next to his head.

"Step back, sir," Corporal Elken suggested as he pulled a stun grenade from his belt.

Nathan slid back one position as the corporal stepped up to the corner. The corporal held his left hand out, and Specialist Knaff handed him a plasma grenade. The corporal activated both and tossed them around the corner.

Nathan heard the grenades bounce down the corridor, followed by shouts of warning in Jung. A few seconds later, there was a flash of light, followed almost immediately by a loud bang, and a thunderous explosion that shook the entire area.

Corporal Elken stepped out, looking down the corridor at the carnage. There were at least eight bodies, all of them severely traumatized to the point of missing significant portions of their bodies.

"Overkill, isn't it?" Nathan commented as they walked through the carnage.

"No one's shooting at us though, are they?" the corporal

replied. "They were probably the QRT for this section. Resistance should be light all the way to the hangar control room."

"Loki," Nathan called over comms. "Be ready, we're almost there."

Vol Kaguchi pushed his Gunyoki fighter into a spiraling dive as two Dusahn octo fighters opened fire on him.

"Two on our six!" Isa warned from the back seat. "Four more at our three, two clicks, coming fast."

"Hold your dive, Vol!" Manzur called from Shenza Eight. "We're coming in from your nine! We'll cut them off at the knees!"

"Just don't miss!" Vol replied.

Energy weapons fire streaked past him on either side, careening off their shields, causing them to flash brilliantly with each impact.

"They're closing!" Isa warned. "We've got to jump!"

"Not yet!" Vol insisted, holding his spiraling dive. "Manzur has them!"

"Vol!" Isa begged.

Two explosions behind them interrupted his weapons officer's pleas.

"Your six is clear!" Manzur declared with excitement.

"Nice shot, Manzur!" Vol exclaimed, ending their spiral and leveling off. "Give me a new target, Isa."

"Standby."

"Where are you, Tariq?"

"Three clicks to your four!" Tariq replied. "Sorry I wasn't there for you. We had a few problems of our own to take care of."

"Gunship pack, four targets, twenty clicks ahead, passing

left to right," Isa reported. "They're moving to protect the space dock."

"Let's go gunship hunting, Tariq," Vol called over comms. "Twenty clicks dead ahead, left to right."

"Lead the way!" Tariq replied.

General Telles stepped through the hatchway into the main corridor, placing himself directly in the line of enemy fire. He dropped to one knee, energy weapons blasts slamming into his personal shield, causing it to flash with each impact. He quickly raised his weapon, pushing the muzzle through his shield and opening fire. One by one, he dropped the Dusahn soldiers at the far end of the corridor. One shot, one kill. In seconds, the corridor fell silent. "We must move quickly," the general cautioned his team as he

rose to his feet to continue forward. "We have only minutes

until this facility will be swarming with reinforcements."

Commander Kainan watched his console as his Orochi's jump sequencer transitioned his ship to their next launch point. "Jump complete," the commander announced. "Ready the second strike package, Sergeant."

"Loading strike package two," Sergeant Adamek replied.

"I gotta tell ya," Chief Torwell said from the gun control station, "I'm liking *this* a whole lot better than the combat jump shuttle. Here, I'm completely enclosed by hull, instead of my head sticking out of the top of the ship in a bubble. And so far, no one is shooting at us!"

"Don't jinx us, Chief," Lieutenant Latfee insisted. "The battle has just begun."

"As long as we keep jumping around the perimeter of the

battle, we're golden," the chief declared enthusiastically. "Hey, Commander, is there any way we can make this a permanent gig?"

"Sorry, Chief," the commander replied.

"Nothing personal, chief," Sergeant Adamek said, "I know I'm the new guy, here, but do you always talk this much?"

"He does," Lieutenant Latfee groaned. "Sometimes more."

"Nervous habit," the chief told the sergeant.

"How's that strike package, Sergeant?" the commander asked.

"Ready to launch," the sergeant assured him.

"Great. Launch point is coming up in one minute."

Josh's eyes widened. "Uh-oh."

Loki glanced outside, spotting the same four Dusahn soldiers that Josh had noticed, cautiously approaching their shuttle with weapons held ready. "We have a problem, here, Captain," he called over comms.

Nathan and the four Ghatazhak dressed as Dusahn soldiers broke out of the corridor onto the catwalk. Nathan glanced down at the hangar bay below, spotting the four Dusahn soldiers advancing on the shuttle. He immediately took aim and opened fire, taking all four men down with only four shots, each landing perfectly in the back of their necks, where their body armor was the least effective.

Corporal Elken looked over at Nathan, shocked. "Nice shots, Captain."

Nathan did not react, instead continuing toward the hangar control room at the end of the catwalk.

"Wait!" Corporal Elken warned, knowing that taking out the four soldiers below would alert those in the control room of their approach.

Nathan ran along the catwalk toward the control room, paying no heed to the corporal's warning cry. "Grenade!" he hollered back at the corporal as he fired into the windows of the control room ahead of him.

The windows blew open, and the corporal tossed his grenade into the room as they approached. The device detonated a few seconds later, sending two of the occupants flying through the shattered windows, falling onto the hangar deck below.

In one smooth motion, Nathan fired at the door, blowing it open. Three shots rang out from inside the smoke-filled control room, which Nathan deftly dodged with shocking speed and precision. Again, the corporal was surprised by the captain's actions.

Nathan charged into the smoke-filled room. He fired once to his left, killing an armed guard, and then raised his left hand to block the butt of a rifle being swung toward his face. He twisted his arm around the butt, grabbing the middle of the weapon, stripping it from its owner and tossing it aside. At the same moment, he felt a blow against his gun hand, knocking his sidearm from his grip. His right hand dropped to his opponent's side, instinctively grabbing the Dusahn soldier's sidearm as he ducked under the man's blow. He slid past the man, pushing him to the side as he passed, then spun around and shot him square in the face, killing him instantly.

By then, Corporal Elken was also in the control room, taking care of the other combatant in the still-smoky room.

Nathan immediately went to the control console, bypassing the automated traffic control system and

releasing their shuttle back to its own manual controls. "You're clear!" he called over comms. "Move to position two!"

"One our way!" Loki replied.

Corporal Elken and the other three Ghatazhak stood in the back of the control room, looking at the five dead bodies on the floor. "Maybe you want to leave a few for us next time?" he suggested to Nathan.

"Sorry," he told the corporal as he activated the transfer airlock's inner doors. "I guess I got carried away."

Gil Roselle deftly adjusted the flight control stick of his Cobra gunship as he brought it out of a hard, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. As he rolled the ship level, his copilot's fingers danced over the center pedestal, quickly setting up the next attack jump.

"You set, Bobby?" Gil called over comms.

"I'll go high, you go low," Robert replied from Striker One.

"Three seconds," Gil replied as he checked his final course and speed.

The Dusahn cruiser maneuvered into position to the port side of the Takaran spaceport, preparing to defend the world's only orbital facility. Dusahn octo fighters chased Gunyoki in all directions, attempting to thwart their attacks on the cruiser so the massive vessel could concentrate its weapons on larger enemy targets.

Suddenly, two Cobra gunships appeared less than five hundred meters to port of the vessel, heading directly for it. Both gunships opened fire, sending waves of plasma torpedoes into the cruiser's midship, port shields. The cruiser's shields flashed red-orange as it tried to absorb and disperse the massive amounts of energy it was being subjected to with each passing second. As the impacts continued, the enemy vessel's shield glowed brighter and brighter. One by one, emitters on the middle of the ship's port side began overloading, sending sparks flying in all directions. But the shields held, and the two Cobra gunships slipped past, above and below, disappearing as the enemy guns continued to pound the gunships' shields until the very moment they jumped away.

"We are outta here!" Josh declared as he eased his lift control forward, causing the stolen Dusahn cargo shuttle to rise up off the deck. A twist of the flight control stick caused the ship to yaw around one hundred and eighty degrees while it hovered. As it came around to face the opening inner doors of the transfer airlock, he eased the control stick forward ever so slightly, causing the ship to move through the parting doors and into the airlock tunnel itself.

Once through, the inner doors automatically closed and the airlock tunnel began to depressurize.

Loki's eyes widened at the sight of the outer doors as they began to part down the middle. "They aren't opening fast enough. You need to slow down!"

"We're fine," Josh dismissed.

"No, we're not!" Loki insisted, bracing himself for impact. Josh pushed his control stick to the right, causing the ship to roll onto its right side, passing between the airlock doors with only centimeters to spare on either side. "Told ya."

"Why couldn't you just tell me you were going to do that,

instead of scaring the hell out of me...yet again?" Loki wondered.

Josh laughed. "And miss the expression on your face?"

"You realize our lives are at risk here, right?"

"Yeah...that's what makes it fun!"

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again," Loki mumbled as he checked the tracer for Jessica's signal, "there's something wrong with you."

"It's part of my charm," Josh joked. "Where's she at?"

"Twelve degrees to port, six hundred and fifty meters," Loki replied.

"Jess, you ready to go?" Josh called over comms.

"It's about time," Jessica replied.

"Captain, we're moving in for the first pickup," Loki reported. "We'll be at the cargo bay in two minutes."

"Warehouse Three is secure," General Telles reported.
"We are loading all four packages onto transport, now."

"Team Three, report," Nathan called over comms.

Energy weapons fire ricocheted off the wall to their right as all six Ghatazhak charged down the corridor, firing ahead of them as they ran. Incoming fire slammed into their personal shields, causing them to flash a brilliant yellow with each impact.

"Team Three is meeting heavy resistance," Commander Kellen reported as he slipped in behind a vertical support beam, as cover, to give his personal shield a few moments rest to recharge.

"Transport is two minutes out," Nathan warned. "Can you make it?"

"We'll take it in ninety seconds," the commander replied confidently. "Ghatazhak!" he yelled back at his team.

"Forward!" he added, stepping back out into the incoming streams of weapons fire, once again allowing his personal shield to take the impacts as he continued forward, returning fire as he progressed.

"Cruiser Two's midship port shields are down to twenty percent!" Robert reported over comms. "If you swarm them, they'll fail and you can take her apart!"

"I thought you were going to make another pass to finish her off!" Vol replied.

"We've got too many octos on our tail!" Robert insisted. "We're jumping clear to shake them. We'll be back in forty seconds!"

"That's a fucking eternity!" Tariq exclaimed from Shenza Two.

"They aren't as maneuverable as we are," Vol reminded his wingman. "It takes time for them to come about. Isa, how many Gunyoki are within comms range at the moment?"

"Six!" Isa replied. "Wait...make that eight!"

"Shenza leader to all Gunyoki," Vol called over comms. "Target Cruiser Two, port midship. Hit it with everything you've got!"

"We have about a minute before reinforcements arrive," General Telles warned over comms. "What is your position?"

Nathan ran up to the corner of the intersection, peering around at the crossing corridor to ensure it was clear before continuing. "We've got one more security checkpoint to go through at the junction between sections fourteen and fifteen. If you've dealt with the checkpoint between fifteen and the cargo bay, then we'll be clear all the way to you after this one."

"You must hurry," General Telles urged. "Our shuttle is landing now. Once Dusahn troops arrive, it will take them very little time to figure out what we are up to."

"If we are not there by the time you are loaded, depart without us!" Nathan instructed as they ran down the next corridor.

"We will hold as long as possible," General Telles insisted.

"Negative!" Nathan barked. "You *must* get those ZPEDs to the Aurora! This place is loaded with transports! We can find alternate transportation if we have to!"

"Understood," General Telles agreed.

"Are you sure about that?" Corporal Elken wondered as they rounded the next corner.

"It's a big base," Nathan replied. "There's got to be more jump shuttles around somewhere, right?"

"We're at the third strike point," Aiden announced. He glanced at the comms display next to him. "Still no abort message."

"This battle is approaching ten minutes," Chief Mando said from the systems console of Orochi Three. "No battle lasts ten minutes."

"Yeah, that's what worries me," Aiden replied. "What's the next strike package, Ali?"

"Ours is the orbital spaceport over Takara," Ali replied from the missile control console. "One has the propellant plant on Jistan Seven, Two has the comm-drone transmission array on Cardona, and Four has surface-toorbit plasma cannons around Answari." "Jesus, all this for a diversion?" Ledge exclaimed. "Why can't we just target their ships?"

"Their ships are moving, Ledge," Aiden replied. "Without position relays, there's no way we'd hit them, and no one's going to be scared of a bunch of jump missiles *missing* their targets over and over again."

"Those plasma cannons are *within* the city," Ledge reminded him. "There could be collateral damage."

"Not our call, Ledge," Aiden insisted. "We just push the buttons we're told to push, remember?"

"It just doesn't seem as easy as I thought," Ledge admitted.

"What are you complaining about?" Ali wondered. "I'm the one pushing the launch button."

"This is war, people," Chief Mando snapped. "We do what we can to prevent collateral damage, but it happens. That's why people try to *avoid* war in the first place."

"That's enough, all of you!" Aiden barked. "One minute to the third launch point. Are you ready, Ali?"

"I'm ready."

"I can't get an angle!" Ambros called from Shenza Eleven.
"I've got too many guns on..."

Vol's helmet comms crackled loudly.

"Eleven is hit! Ambros is dead stick! He's headed... Oh, God!"

"Ambros!" Vol yelled over comms.

"I just lost Shenza Eleven's transponder!" Isa reported from the back seat of Shenza One.

"Did he jump?" Vol wondered. "Did anyone see Ambros jump?"

"Negative," Jenna reported from Shenza Nine. "His right

engine was hit...he spun into the cruiser's port, forward shields."

"I can't find Manzur!" Damus said. "Has anyone seen Shenza Eight?"

"I saw him jump out a few seconds ago," another Gunyoki pilot reported. "He had two octos on him, and they jumped immediately after him."

"Jesus," Vol exclaimed. "We can't take down this cruiser," he admitted. "Between the cruiser's point-defense and all these damned octos, we can't even get close!"

"Someone shake these fuckers off my six!" another pilot begged.

"Shenza Leader to all Gunyoki," Vol barked. "Jump to rally point lima five. We'll regroup and choose another target."

Robert pressed the jump button on his flight control stick, and a moment later the Dusahn cruiser appeared before him, less than a kilometer away. "Shit! It's still here!"

"Strike package three is twenty seconds away!" Sasha warned.

Robert glanced at his tactical display, noting that Striker Two had also jumped in. "Gil! We have to bring this bitch down, now, before the missiles come!" he said as he pressed his firing button.

Waves of plasma torpedoes streaked forth from under their noses, slamming into the Dusahn cruiser's weakened, port, midship shields. Within seconds, the shield completely collapsed, and the plasma torpedoes tore the ship open. The explosions caused a chain reaction, and the cruiser's remaining shields began to blow, as well.

"Five seconds to missiles!" Sasha warned.

"Clear out, Gil!"

"I'm already gone!" Gil replied from Striker Two.

Four blue-white flashes of light washed over Striker One's cockpit as jump missiles appeared less than five hundred meters from the orbital spaceport over Takara. Five seconds later, the missiles impacted the target, blowing it apart in yellow-white explosions.

Robert pitched his gunship upward, getting a clear jump line, and pressed his jump button just in the nick of time.

The Dusahn cargo shuttle jerked to a stop less than a meter away from the four antigravity carts containing the large, zero-point energy devices that General Telles and his team had taken from the warehouse on Rama.

The side cargo door slid open, revealing Jessica and Specialist Samudio, both of them still wearing the majority of their EVA gear.

"You boys need a ride?" Jessica asked, smiling.

"We must get these loaded quickly," General Telles insisted. "We have little time."

"Where is Nathan?" Jessica asked as she activated the loading grappler, causing it to swing out from the cargo bay.

"He should be here momentarily," General Telles replied.

"Nathan, Jess," Jessica called over comms. "Tick tock, Skipper."

"Stop nagging," Nathan replied, energy weapons fire sounding in the background.

"Now is not the time to be dancing with the locals," Jessica scolded.

"Tell them that," Nathan replied.

"You need backup?"

"Negative!" Nathan barked. "Just get those ZPEDs loaded and get ready to liftoff!"

"Not without you, boss," Jessica insisted.

"General!" Nathan barked.

General Telles looked at Jessica.

"Not without Nathan," she stated emphatically, looking him in the eyes.

\* \* \*

Explosions shook the Dusahn command center in the heart of Answari, the capital of Takara.

"My, God!" one of the Dusahn commanders exclaimed. "They're targeting our surface defenses with *jump missiles*!"

"Steady, Commander," General Hesson urged.

"We have lost the Mor-Ganzen!" another commander announced.

Lord Dusahn stood quietly, observing the battle, his eyes darting from view screen to view screen as data streamed in from all ships and sensor arrays throughout the Takar system. "Why are they not targeting our battleships?" he wondered more to himself than to others.

"Perhaps they realize that they cannot defeat them with gunships and fighters," General Hesson suggested.

"They seem to have plenty of jump missiles to lob our way," Lord Dusahn observed. "Why not use them against our greatest assets, instead of such lesser targets?" Lord Dusahn noticed an icon on the map of the Pentaurus cluster that suddenly switched from green to flashing red. "What is that?"

General Hesson looked at the flashing icon. "The Tico system." The general snapped his fingers to get the attention of one of his aides, pointing to the icon. "Why is the Tico system showing an alert?"

"What is there?" Lord Dusahn inquired.

"Nothing of interest," the general replied. "Only a factory that produces the zero-point devices that power most of the newer Takaran ships."

"We have lost contact with the facility on Rama in the Tico system," General Hesson's aide reported.

"That is what they are after," Lord Dusahn realized.

"But ZPED technology is already known and in common usage by the Alliance," General Hesson pointed out to his leader.

"The Aurora was badly damaged, was it not?" Lord Dusahn postulated.

"We do not have current intelligence on the Aurora's status..."

"She is powered by antimatter reactors, not ZPEDs," Lord Dusahn continued. "If those reactors became unstable..." He looked at the General. "Has the Aurora left the orbit of Rakuen since we last attacked her?"

"Not to my knowledge, my lord," General Hesson replied, "but again, we have no recent..."

"Send our forces to Rama," Lord Dusahn instructed.

"My lord," General Hesson objected. "If we leave Takara undefended..."

"Our battleships can defend themselves against gunships and fighters," Lord Dusahn insisted.

"But there are still numerous industrial targets at risk," General Hesson reminded him.

"This is all just a diversion, General," Lord Dusahn insisted. "I'm disappointed that you did not recognize it as such. Send our forces now...and send the Zen-Anor, as well," he added, turning toward the general. "Their real mission is on Rama, I am certain."

Robert adjusted his course as his Cobra gunship came out of its jump, turning toward the nearest gunship. Within seconds, his targeting system indicated a good lock, and he pressed his firing button, sending the first wave of plasma torpedoes at the target.

The enemy gunship's shields flashed, but then the ship became surrounded by blue-white light, disappearing a split second later.

"Damn it," Robert cursed. "Find me another target, Kas."

"I don't have any," his sensor officer replied.

"What do you mean, you don't have any? This place was crawling with targets a few seconds ago."

"They're all jumping out!" Kasma exclaimed. "First the octos, then the gunships..."

"Bobby," Gil Roselle called from Striker Two. "You seeing what I'm seeing?"

"If you mean *nothing* then, yes," Robert replied.

"I think they're on to us."

"Shit," Robert said, coming to the same conclusion. "Strike Leader to all ships! Jump to Rama! Repeat, jump to Rama!"

"Maybe they just jumped out to shake-off our attacks and they're planning on jumping back in to ambush us?" Sasha suggested.

"I sure as hell hope you're right," Robert replied as he turned the ship toward the Tico system.

Vol glanced at his tactical display as they came out of the jump to Tico. Icons were appearing one by one near Rama.

"Striker Leader to all ships," Robert called over comms. "Don't let anything get *to* Rama. If you see a shuttle, destroy it!"

"That's not going to be easy," Tariq said from Shenza Two. "This place is crawling with octos."

"Let's see if we can do something about that," Vol said. "All Shenza! Lone wolf mode! Hit and run! Don't give them more than a few seconds of peace! Guns only! Save your missiles for the shuttles!"

"Suvietai no shayoo!" another Gunyoki pilot yelled over comms.

"Red..... Stri..... One!" Robert called, barely audible, over comms.

Nathan ducked down as more energy weapons fire streaked over his head. He dove for cover behind a vertical support as one of his men took a hit to the leg, collapsing next to him. Nathan reached out and grabbed the fallen Ghatazhak, pulling the man toward him by his Dusahn uniform as the soldier continued firing down the corridor.

"Red One, Striker One!" Robert called again, this time coming through more clearly.

Nathan helped the corporal back against the wall behind him and then tapped his comm-set. "Go for Red One!" he barked as he resumed firing at the group of Dusahn soldiers standing between them and the cargo hangar bay.

"Blue Leader! Red Two!" Corporal Elken exclaimed from the other side of the corridor, where he too had taken shelter. "We have Zen-Anor blocking our route!"

"Red Leader! Striker One!" Robert replied urgently. "The jig is up! Bandits of all sizes are on top of you! We're trying to push them back so you can get out! Suspect they will try to drop in reinforcements! You need to hurry!"

"They already have!" Nathan replied as an energy blast

struck the vertical beam only centimeters from his face. "But, thanks!"

"Blue, Red! Do you copy?" the corporal repeated as the enemy barrage continued.

Several energy weapons blasts streaked past them from behind.

"Contact! Rear!" Specialist Knaff barked as he spun around to fire on the enemy attacking from behind their position. "Zen-Anor!"

"I'm not getting through to Blue team!" Corporal Elken yelled as energy weapons fire streaked past him from both front and back.

"Blue! Red!" Nathan called as he pulled the sidearm from the injured corporal next to him, firing down the corridor behind them with it while continuing to fire at the enemy in front of them. "Blue! Red! In the blind! We're caught in a cross fire, corridor one eight five, intersection forty-seven B, about one hundred meters from your position! Can you assist?"

"My rifle's inop!" the injured corporal exclaimed, tossing his main weapon aside.

"Can you fight?" Nathan asked.

"I'm still in it, Captain!"

"Whaley!" Corporal Elken hollered just before tossing the corporal his own rifle.

Corporal Whaley caught the rifle and immediately opened fire on the enemy to their rear, joining the other two specialists in the barrage of energy. "We're not going to make it out of here!"

Corporal Elken pulled a grenade out of his uniform thigh pocket. "After this goes off, we charge them!" he barked.

"They'll mow us down!" Nathan replied, still firing with both weapons.

"It's all we've got!" the corporal insisted.

"Do it!" Nathan agreed.

Corporal Elken twisted the top of his grenade, tossed it ahead of them down the corridor toward the Zen-Anor, and then started to rise.

"RED TEAM! HEADS DOWN!"

"DOWN!" Nathan barked, ceasing fire and covering himself and Corporal Whaley.

The other three Ghatazhak quickly ceased firing, as well, curling up into balls and tucking themselves as close to the walls as possible.

There was a clanking of metal, barely audible above the sound of energy weapons fire. Nathan thought he saw something small fly over his head, but couldn't be sure.

Suddenly, the corridor was filled with blinding, white light and a high-pitched whine that felt like it would split Nathan's head open. A split second later, several explosions went off, and a shock wave swept through the corridor from both directions. Nathan and the others were pushed back against the wall so hard, he felt as if he were going to go right through it into the next compartment. All the air in his lungs was immediately sucked out, and he found himself desperately gasping for breath. The sensation seemed to last forever, and he was certain he was going to lose consciousness.

A cacophony of weapons fire rang out from both directions. Nathan felt himself slipping away as he barely made out the sound of boots on the hard deck. He was certain they were being overrun.

Suddenly, someone shoved something over his face. His face became cold, and then he felt the sweet sensation of air flowing past his lips and nostrils, and into his lungs. He instinctively grabbed whatever was covering his face, not wanting to let it fall away. His wits began to return, and his vision began to clear.

"Are you injured?" he heard a voice call. "We gotta move!"

He felt someone tug at his uniform, trying to get him onto his feet. He felt his feet touch the deck and somehow managed to gain his balance again. He blinked and saw Jessica standing before him, decked out in full Ghatazhak battle armor, a smile on her face. "Get behind me!" she ordered, shoving him forward.

Energy weapons fire began again but only from behind them, this time. He grabbed Corporal Whaley, helping him to his feet, as well, and they stumbled forward as the weapons fire intensified. Within seconds, they were passing more than a dozen dead Zen-Anor soldiers, their bodies mutilated by whatever devices Jessica's team had used to subdue them.

Jessica and her team walked backward, their personal shields protecting both teams as they carefully stepped through the remains of the Zen-Anor position that had been blocking Red team's progress. She glanced back and saw that Nathan and his team had made it through the next hatch. "Grenades!" she ordered as she continued firing.

Two of the Ghatazhak on her team pulled grenades off their thigh armor and tossed them down the corridor.

Jessica continued firing as her team stepped through the hatch, then stepped backward through it herself, just as the grenades detonated. As soon as she made it through, one of her teammates slammed the hatch closed and spun the latch. Jessica took aim at the locking mechanism and fired three times at a lower power setting, melting the mechanism so it couldn't be easily opened.

Jessica turned around to look at Nathan. "How are you

doing?"

"I've had better days," Nathan admitted, finally able to remove the portable breather that Jessica had put on him. "Why the hell didn't you answer me?"

"I didn't want the Zen-Anor to know we were coming," she replied, pushing him forward. "They probably monitor enemy comms during a battle, just like we do."

"What about the ZPEDs?" Nathan asked as they ran down the corridor.

"Loaded and ready to go," she replied.

"I ordered you to depart as soon as they were loaded!" Nathan barked.

"Tell me something I don't know!" Jessica replied, laughing as they ran.

"One minute to strike package four," Aiden announced from the helm of Orochi Three.

"Jesus." Chief Mando looked at Aiden. "Do you think they're clear?"

"I'm trying *not* to think about that," Aiden replied, double-checking his flight displays. "This is all very surreal...fighting a battle from light years away with no one shooting at us. It doesn't seem right. We aren't taking any risk."

"We're taking *some* risk," the chief insisted. "The Dusahn are pretty good at following jump trails. If they did and they found us..."

"You're not helping," Aiden said, interrupting the chief. He sighed. "I think I actually liked it better when we were jumping into the thick of it." He looked at the time display again. "You ready, Ali?"

"Strike package four, loaded and ready for launch," she

replied.

"Let's hope they're clear."

\_\_\_\_\_

"I thought I gave you an order," Nathan said to General Telles as they ran across the hangar bay toward him.

"Tell *her* that," he replied.

"I tried."

time.

"As did I," the general insisted.

Shots rang out from the far side of the cargo hangar bay, striking the side of the Dusahn cargo shuttle, and the surrounding deck, as Zen-Anor troops entered the bay and attacked.

"Holy crap!" Josh exclaimed, ducking inside the cargo shuttle's cockpit as energy weapons fire slammed into the side of their hull, just aft of the starboard cockpit window.

"Powering up the antigrav drive," Loki announced.

"Everyone get on board!" Josh yelled. "It's time to go!"

"Loki!" Nathan called over comms. "Raise the shields!"

Vol guided his Gunyoki fighter under the passing Dusahn gunship, his topside shields flashing as they absorbed the incoming weapons fire.

"Two octos passing left to right, directly below you, Vol!" Vol leaned to his left, looking downward as the two Dusahn octo fighters appeared from under him. "We're on them," he replied as he pushed his flight control stick down and left, twisting it slightly counterclockwise at the same

"Right behind you, Vol," Tariq assured him over comms. Vol's fighter nosed down and turned quickly to the left,

dropping in behind the two enemy fighters. "Where the hell are those two going in such a hurry?" Vol increased his throttles, closing on the two fighters as they skirted the edge of the asteroid. Suddenly, both octo fighters pitched upward and rolled on their starboard sides, turning and diving in between two rows of buildings on the surface of the Rama asteroid.

"Shenza One! Striker One!" Robert called over comms. "Your targets are making a run for the cargo hangar transfer tunnel! If they get in there, they'll block the cargo shuttle's exit!"

"Understood," Vol replied, increasing his throttles even further as he, too, dove between the rows of buildings.

"You have to take them out, now!"

"We're all out of missiles, Vol," Isa warned.

"Switching to guns," Vol announced. "Ten seconds to range."

"You can't raise the shields on this thing when you're on the deck," Loki replied. "Something about the antigrav fields interacting with the surface, or something!"

"Thirty seconds until this entire rock is vaporized," Jessica reminded everyone.

"GHATAZHAK!" General Telles barked. "Shield the doors!"

The general and several other Ghatazhak took up positions in front of the starboard cargo hatch to the shuttle, three of them staying low while the other three stood tall, thus creating a shield tall enough to protect Nathan and his team from the incoming Zen-Anor weapons fire while they climbed up into the cargo shuttle.

As soon as Nathan and his team were inside, they turned

around and opened fire, shooting over the tops of the Ghatazhak shields that had protected them. Incoming energy weapons fire pounded the Ghatazhak shields as one by one, they each jumped up backwards into the cargo bay of the shuttle, still firing away at the advancing Zen-Anor.

"Liftoff and raise shields!" Nathan ordered as he closed the cargo hatch.

"Red Leader, Striker One!" Robert called over comms. "Two octos have entered the transfer airlock tunnel to your hangar bay! They'll blow you away as soon as those doors open!"

"Inner airlock doors are opening," Loki warned as the shuttle rose off the deck.

"Ten seconds to missiles!" Jessica warned.

"Striker One, Red Leader! Blow the tunnel! Repeat, blow the tunnel!

"The entire hangar will decompress and come apart!" Robert warned. "You'll all be killed!"

"DO IT!" Nathan ordered. "Josh, get ready to jump!"

"Launch strike package four," Aiden instructed, "in three.....two.....one.....launch."

Ali pressed the launch button. Two seconds later, the launch confirmation light blinked. "Missiles away."

Aiden looked up as four missiles streaked overhead, then disappeared behind blue-white flashes of light. "Time to go home," he said, not wanting to think about the possible ramifications of the weapons they had just sent toward Rama.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Gil! I'm not in position!" Robert called.

"I am!" Gil assured him as he pushed his nose down and pressed his jump button. A split second later, the ZPED factory on the Rama asteroid was directly in front of him, filling their front windows.

"New contact!" his sensor officer reported. "Dusahn battleship just jumped in right on top of us!"

Gil pitched up slightly, lining up on the transfer tunnel. "Nathan! I'm firing.....NOW!"

As the transfer airlocks doors parted, Josh and Loki could see the two Dusahn octo fighters hovering in the tunnel on the other side, their weapons pointed forward ready to fire.

"Oh, shit," Josh said calmly, his eyes wide.

There was a flash of red-orange light as the tunnel came apart, taking the wall and nearby ceiling of the hangar bay with it. The shuttle lunged forward suddenly, pulled along by the decompression of the massive hangar bay. Josh quickly pitched up, pushed his throttles forward, and pressed the jump button, closing his eyes as they jumped.

"Oh, my God," Robert said half under his breath as he watched sixteen jump missiles detonate all over the Rama asteroid, blowing it apart. "EVERYONE TO THE RALLY POINT!" he barked over comms as he steered his gunship away from the doomed asteroid and pressed his jump button.

Everything was quiet. Only the faint whirring of ventilation fans and the occasional alert beep could be heard.

Josh opened his eyes, looking right and left. A giggle

suddenly leapt from his mouth. "Fuck, we made it!" he exclaimed with glee.

"I never had any doubt," Nathan said from behind them.

Josh and Loki both turned to Nathan, looks of skepticism on their faces.

"Okay, maybe just a little," Nathan admitted, smiling. "Take us to the rally point, boys."

"With pleasure," Josh replied, also smiling.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

General Hesson stood proudly before his lord, waiting for him to speak. He had been doing so for several minutes, but all his leader had done, thus far, was to stare at him. Several times over the last few minutes, the general had considered asking his lord the reason he had been called but with each silent minute that passed, he became more certain that doing so would likely make things worse.

Finally, Lord Dusahn rose from his seat behind his massive, ornate desk and moved over to the window overlooking the palace garden; still silent.

In Dusahn culture, displaying ones back without comment showed contempt and was considered highly disrespectful. General Hesson, who had served both his current lord and the two who had preceded him, could barely contain himself. Surely a century of service deserved greater respect than this arrogant, so-called *lord* was showing him.

"My father had a great fondness for you, General," Lord Dusahn finally said, his back still to the general. "It is for this reason that I shall spare your life."

General Hesson could take no more. "How have I failed you, my lord?" he asked, fighting not to choke on the words.

"Are you truly unaware?"

"I am."

Lord Dusahn sighed. "You have served your caste for nearly a century, so perhaps your mind is not what it used to be."

"While that is entirely possible, I still believe that I am

capable of serving my caste at the same level as I have in the past," General Hesson insisted.

"Yet, it was *I* who ultimately deduced the Karuzari's *true* intentions yesterday," Lord Dusahn pointed out, turning to face the general.

"That is why you are a *lord*, and I am but a general."

"You have lost your political and interpersonal acumen, I'll give you that," Lord Dusahn noted. He moved slowly around the desk, coming to stand in front of the general, only two meters distant. "Out of respect for your service to the empire, I will allow you to retire, retaining all honors, privileges, and compensation due your rank. Will you offer your resignation?"

"Options?" the general asked somewhat curtly.

Lord Dusahn looked the general directly in the eyes. "A Dusahn soldier's career can only end three ways. Death in battle, retirement, or execution. Feel free to choose, if you like."

General Hesson drew in his breath slowly and evenly, suppressing the anger that threatened to boil over at any moment. He had spent decades enduring this man's arrogance and incompetence, and now... "I will have the papers in your hand within the hour, my lord," the general replied with a nod. The general took a step back, preparing to leave.

"Is there not something else?" Lord Dusahn said, his tone becoming less tolerant.

"Thank you, my lord," General Hesson added, nodding yet again.

"You are dismissed, General," Lord Dusahn commanded, turning his back to him again, returning to the window to gaze at the gardens he had inherited from the previous ruler of Takara.

General Hesson turned and headed for the door, his anger and contempt barely held in check.

\* \* \*

"We have finished integrating the Sugali AI into all the ship's systems," Deliza reported to everyone gathered in the Aurora's command briefing room. "However, she still has no access to the ship's communications systems, as you requested, Captain."

"Thank you," Nathan replied. "Though I see you're still referring to *it* by a gender."

"It's almost impossible not to," Abby defended.

"Is there really any harm in referring to it as a 'she'?" Jessica wondered.

"It may increase the danger of us developing personal attachments to it," Cameron suggested.

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," Abby argued. "She is very careful about that. The way she states her opinions, the way she converses, it's all very businesslike and *impersonal*. She never addresses you by your first name. She never displays inappropriate emotion, she never argues with you, but rather she merely points out the flaws in your logic, allowing you to see that she is correct. These things may seem small but they, and others, make all the difference."

"Are you sure it's going to help with the installation of the ZPEDs?" Nathan asked Vladimir.

"She has already helped," Vladimir insisted. "I was going to start with ripping out the main power trunks and upgrading them, and she suggested that we simply add multiple trunks and then rephase the loads at each draw point. I never would have thought of this myself."

"And that will save time?" Cameron asked.

"A couple days, at least," Vladimir assured her. "She truly

is a godsend."

Nathan sighed. "Then I guess we'll keep *Leta,* for now, and see how it goes. But I still want a kill switch."

"Of course," Vladimir replied. "Uh..."

Nathan's eyebrow went up. "There is something else?"

"Da. A small thing, really, but..."

"What is it?" Nathan wondered.

Vladimir looked at Abby, then at Deliza. "It was their idea," he spurted.

"Coward," Abby muttered.

"What was their idea?" Nathan asked, growing impatient.

"We don't call her Leta," Abby told him. "It was an accident, at first, and then it just seemed more natural to..."

"What seemed more natural?" Nathan interrupted.

Abby took a deep breath. "Well, we call her 'Aurora'."

Nathan looked to Cameron, who shrugged, then at Jessica, who appeared to be holding back her laughter. He looked back at Abby. "I see." Nathan thought for a moment. "And I suppose *she* answers to it."

"Of course," Abby replied.

"She will answer to anything you like, Captain," Deliza assured him.

"Aurora is fine," Nathan replied, "for *now*." He looked around the table. "Anything else?" When no one responded, he spoke again. "Then let's get those ZPEDs installed."

The attendees rose and headed for the exit, while Nathan remained seated. "Lieutenant Commander Nash," he called, "a moment?"

Jessica returned to her seat, while the others departed. As soon as everyone was gone, she spoke. "If you're going to chew my butt for disobeying your orders yesterday, you don't have to. I know I was wrong, but surely you

understand that I couldn't leave you behind to die, not after all we've been through and all we mean to each other..."

Nathan raised his hand, cutting her off mid-sentence. "I wasn't going to *chew your butt,*" Nathan said. "I was going to thank you."

"You were?" Jessica asked, shocked.

"I was," Nathan assured her. "I was also going to apologize."

"You were." After a moment, she added, "For what?"

"I was wrong the last time I chastised you. I don't want officers who blindly follow orders. I want officers who think for themselves."

"But..."

"I'm not saying that you were correct in running off to Casbon the way you did, because you weren't. But there are times when you do need to ignore orders and do the right thing. I should know this better than anyone."

"No argument there," Jessica said half under her breath.

"On *Rama* you were correct. You read the situation, you identified the problem, and you formulated a solution that was better than the one I had given you. In that case, there was no time to consult with me and explain your alternate plan, and you knew it. So, you disobeyed my orders but *only* because you were certain that, had I known of your alternate plan, I would have approved of it. Am I right?"

"Oh, yes," Jessica agreed without reservation.

"That's what I thought," Nathan added. "That is all."

Jessica rose from her seat, fighting back a smile as she headed for the door. As she passed him, she stopped, bent over, kissed him on the side of the head, and then whispered in his ear, "You know you love me."

Nathan looked up as she left, rolled his eyes, and shook his head.

Lord Mahtize entered the steam-filled room and made his way across to his favorite spot in the corner. As usual, the room had several men sitting about with towels around their waists and a cold beverage in a tumbler on the bench next to them. Such was how Lord Mahtize usually ended his workweek: a round of torra ball, a massage, and a long steam. It was one of the many pleasures afforded Takara's upper class and, thankfully, one of the few that had not been taken away by the Dusahn.

Lord Mahtize leaned back, draping a towel over his face and closing his eyes for a few moments. It had been a tumultuous couple of weeks: the execution of so many nobles and the disbanding of their assets, the unexpected visit from the frighteningly confident Ghatazhak general, and, of course, the attack on Takara and the destruction of their only orbital spaceport...although he did stand to make a profit rebuilding it.

Lord Mahtize continued to lie back with his face covered, beads of sweat forming on his face and head, listening to the small talk of others in the room, as he usually did. He often gathered interesting and profitable tidbits of information this way.

Today, however, the conversations seemed less. In fact, after a while, they became non-existent. Eventually, Lord Mahtize removed the towel from his face and looked around. The steam room was empty.

For a moment, he became concerned. He could not remember the last time he had been in this room alone. He wondered if there might have been some emergency that caused the others to leave but then, he too would have been notified. Unless......

Lord Mahtize allowed his nervousness to take over. What

if someone *wanted* him to be alone in this room? General Telles's visit suddenly came to mind, and Lord Mahtize grabbed his towel and beverage tumbler to depart.

That's when the door opened and an old man walked in. A very old man; older than Lord Mahtize could ever remember seeing on Takara. He, too, was wearing a towel around his waist. The old man was quite wrinkled but appeared to have a sturdy, muscular frame underneath. In addition, there was a strength and confidence about the man...and a familiarity.

Again, Lord Mahtize gathered his towel and tumbler to leave.

"Please, stay," the old man insisted. "It is you with whom I wish to speak."

"To me?" Lord Mahtize wondered.

"Indeed."

"Do you know who I am?"

"You are Alejandro Mahtize, Lord of House Mahtize, Chair of the Council of Nobles, father of three, husband of one, lover of at least three that I know of, and a spy for the Karuzari Alliance."

"You know much of me," Lord Mahtize replied, struggling to appear unaffected by the old man's accusations. "However, I'm quite sure you are incorrect about the last two."

"My information on you is correct, I assure you," the old man replied confidently. "However, do not be concerned, I have no plans to turn you over to the Dusahn...assuming you provide me with that which I am about to ask."

"I could have you arrested, old man," Lord Mahtize stated indignantly. "I am a noble, remember."

"Yes, you are," the old man replied, unshaken by his

threats. He leaned forward, looking Lord Mahtize in the eyes. "Do you know who I am?"

"You are a decrepit, old fart who has threatened the *wrong* noble," Lord Mahtize replied, his tone taking on a hint of menace toward the old man.

The old man smiled, his eyes becoming steely. "I am General Aldemon Hesson of the Dusahn Empire...retired." The old man leaned back again. "I suggest you parse your words quite carefully from this point forward, Alejandro."

Lord Mahtize was silent for several moments. "What is it you wish of me?" he finally asked.

"I wish for you to deliver a message."

Lord Mahtize again paused, afraid to ask the obvious question. "To whom?" he finally asked.

"To Captain Nathan Scott, leader of the Karuzari Alliance," General Hesson replied. "Tell him, I wish to meet...in private."

## Thank you for reading this story. (A review would be greatly appreciated!)

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