

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA

EPISODE 9



RESISTANCE

Ryk Brown

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**THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 9**

RESISTANCE

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #9: Resistance

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CHAPTER ONE

“Captain on the bridge,” the guard at the hatch announced as Nathan stepped out of his ready room.

There was no response from his bridge staff. They were all busy going about their duties. It had been over two hours since they had briefly engaged Jung forces in Earth orbit. More important to Nathan, it had been over two hours since they had left Lieutenant Commander Nash in the midst of an extremely hot space jump down to the surface of their homeworld in an attempt to make contact with the underground resistance forces on Earth.

“Commander,” Nathan began, addressing his executive officer.

The captain’s tone was more direct than usual, which caused Commander Taylor to eye her captain for a moment before speaking. “Jump drive is fully charged, Captain. We can jump whenever you like.”

“Lieutenant, have you had a chance to analyze the sensor logs from Lieutenant Commander Nash’s space jump?” Nathan asked his science officer.

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Yosef answered. “There were no signs of suit failure, debris, or abnormal flare-ups in her plasma wake. In fact, we were still receiving intermittent signals from her suit telemetry when we jumped away.”

“So it’s still a matter of if she survived the interior temperature,” Nathan said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Any chance the Jung detected her jump?”

She shook her head. "Doubtful, sir. If I hadn't known where to look, I wouldn't have seen her."

Nathan took a breath as he considered Jessica's fate. Jessica was both physically and mentally strong, more so than most of the crew. She was also his friend, which made it all the more difficult for him to not give her well-being undue concern. Putting people he cared about in harm's way was one of the many things he disliked about command. This time, however, it was different. There was little hope of eventually handing command off to someone more qualified. The fate of his world now rested squarely on his shoulders.

"I'm sure she's fine," Cameron said under her breath.

Nathan shot a quick, thankful glance the commander's way. "Flight deck status?"

"Currently red, sir," Cameron answered.

"Set general quarters," Nathan stated calmly. "Mister Riley, prepare to jump to the outer edge of the Barnard system."

"Plotting jump to the outer edge of Barnard, aye," the navigator answered.

"We'll jump to the edge and take a peek before we jump in deeper," Nathan told Cameron.

"I'll be in combat." She turned to exit.

Nathan took his seat in the command chair at the center of the bridge. All around him the bridge staff was preparing for a jump into possibly hostile space, a task made all the more dangerous by the simple fact that they were dangerously low on propellant and had to keep maneuvering to a minimum.

Nathan stared at the spherical main view screen that wrapped around the forward half of the bridge and over their heads. Synchronous feeds from external imaging

systems all seamlessly blended together to give them as good a view as if they were standing outside the ship in the vacuum of space. Though the view was normally of little use, it did serve to remind him of the enormity of the environment in which they operated.

Dozens of voices chattered in the background as compartments from throughout the nearly fifteen-hundred-meter ship reported their readiness to the Aurora's communications center. Naralena and her two Corinairan comm technicians busily responded to each and every call as the ship prepared for action. It was a task the crew of the UES Aurora had perfected over countless drills, thanks to their executive officer.

As he had requested, tactical and system maps appeared on the main view screen situated in separate windows that seemed to hover in space to either side of the forward portion of the spherical screen. Soon, they would also have a tactical enhancement system that would mark the location of targets within their field of vision, keeping him aware of the location of objects that he could not yet see on the screen with the naked eye.

"All hands report general quarters, sir," Naralena announced from the comm station at the back of the bridge. "The XO is in combat, and the chief of the boat is in damage control. Flight deck is yellow."

"Very well."

"Jump to outer edge of Barnard plotted and locked," Mister Riley reported from the navigator's chair.

"Jump when ready, Mister Riley," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir. Activating auto-nav." Mister Riley turned his head toward the helmsman to his right.

The helmsman slid his hands down his console, moving them clear of the flight controls on the various touch

screens built into the helmsman's side of the flight console. The jump drive's auto-nav system took control of the ship and made the necessary adjustments to the ship's course and speed in order to ensure a perfect jump. In this case, the ship was already on the correct heading, and the jump had been calculated based on the Aurora's current speed. It only took a split second for the auto-nav to initiate the jump count.

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

As the jump fields initiated along the external hull of the ship, the main view screen automatically filtered out the intensity of the flash. Blue-white waves of energy poured out of the emitters along the forward section of the hull, quickly engulfing the ship and surging into an intense flash of light. The entire process took less than a second. The stars shifted an almost imperceptible amount, so little that Nathan would not have noticed had he not been staring at them during the jump.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Verifying position," the sensor operator said. After a few seconds of inspecting his displays, he announced, "Position verified. We are on the outskirts of the Barnard system, approximately eighteen light days from the star."

"Threat board is clear," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station.

"Plot an escape jump, just in case," Nathan told his navigator.

"Aye, sir."

"Begin your scans, Mister Navashee," Nathan ordered his sensor operator.

"Aye, sir," Mister Navashee answered. "Performing passive, long-range scans of the Barnard system."

"Escape jump plotted," Mister Riley said.

“Very well.” Nathan rested his right elbow on the arm of his command chair, rubbing his upper lip with his index finger as he waited for a report from his sensor operator. Getting into the Barnard system and using one of its three rocky worlds to perform a gravity assisted turn was crucial if they were going to get to the 72 Herculis system. The last thing they needed was for the Jung to be present in the Barnard system.

“I’m not picking up anything unusual, sir,” the sensor operator reported, “no signs of traffic, no comm-signals, no unusual heat signatures. The system appears empty, at least, as of eighteen hours ago.”

“Very well. Mister Riley, find your gravity assist target and plot our next jump.”

“Aye, sir.”

The navigational chart for the Barnard system appeared on the main view screen in front of them.

“Barnard has three rocky planets close to the system’s red dwarf star,” Mister Riley said. “Barnard Two is on the far side and won’t be in a clear jump line for several days. Barnard One will be passing behind the star in about a week, but is still in the jump line. It won’t require any significant amount of propellant to put us on course for her, but seeing as how she’s closest to the star, we’ll be passing pretty close to the red dwarf when we come around the planet and jump out.”

“What about the third planet?” Nathan said, pointing at the image on the right of the display.

“Farthest from the star and cleanest exit path after our turn, but we’ll burn a bit of propellant lining up with her.”

“Any chance she’ll move closer to our current flight path in the near future?”

“In about four months.”

“Recommendation?”

“I’d choose Barnard Three, sir,” Mister Riley said. “It will cost us some propellant, but there’s almost no risk involved. Choosing Barnard One takes us uncomfortably close to that star. The estimated mass of the star is based on one-thousand-year-old data using technology of unknown precision. If it’s too far off, we could end up using more propellant than we bargained for.”

“Three it is, then,” Nathan agreed. “Plot your jump and change course when ready.”

“Aye, sir, plotting jump for Barnard Three.”

Nathan leaned back in his command chair as he waited for his navigator to prepare their jump plot. As much as he liked Josh and Loki, the B shift flight team had performed admirably over the last few weeks. With Josh still recuperating from his injuries and Loki about to go down to the surface of Tanna to make contact with the resistance, the Aurora’s other two flight teams had been putting in a lot of hours.

“Jump plotted and locked, Captain,” Mister Riley reported.

“Execute when ready.”

“Activating auto-nav. Performing course correction burn.”

Nathan tried not to wince at the sound of the main propulsion system burning up their precious remaining propellant. It seemed an odd thing to even have to consider the cost of propellant for each maneuver. The Aurora’s design profile had called for extended duration missions outside of the Sol system. Accordingly, her propulsion system had been designed to use a fraction of the amount of propellant used by the Defender-class ships for the same maneuvers. Had it not been for their encounter with an unforeseen black hole during their journey back from the

Pentaurus cluster, they would still have most of their propellant. Jumping across the galaxy had used almost no propellant beyond that needed for minor course corrections in between jumps.

One thing was obvious to Nathan: they were going to be using gravity-assist maneuvers to make course changes whenever possible for the foreseeable future. With no homeworld to support them and provide them with resources, rationing would be in order across the board—not only propellant, but food, water, and all other consumables as well. There was no way of knowing how long it might take to liberate the Earth, nor how long they would be at war with the Jung.

“Course correction complete,” Mister Riley reported. “Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump.”

On the screen, the jump field emitters again sent their blue-white light out across the Aurora’s hull like colored water spewing forth from dozens of faucets. In the blink of an eye, the light from each emitter converged and surged up into a brilliant flash, subdued only by the main view screen’s digital filters.

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported. “Orbital insertion in two minutes.”

The barren world of Barnard Three loomed on the view screen before them. It was small—maybe half the size of Earth at best—and was covered by the blue-gray haze of its tenuous atmosphere.

“Might as well gather as much data on that planet as we can while we’re here,” Nathan told Lieutenant Yosef at the science station.

“Already on it, sir,” she answered.

Nathan had observed an overall improvement in the mood of the young lieutenant ever since he had promoted

her to the head of the Aurora's science department. She had spent four months serving as their sensor operator, a job for which she was significantly overqualified. She obviously enjoyed getting back to her original duties.

Nathan continued staring at the image of the planet in front of them. It slid slowly to starboard as the Aurora fell into orbit.

"Entering orbit," Mister Riley reported.

"Is that water ice down there?" Nathan asked Lieutenant Yosef as he noticed the white patches covering the poles of the planet as well as much of her upper latitudes.

"Mostly," the lieutenant answered. "There was probably liquid water on this world long ago either due to a more active star or the thermodynamics of the planet itself. I'm reading gorges and canyons that were probably carved out by flowing water."

"Good to know it's there," Nathan said, "in case our recycling systems ever fail us."

"Water *is* one of the more abundant resources in the core," Lieutenant Yosef said. "That much we *do* know."

"Of course," Nathan answered, turning forward. "Mister Riley, how long will it take us to complete our gravity assist maneuver?"

"Just a few minutes, sir. It's a small planet, and we only have to make a twenty-four point seven degree course correction." Mister Riley looked down at his console briefly. "We'll reach our next jump point in two minutes and forty-eight seconds."

"Very well." Nathan rotated in his chair to face aft. "How are we looking, Mister Randeem?"

"Threat board is still clear."

"I've taken the liberty of scanning everything in line of sight nearby, sir," Mister Navashee reported from the sensor

station. "It doesn't look like anyone has ever bothered to set foot on any of these worlds. Can't say as I blame them, really. Pretty barren."

"On the contrary," Lieutenant Yosef said. "Everything you need to survive is down there. That world *is* habitable."

"Are you kidding? Who would want to live on that frozen hunk of rock?" Mister Navashee said. "Remember BD+25?"

"I said it was habitable, not hospitable," the lieutenant said with a shrug.

"If it has so many resources, why haven't people from Earth ever been here?" Mister Chiles asked from the helm.

"Gravity well," Nathan said. "It's cheaper to mine from asteroids where the surface gravity is only a fraction of a full G."

"Coming up on our jump point, sir," Mister Riley announced. "Fifteen seconds."

"Very well. You're clear to jump, Mister Riley."

"Ten seconds."

The gravity assist maneuver in the Barnard system had gone without incident. Nathan was pleased to know that one of the closest systems to Earth was unoccupied. It might someday serve as a strategic rally point. It was a bit obvious, and he had no doubt that the Jung would eventually check this system for the presence of Terran assets. Still, it *was* a seven-month journey from Earth for the Jung, while it was instantaneous for the Aurora.

"Three.....two.....one.....jump."

Nathan closed his eyes as they jumped once again. *Yes, he thought, the jump drive is going to be our greatest weapon against the Jung, just as it was against the Ta'Akar.*

* * *

The sunlight was a welcome feeling on Jessica's face that morning. She had been on several worlds in the past few months and had witnessed both sunrises and sunsets. She had seen worlds with multiple suns and even a world that had been lit primarily by light reflected off the gas-giant it orbited. But none of them felt familiar. None of them were her sun.

It was cooler here than down on the Florida peninsula where she had grown up and attended the Earth Defense Force's North American Fleet Academy. Early summer had come to Earth, and even though the morning was only a few hours old, she was already warmed up enough that she had been able to remove her jacket and tie it around her waist.

After landing in a dairy pasture twenty kilometers outside of the greater Winnipeg area, Jessica had made her way to the nearest road and followed it toward the city. She carried no maps or electronic navigational aids with her, as they would surely raise suspicion if found in her possession. To that end, she had committed the local area to memory as best she could.

She had walked along the deserted back roads for more than five hours. During her journey, she worked out the details in her head about who she was, where she was from, and why she was headed for Winnipeg. She had to appear convincing to whomever she met along the way. One of the many things she had learned in special operations was that, during an occupation, no one could be trusted. The locals would cooperate and even assist occupying forces in order to secure a better life for themselves and their families. It was basic survival. If any of them found her the slightest bit suspicious, she had to assume they would run straight to the Jung to curry favor.

Unfortunately, the Aurora had run out of fleet-issued hygiene supplies long ago, and they had been using Corinairan soaps, shampoos, and deodorants. They were similar but smelled unlike anything on Earth, having been made from plants indigenous to Corinair. Finding local replacements would be one of her first goals. She had purposefully dirtied her clothing up a bit in order to appear as if she had been traveling for some time. With any luck, her impromptu moonlight dip in the pond and her sweat would be enough to disguise any alien fragrances.

The road eventually began to follow a small river that snaked its way through the farmlands. She knew that the river led to the city; so as long as the road remained close to the waterway, she would be on the right track. The road's roundabout course made for slow going, and she had considered heading east toward one of the main roads in order to hitchhike, but the bigger the road, the more likely it would have occupying forces traveling on it. That was another lesson they had taught her in spec-ops.

This road had been all but devoid of morning traffic. She made an effort to remain hidden from the few vehicles that passed by, usually by ducking behind nearby brush or trees. She had entertained the idea of hitching a ride from a local. Perhaps she'd pick up a little intel during the ride. In the end, she decided it wasn't worth the risk.

A routine glance over her shoulder revealed a dust trail along a recently passed side road. A vehicle was approaching her road, and it was more likely to turn toward the city than away from it. She started looking for a new place to hide if the vehicle did turn her way but came up with nothing: no trees, no rocks, not even a large bush, just a dried-up drainage ditch along the right side of the road that didn't appear to be deep enough to do the job.

Jessica watched the dust trail, walking backward as it approached the road. She could barely make out a faint glimmer of sunlight shining off one of the vehicle's side mirrors as it came to a stop. It turned toward her.

"Crap," she exclaimed as she spun around, searching one last time for a way to hide. The trees in the distance were still too far away. Running toward them would undoubtedly raise suspicion. *Hide in plain sight*, she thought. It was yet another lesson learned during her spec-ops training.

The sound of the vehicle grew louder, and the pitch of its engine increased. There was no doubt it was coming toward her. Jessica continued walking along the road's shoulder, maintaining a normal gait as might be expected of someone walking toward a distant point. As the sound of the vehicle continued to grow closer, the pitch of its engine began to decrease. *It's slowing down*, she realized.

The vehicle rolled to a stop right next to her. "You headed for the city, miss?"

"Yup," she answered, as if it were not the first time she had been asked that question.

"You wanna ride?" the old man behind the wheel asked.

Jessica stopped a moment, looking toward the distant horizon as if trying to judge the distance remaining. "I don't know," she began tentatively. "How much farther is it?"

"Farther than a girl like you should be walking by herself," the man said, "especially considering the times and all."

"Yeah, well, a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do," she said as she started walking again.

The truck eased forward, the old man keeping pace with Jessica. "You know, the Jung usually patrol this road around noon. Might be better if you weren't on it."

Jessica stopped again and looked at the small truck. It was the kind used by farmers and ranch hands all over North America. He was a good-sized man, probably in his late fifties. He looked strong from years of work.

“I don’t have any money,” she told him.

“Don’t remember asking for none.” The old man laughed. “Besides, ain’t no one accepted money around here since the Jung took over.”

“How do I know you’re not some kind of serial killer that’s going to chop me up with an ax and feed me to your farm animals?”

The old man laughed. “Sweetheart, I’ve got two girls your age, both of them just as sassy. How would I look them in the eye knowing I did something like that to someone same as them?”

Jessica looked him over once more. Although he appeared to be big and strong, he did have a kind face, and by her estimates, it would still take another five hours of walking to reach Winnipeg. It was also an opportunity to ask a few questions and collect some intelligence on the occupation.

“Besides,” the old man continued, “you’re probably safer with me than you would be if you got picked up by the Jung.” The old man reached over and opened the passenger door of the old truck. A big smile covered his face. “See? No ax.”

Jessica eyeballed the old man one more time. She unslung her knapsack and moved toward the truck’s open passenger door. “I guess you’re right,” she said as she climbed in. No sooner had she closed the door than the old man gently pressed the accelerator pedal and began maneuvering the truck back onto the road to head out again.

The inside of the old man's truck was no more attractive than the outside. Torn upholstery, a dashboard cracked by decades of sunlight, and a crack in the corner of the windshield all told of the many miles the old truck had carried its owner.

"Bill," the old man said as he brought the truck up to speed.

"Jessica," she answered as they bounced along down the road.

"Been on the road long?"

"Long enough," she said, trying to avoid answering any questions that didn't need to be answered.

"You got business in Winnipeg?"

"Trying to find my brother. He moved up there a few years back."

"Up there? Where you from?"

"Cocoa Beach originally."

"Never heard of it."

"Florida?"

"Florida?" the old man exclaimed, surprise evident in his voice. "Little girl, you are a long way from home. Surely you didn't walk all the way here."

"Hitched some, walked some. Lately, more walking than hitching."

"Where do you sleep, eat, wash up?"

"Whatever, whenever. Occasionally I got lucky and picked up an odd job along the way, usually from friendly people looking to help one another out. Do some chores for them to repay their kindness and such."

"Lot of that going on, lately," the old man said. "Where are your parents?"

"They were killed when the Jung invaded," she said following the story she had concocted during her long walk

toward the city.

“How did that happen?”

“We lived near the Fleet Academy. They got hit hard. The Jung bombed the nearby city as well. Not sure why. I was out of town when it happened.” The hint of grief on Jessica’s face was real, as she did not yet know the true fate of her family.

“So you’ve been on the road since?” the old man asked, again sounding surprised.

“Pretty much,” Jessica said.

“Is your brother expecting you?”

“Don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him since before the Jung came. I don’t even know if he’s aware that our parents are dead.”

“Surely he must know by now,” the old man said. “Communications are spotty, to be sure, especially long-distance stuff. But at least they work again. Have you tried calling him?”

“I tried, but it was disconnected.”

“How do you intend on finding him?” the old man asked.

“I’ve got his address, where he works, and the name of his girlfriend. I figure it’s a start.”

“Not much of one.”

They drove along for several minutes. Jessica could feel the old man’s eyes on her every few seconds. She wasn’t sure if he was nervous that he might have picked up trouble or was just a horny, old man leering at her when he thought she wasn’t paying attention.

“What are you going to do if you don’t find him?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’ll just make do on my own. Maybe head up north, get away from the Jung. Nothing but wilderness up there. The Jung probably don’t even care about it.”

“Just as well you stay in Winnipeg,” he said. “It got hit pretty hard, but the Jung have been pretty good about rebuilding it so far. Besides, life up north is hard.”

“It doesn’t bother you,” she asked, “that the Jung just came in and took over?”

“Someone is always in control, darling,” the old man said. “Different name, different set of rules. The Jung, the NAU, the provincial coalition: in the end, it’s all the same to me. People need food. I grow it and get what I can for it.”

“Never thought about it that way,” Jessica said, fighting to control her outrage. She wanted to tell the old man that he was full of crap. Some things were worth fighting for. Some were even worth dying for, but she didn’t want to appear too radical. She just wanted to get to Winnipeg and find a way to covertly slip into the city.

The old man turned down a side road that headed into a thick grove of trees. The road was unpaved and bumpier than the river road they had been following.

“Where are we going?” Jessica asked.

“Shortcut,” the old man said, a grin on his face.

“Shortcut?”

“That road follows the river. It’s gonna bend right for a few kilometers and then come back again. Waste of time to drive it. This will save us at least ten minutes.”

Jessica held onto the handle above the door to her right, her other hand on the dash board trying to steady herself as the truck bounced along the bumpy dirt road. As she peered outside at the dense forest, she was well aware that the old man was enjoying the sight of her breasts as they bounced with the truck.

A few minutes later, the old man made an abrupt right turn down a narrow path barely wide enough for the truck to

pass. Trees rushed past the outside of the truck, nearly making contact with the vehicle's side-view mirrors.

"What the hell?!" Jessica yelled. "Another one of your shortcuts?" she asked, suspicion in her tone.

"Trust me," the old man said, his grin becoming more lecherous than trustworthy.

The path made several more sharp turns before it finally opened up into a clearing covered with a small, grassy meadow. The old man slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop in the hard-packed, dirt road and sending dust swirling about.

Jessica coughed a couple times as the dust settled. "Wrong turn?" she quipped. She turned and looked at the old man as he pulled a long knife out of his boot.

"Time to pay for your ride, little girl," the old man said as his eyes locked onto Jessica's breasts.

Jessica looked at the old man, trying to appear frightened. "Are you going to rape me or kill me?"

"That's up to you, little darling."

"What about your daughters? How are you going to look them in the eyes?"

"I lied," the old man said, his kindly old expression fading rapidly. "I ain't got no daughters. But if my boys were here, they'd be joining in."

Jessica continued her masquerade as the frightened, defenseless traveler, not wanting to put the old man on the defensive. "What do you want me to do?" she asked, her lower lip quivering.

"Do as I ask, and I might let you live," he told her. "Make me happy, and I might even take you closer to your destination." The old man stopped and leaned in toward her, brandishing his knife in front of her eyes. "Piss me off,"

he began in a sinister tone, “and I’ll leave you out here lying in a pool of your own blood.”

Jessica maintained her act, all the while fighting to hold back her laughter. She took a deep breath, pretending to summon the courage to face the sexual degradations that the old man expected to inflict upon her.

“Very well,” she mumbled as if she were about to cry. She turned to open the door, but found the handle did not work.

“Eh!” the old man said. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I figured there would be more room outside,” she lied. “It’s kind of cramped in here, isn’t it?” She flashed her biggest, most innocent eyes.

He fell for it, grinning from ear to ear. “Wait right there,” he told her as he climbed out of the truck on the opposite side.

Jessica watched through the front windshield, maintaining her fearful expression as the old man came around the front of the truck to her door. She tried to avoid looking him in the eyes, wanting him to feel convinced of his domination over her as he opened her door. That was all she needed, some room.

Jessica stepped out of the truck, taking two steps back from the old man as he closed the door. Her fearful expression had vanished, replaced by one of strength and confidence.

The old man looked at her. “Well?”

“Change of plans, Grandpa,” she began, arrogance in her voice. “Put down the knife, apologize, and hand over the keys to your crappy, old truck. If you do as I ask, I might let you live. If your apology is sincere enough, I might even let

you keep your truck... after we get to the outskirts of Winnipeg.”

The old man laughed. “Or?”

“Or I take the knife from you, slit your throat, and leave *you* out here lying in a pool of *your* own blood.”

The old man looked at her as she puckered up and winked at him. He laughed. “Oh, this is gonna be fun,” he said with an evil grin. He lunged at her, his knife hand extended and slashing from the center outward.

It was a dumb opening move. Jessica fired a quick right into the old man’s nose, breaking it and sending blood flying.

The old man staggered backward a few steps. “Fuck!” he screamed as he reached for his injured nose.

“What’s the matter, asshole?” Jessica answered, still in her combat stance. “Not the kind of foreplay you were hoping for?”

“I’m gonna cut you up, bitch!” he shouted, coming at her full force.

Jessica leaned slightly to her left, moving out of the way of the old man’s oncoming knife. She grabbed his knife hand with her right hand and pivoted on her right foot as his hand passed her. As she pivoted, she raised her left forearm up and slammed it into the old man’s upper arm, stripping the knife from his now weakened grip. Her left foot landed in the path of the old man’s right leg, sending him toppling forward so he slammed head first into the side of the truck.

Jessica stepped toward the fallen, old man, tossing the knife a few centimeters into the air so that it spun a half-circle before she caught it again with the blade now pointing straight ahead. The old man was face down in the dirt, dazed. She stepped up and planted her feet on either side

of the old man's legs, then bent over and grabbed his hair, pulling his head up and backward as she squatted.

Jessica put the knife up against the old man's throat. "Had enough, old man?" She leaned in closer, her mouth next to his right ear. "Are you happy?"

"I got people, bitch!" the old man swore, spitting as he howled. "My boys will avenge me!"

"I shot an emperor between the eyes! You think I give a rat's ass about a bunch of hick, northern farm boys?" Jessica slammed the old man's head into the side of the truck again, rendering him unconscious.

Jessica dropped the old man's limp body onto the dirt, then reached for his neck to check his pulse.

"You'll live," she declared as she got back to her feet. She looked around the clearing, checking to see if there was anyone nearby. She had no idea how far she was from the main road, and she had only a faint recollection of the number and direction of the turns the old man had taken to get them to this clearing. "Damn!" she yelled, kicking the unconscious old man in the side. "I come all the way back to save this planet, and this is my welcoming party?"

Jessica took a few moments to gather her thoughts, recalling everything that had happened and the things she had said to the old man. "I probably shouldn't have said that thing about shooting an emperor between the eyes," she said to herself, "not that you'd understand the reference."

Jessica squatted down next to the old man and started rummaging through his pockets, pulling out his keys, his wallet, and his phone, as well as a few small, plastic chips. She scrolled through the list of contacts on the old man's phone. Finding nothing of interest, she pulled the battery from the device and tossed it into the woods behind her.

She smashed the phone against the corner of the truck bed and flung it in the opposite direction of its battery.

She held up one of the small chips she had found in the old man's pocket. There was an emblem on it, as well as some unusual writing. She had seen such writing before, back on the Jung gunboat in the outer edges of the Sol system's Oort cloud. The chip had a magnetic data strip on one end.

"Don't know what they are exactly, but they're mine now," she said, "as is your truck." She stood up, walked around to the driver's side, and climbed in. She started the truck and eased it forward and into a left turn, circling around the middle of the clearing. As she straightened out and pointed the vehicle back down the dirt road, she called out the window, "Thanks for the ride, Grandpa!"

* * *

Luis lay on the mattress in his quarters, his feet dangling over the end of the bed at his knees. He had just started to drift away when the beep of the intercom snapped him awake. He already knew who was calling.

"What's up, Devyn?" he called out, his voice automatically opening the comm-channel.

"Are you sleeping?" Devyn's voice asked over the comms.

"No, just resting after another exciting watch."

"Am I bothering you?"

"Does it matter?"

"You spend too much time sleeping anyway," Devyn said. *"You should do something constructive with your off-duty time."*

“Like what?” he asked, his hands in the air above him as he lay on the bed. “I’ve watched just about every movie in the video database, even the training videos. You want to know how to properly clean the galley? I mean, if we had one.”

“No thanks,” she said. “You could try reading a book.”

“Reading makes me sleepy.”

“Everything makes you sleepy.”

“Not true,” he said, holding up one finger to emphasize his point even though she couldn’t see him.

“Go for a run, then.”

“The command deck isn’t that big,” Luis said as he sat up on the edge of his bed.

“Walk, then. At least it’s movement.”

“The corridors are narrow, and there’s stuff hanging from the overheads everywhere. It’s like an obstacle course. This deck is far from finished.”

“I thought Mola and Darcy were working on that.”

“They have been, whenever they’re not on watch. There’s a lot of stuff to finish, though. And I don’t think they have all the materials they need. They’ve mostly been tying things up out of the way temporarily, so we won’t have to keep ducking all the time.”

“You could go and help them.”

“I tried once. They kept getting pissed off at me for doing things incorrectly. I’m pretty sure they prefer that I *don’t* help them.”

“There’s got to be someplace you can stretch your legs a bit.”

“Easy for you to say,” he said as he sat up on the edge of the bed. “You’ve got those nice long corridors to jog down.”

“True, but I’d gladly give it up for quarters and a decent shower. If it wasn’t for the decon showers back here, we wouldn’t have anything at all.”

“Yeah, the quarters *are* pretty decent,” Luis said. “I just wish we had actual linens. I have a feeling this mattress is going to get a bit rank if we’re out here much longer.”

“At least you have a mattress,” she said. *“I’ve been sleeping on a field cot for... How long have we been out here now?”*

“Two and a half months,” he said. “Two and a half long-ass months... give or take a day or two.”

There was silence for several seconds.

“Things must not be going well on Earth,” Devyn finally said, her tone more somber.

Luis recognized the change in her tone. It wasn’t the first time the hopelessness of their situation had seeped into their conversations. Luis stood, moved into the next room, and switched on the main view screen, selecting the comm-system as the input source. Devyn’s face appeared on the screen a moment later. “We don’t know that, Devyn,” he said as he sat on the padded chair, looking at her saddened expression.

“Then why haven’t they come for us yet?”

Luis didn’t have an answer. They hadn’t received any messages from Fleet Command since they’d picked up the broadcast of the general surrender order just after they had finished their final acceleration burn during their escape from Earth.

“They haven’t even sent us a message,” she added, her eyes downcast on the video screen. *“The Jung have probably taken control of the entire planet. There probably isn’t anyone left alive from the EDF.”*

“Our orders still stand, Devyn. We stay hidden until contacted and scuttle the ship if the Jung try to take her.”

“What’s the point?”

“You can’t lose hope, Devyn,” Luis said.

“Too late,” she said, her eyes glancing up to meet his on the screen momentarily.

“As long as this ship survives, there is still hope,” Luis said. “Sooner or later, they’ll find a way to reach us. They wouldn’t have gone to so much trouble to make sure we escaped unseen unless they had a plan that involved this ship. They’re just waiting for an opportunity.”

“Always the optimist.”

“You used to be.”

“That was two and a half months ago,” she reminded him, a small smile briefly appearing at the corners of her mouth.

“We just have to keep this ship and the data cores safe until Fleet comes looking for us.”

“But for how long?”

“As long as it takes,” Luis said. “You know that, Devyn. We’ve been over this before.”

Devyn looked at him across the video monitor. *“This would all be so much easier if we were all together, instead of being separated by a vacuum.”*

“I didn’t know you cared,” Luis teased.

“I don’t,” she countered, her expression turning devilish. *“I just want to sleep in a real bed for once.”*

“Nice.” One of the things he liked about Devyn was her ability to pull herself out of a gloomy state of mind.

She sighed. *“Up for another game of Hi-Lo?”* she asked, trying to change the subject with one of their usual, mindless diversions.

“What do you owe me now, about half a million?” Luis wondered.

“You’re actually keeping track?”

“Hell, yes. If we ever get rescued, I’m gonna own your ass.”

“Oh, baby, I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

* * *

“Captain,” Abby said, standing in the hatch to Nathan’s ready room, “do you have a moment?”

“Of course, Doctor,” Nathan responded as he stood from behind his desk. He gestured for her to sit. “Please.”

Abby stepped through the hatchway, taking care to swing the hatch closed once inside before taking her seat.

“What can I do for you?” Nathan asked, noticing that she had chosen to close the hatch before speaking.

“I was wondering if I might ask a favor of you.” She took a seat across the desk from Nathan.

“Of course. What do you need?” He sat back down.

“I don’t know if it is even possible, but I was hoping that, while Lieutenant Commander Nash is on Earth, she might attempt to make contact with my husband.”

Nathan was unsure how to respond at first. “To what end?” he asked, treading carefully.

“I was hoping to learn if my family...” Abby looked down at her hands in her lap for a moment before looking up again. “I need to know if they are alive... if they are well.”

Nathan leaned forward, his arms folded on his desk. “I don’t know if that’s even possible. Even if it is, it’s likely unwise.”

“I understand that, sir, and I do not ask this without serious consideration. It’s just that ever since we returned to

Earth, ever since the Lieutenant Commander's report, I have been terribly distracted... unfocused. I can't work. I can't eat. I can't sleep. My mother died when I was young. Since my father passed, my husband and our children are all I have left. Without them..."

"Abby," Nathan interrupted, seeing how upset she was, "I understand how you feel. None of us know about our loved ones."

"I know, but still..."

"Have you considered the possibility that attempting to locate them might raise undue suspicion?" Nathan said. "It could even put your family at risk." He could tell by the look in her eyes that she had not considered such risk. "And what of the others on board?" Nathan continued. "Shall I have Lieutenant Commander Nash track down all of their families as well?"

"Of course," she conceded, her eyes downcast. "You're quite right, sir. I'm terribly sorry to have asked."

"It's quite all right, Abby. Really, it is. Unfortunately, there is so much more at stake now. We're no longer just trying to get home. We now have the fate of our own world on our shoulders. We can no longer afford the luxury of our own personal needs, and we can't afford mistakes. Everything we do now must be with good reason, with the risks balanced against the gains." Nathan looked at her, noticing that she was barely holding herself together. He chose not to continue presenting his argument, fearing that doing so might be more than she could handle at the moment and convinced that she had understood the impossible nature of her request even before she had entered the room. He suspected that she had only asked to ease her own conscience and possibly with the slim hope that it might somehow be possible after all.

She forced a smile. "You know, I considered putting on one of those absurd suits and jumping out alongside the lieutenant commander," she said, "without permission."

Nathan tried not to laugh at the idea. "From what I understand, you would not have enjoyed the experience."

"I won't bother you any longer, Captain." She began to rise.

"Perhaps you should consider taking some time off from your duties. Maybe ask Doctor Chen for something to help you sleep."

"I don't know if that would be a good idea," she said, seeming embarrassed by the admission of her sleeping disorder.

"You know, I haven't slept well for months now," Nathan told her, hoping to ease her embarrassment. "I only get three or four hours of sleep a day," he continued as he leaned back in his chair. "At least once a week, I have to take something to knock myself out for nine or ten hours. If I didn't, I'd be speaking gibberish on the bridge."

"Really?" She settled back down into her seat as the captain continued.

The look on her face and her tone suggested surprise at his revelation.

"Seriously," he said. "Before I started taking the doctor's knock-out nuggets, every so often I'd find myself walking down a corridor without knowing where I was trying to go. Trust me; you'll feel much better if you let yourself get a good night's sleep every few days."

"Perhaps I will speak with Doctor Chen."

"Tell her I sent you," Nathan said, smiling. "Maybe you'll get a discount," he added with a wink.

"Thank you, Captain," she said as she rose again.

“Abby.” Nathan leaned forward once more. “I should have told you this long ago, but everything that we’ve accomplished thus far—escaping the anti-matter explosion, surviving our adventures in the Pentaurus cluster and defeating the Ta’Akar, and finally making it back home by leap-frogging across a thousand light years—none of that would have been possible without you.” Nathan looked her squarely in the eyes, trying to appear as confident as possible. “When we drive the Jung from our world and free our people, it will be because of the efforts of you and your father. It will be because of the sacrifices of you and your family, as much as it will be because of the sacrifices of the rest of our crew. Someday, you will tell your children of your adventures. You will tell them how you helped save their world, and they will be proud of their mother. Incredibly proud.”

Abby smiled, this time more genuinely than before. “Thank you, Captain.” She began to turn toward the hatch, then paused. “I suspect your father will be equally proud of his son.”

Nathan watched as she turned and opened the hatch to exit, wondering if she was correct. *Would my father be proud?* he wondered. *Assuming he is still alive.*

* * *

Jessica looked at the city skyline approaching from ahead of her as she rolled along in the old truck. She figured she was no more than a kilometer or two from the edge of the city proper. Farm houses were increasingly common on the back road she had been following. Up ahead, the road curved to the left again, taking it farther away from the river on her right.

Jessica looked at her watch. It was almost noon. The old man had mentioned that the Jung patrolled this road around this time. Of course, there was no reason to believe him. There was also no reason *not* to believe him. Just the same, she was beginning to feel like she had followed this road about as far as was safe. She doubted she could simply drive into the city. The transmissions the Aurora had monitored during her recon cruise toward Earth had shown that there was an active underground resistance cell in the greater Winnipeg area. That meant the Jung would have roadblocks and checkpoints. They would be checking IDs and searching vehicles, both of which were complications she wanted to avoid. If she was going to get inside the city unnoticed by the Jung, more discreet tactics would be in order.

Jessica scanned the area as she slowed the old truck and pulled as far onto the shoulder as possible. She continued scanning the area long after she came to a complete stop, waiting for the dust kicked up by her tires to settle. Satisfied that no one was watching her, she shut the vehicle off and removed the keys. She grabbed her jacket from the seat next to her and vigorously wiped down the steering wheel, control surfaces, door handles, and the dashboard. She looked at the inside of the vehicle, thinking about the places she might have touched, then reached up and wiped the handle above the passenger door as well.

Jessica got out of the old truck, pulling her knapsack and jacket out with her. She closed the door and wiped off the handle, then went around to the passenger door and wiped down that handle as well. She paused once more, carefully looking around for anyone that might be looking her way, but there was no one in sight. She resisted the temptation

to look upward, wondering if the Jung might be using satellites to monitor ground activity.

She walked around the back end of the truck and squatted down to look underneath. After finding no spare tire, she moved around to the rear driver's side tire and pulled out the knife she had liberated from the owner of the truck. Using the tip of the knife, she depressed the valve stem and let all the air out of the tire.

After one last look around, she moved quickly into the forest along the side of the road and headed toward the river. This particular section of the forest was only ten or fifteen meters wide. Minutes later, she reached the river's edge. She looked up and down the river, again checking for onlookers. There was a small bit of smoke wafting up from what appeared to be a small encampment along the opposite bank far to her right, but she could not see anyone nearby. She pulled the keys from her pocket and tossed them into the river with a sweeping underhand motion. She then turned to her left and headed toward the city, moving back under the cover of the forest canopy as she considered the possibility of overhead surveillance once more.

* * *

"Captain," Commander Taylor said as she entered the captain's ready room and closed the hatch behind her.

"Yes, Commander?"

"We'll be fully charged and ready for the last jump in about an hour."

"You came in to tell me that?" Nathan asked, knowing full well that there was more on the commander's mind.

Cameron moved closer to Nathan's desk. "I was wondering if you'd given any thought as to what we're

going to do.”

“I thought we were going to 72 Herculis.”

“I didn’t mean right now. I meant over the next few months.”

“It’s difficult to plan that far ahead,” Nathan said, “especially since we have so little information. Perhaps after we’ve figured out how to replenish our propellant reserves and have established contact with Earth’s resistance, we’ll be in a better position to make such plans. As for now, I’m taking it one day at a time.”

“Surely you’ve considered various strategies to liberate Earth.”

“Actually, I have not.” Nathan leaned back in his chair.

“Nathan, don’t you think that...”

“No, I don’t, Cam,” Nathan interrupted. “Planning ahead and working out a solution for every possible contingency is *your* way of doing things, not mine.”

“I still think it would be best to have at least some sort of long-term plan in mind.”

“Eventually, yes. *That* much I *would* agree with. For the time being, however, I think it best we concentrate on the acquisition of usable propellant, the establishment of communications with the resistance on Earth, and a rendezvous with the Celestia. Honestly, Cameron, can you think of a long-term scenario that *doesn’t* require us to first accomplish those three goals?”

“Of course not, Nathan,” Cameron said. “But it wouldn’t hurt to give it some thought. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I understand. I just believe it’s better to concentrate on the tasks at hand for now. By the time we accomplish them, we’ll not only have a better understanding of the situation, but we’ll also be better prepared to take whatever actions we deem necessary. Right now, without propellant, there is

very little we actually *can* do. Until that problem is solved, everything else is just daydreaming.”

“Daydreaming?” Cameron asked, frowning slightly. “Without an end goal, how are you going to recognize opportunities as they present themselves along the way?”

“The end goal is an Earth that is free of the Jung and is safe from reinvasion. That much is obvious. It’s the idea of preparing a strategy without first understanding the broader picture that I object to. Honestly, Cameron, I suspect this is going to be one of those situations where we’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

“No, it’s not. You are the captain, Nathan, and I’ll follow your orders. You already know that. You also know that, as your executive officer, I’ll tell you when I think you’re full of it.”

“Is this one of those times?”

“Close. Very close, but not yet. Don’t worry; I’ll let you know.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Meanwhile, I assume you have no objections if I continue to plan ahead and work out a solution for every possible contingency.”

Nathan chuckled. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

“Have at it, then, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Is there anything else?”

“The cheng reports the jump shuttle is finally operational again. However, he is requesting a few test jumps before it goes back into regular service.”

“Not a moment too soon,” Nathan said. “Tell Vlad he gets one test jump, then we have missions for that shuttle. After that, have him divide up the men that had been working on

the jump shuttle, half to the Falcon's repair team and half to Lieutenant Montgomery's improved jump shuttle project."

"He's already planning on doing just that, sir."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Make sure our last jump is at least three light years shy of 72 Herculis. That place was a hornet's nest last time we were here, and Josh and Loki stirred it up a bit. We'll send the jump shuttle to the outer edge of the system and let them collect old light data for a few hours before we send Loki and the major to Tanna."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else, sir?"

"No, Commander. You're dismissed."

Cameron turned to exit.

"Commander," Nathan said before she reached the hatch, "join me in the captain's mess at nineteen hundred. You can tell me about your long-term strategies then." A small smile crept back onto his face.

"You may regret that invitation," she said as she turned to exit.

* * *

"Ensign Delaveaga," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic greeted.

"Evening, sir," Luis answered as he made his way to the tactical station on the Celestia's bridge. Although they had no weapons, the tactical station had been configured by the two civilian technicians stranded on board to display most of the critical systems on the bridge.

"Actually, it's early morning, at least by Earth Mean Time."

"Guess I've lost track of the time of day, what with all the shift swapping going on." With only six members of the

fleet on the Celestia's command deck, they had to work in pairs to man the bridge twenty-four hours a day.

"Ensign Goba should be back on his feet in a few days. Until then, we'll just have to keep juggling things around."

"Couldn't we just have one guy monitoring this station and the other guy sleeping in the ready room?" Luis said.

"Isn't that what you guys are doing already?"

"Not me, sir," Luis said, feigning innocence.

"Of course not," the lieutenant commander said. "What was I thinking?"

"Anything new happen while I was gone?"

"Jupiter keeps getting bigger on the screen," the lieutenant commander said, pointing at the image of the big, orange gas-giant on the tactical display screen. "Other than that, nada." The lieutenant commander stepped out of Luis's way. "We are going to miss it, right?"

"I run the numbers every shift at the beginning, middle, and end, sir. They're always the same. We're just going to cruise on by. The planet's gravity will slow us slightly and change our course a full degree, but we'll miss her for sure."

"Just checking," the lieutenant commander said as he patted Luis on the back. "I know you're pulling back-to-backs, so I'll be in to relieve you in four."

"That won't be necessary, sir. I'll be fine. We've still got plenty of coffee, and I still have more than half the flight manual left to read."

"As you wish, Ensign."

Luis settled into his seat behind the tactical console as the lieutenant commander departed. "How's your back doing, Gus?" he called out to Ensign Schenker at the sensor station.

"Still hurts."

"Anything interesting on sensors?"

“Nothing but swirls of gas on Jupiter.”

“Still can’t see anything around Earth?”

“Nope. I can’t pick up squat on the short-range passive array, at least not at this distance. You’d think they would have installed the long-range stuff, knowing they were going to send us on a one-way trip into deep space and all.”

“You’d think,” Luis said. After so many shifts together, Luis had learned that it was better to just agree with the ensign than to argue with him. It made for an easier shift.

“It just sucks not knowing how many Jung ships are out there,” Ensign Schenker said. “I don’t mind the tedium so much, and I am seeing a lot of cool stuff on Jupiter’s moons. I just wish I could see what’s going on farther away. Short-range sucks.”

“I hear ya, my friend,” Luis said. “So, what will it be tonight? Another old movie from the database, or more Jung propaganda broadcasts from Earth?”

“Neither,” Gus said. “I’m sick of movies, and I can’t stand to listen to more ramblings about the glory of the empire and about how our political leaders had been enslaving us for all those decades. I’m probably just going to go crash in the ready room like usual. I think that couch helps my back.”

“I guess it’s back to the flight manual for me, then,” Luis said. He opened up the digital flight manual on one of his displays and began reading where he had left off.

* * *

“Mister Sheehan and I will land in this valley,” Major Waddell said, pointing at the holographic rendering of the canyons on the command briefing room’s conference table. “It is just north of the same waterfall that he and Mister

Hayes flew through. That should put us close enough to the cave to reach it before sunrise.”

“You’re going to space jump into a narrow canyon at night and land near a massive waterfall?” Nathan asked, finding it hard to believe that anyone would choose to attempt such a thing on purpose.

“The auto-navigation systems on the Corinari space-jump rigs are precise enough for this jump,” Lieutenant Montgomery said. “However, the Ghatazhak rigs would be better suited to the task.”

“That may be so,” Major Waddell said with a nod, “but I’d feel more comfortable using equipment that I am familiar with.”

“How much better suited?” Loki asked nervously. “I have no preferences, other than personal safety, that is.”

“The Corinari rigs will be fine,” Major Waddell insisted. “The mist from the falls blows south through the canyon. According to Mister Sheehan, it is quite heavy and should serve to obscure the view of our descent from anyone in the valley south of the falls. The section of the canyon north of the falls is unsettled. Therefore, our risk of detection should be minimal.”

“Why is it unsettled?” Cameron said.

“Probably because you’d have to be a mountain goat to want to live there,” Lieutenant Yosef said. “It’s pretty rugged terrain, for the most part.”

“Using the logs from the terrain-following sensors on the Falcon,” Major Waddell said, “we were able to find a suitable landing site. It is a small plateau approximately thirty by eighty meters.”

“That’s a small target,” Major Prechitt pointed out.

“And if you miss your target?” Nathan asked.

“We will not miss,” Major Waddell proclaimed with confidence.

Nathan looked at Lieutenant Montgomery for a second opinion.

“Without weather data from this world, one cannot factor in the numerous variables involved. Assuming the weather at the time of their descent is similar to that during which the Falcon was flying, I see nothing that might significantly diminish their chance of an accurate landing.”

“Don’t you mean ‘safe’ landing?”” Loki wondered aloud.

“You should be in politics, Lieutenant,” Nathan mumbled. He looked at Cameron.

“There are five moons orbiting Tanna,” Cameron began. “The fifth moon, the smallest of the five, is the moon that has the Jung fighter base on the surface. The orbits of the five moons are somewhat dissimilar, but the fifth moon’s orbit is even more dissimilar. It is lower and faster than the other four. We were able to calculate windows during which it will be safe for the shuttle to jump into nearby space in order to communicate with the landing party. I have prepared a communications schedule that will provide comm opportunities at intervals of approximately every six and a half hours, give or take an hour. The window will last five minutes, no longer. The shuttle must jump in and out during that time in order to use the positions of the other moons to avoid detection by the asteroid base. This is all based on shipboard time, of course. I have no idea how the people of Tanna track their time of day.”

“The sooner you wrap this up and call for extraction, the better,” Nathan said. “Get in, make contact with the resistance, determine if they know of a source of usable propellant, and get out again. Do not engage the Jung other than to defend yourselves. If we do not hear from you within

72 hours, we will consider you missing in action, and we will depart. Is that understood?"

"Depart, as in gone for good, or as in we'll come back and check on you later?" Loki said. The lack of response to his question served as his answer.

"I included the coordinates for the laser-comm unit," Cameron told them. "No omni-directional broadcasts, and all comms shall be encrypted using the new cipher developed by Lieutenant Montgomery's people."

Nathan looked at Cameron. "Not standard fleet encryption?"

"Jessica thought it best to assume all fleet encryption had been broken, perhaps even long before the invasion. She asked one of Lieutenant Montgomery's men to develop a replacement cipher."

"Our cryptology is considerably more advanced than what I've seen of standard fleet ciphers," the lieutenant explained. "I expect it will be nearly impossible for the Jung to break, assuming their computational technologies are not significantly advanced over your own."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Lieutenant Commander Kamenetskiy is finishing the validation testing of the rebuilt jump shuttle. As we still have a few hours before departure, I suggest you two get a bite to eat and some rest." Nathan looked at the faces gathered around the conference table. "Dismissed." As the attendees stood to exit, Nathan added, "Loki, would you remain for a moment, please?"

Cameron followed the rest of the staff out of the command briefing room, closing the hatch behind her as she exited.

"You sure you're up for this, Loki?" Nathan asked. "You seem a bit apprehensive."

"A bit? That's all?"

“I was being kind,” Nathan said. “You know, you don’t have to do this. We can send one of the major’s men along with him. Garrett said to send the knife along with anyone that came to find him.”

“I know, sir. Lieutenant Commander Nash and I talked about this at length. She believes we will have a better chance if someone that Garrett already knows is there.”

“You do realize how dangerous this mission could be? I’m not just talking about the space jump itself. God knows that’s dangerous enough.”

“I know, sir. Master Chief Montrose has been helping me prepare, teaching me to shoot straight and such. He’s even been teaching me a few Corinari combat moves. Marcus even rigged up a harness and a pulley system to simulate the landing. Can’t say that I’m that good at it yet, but at least I’m not landing on my butt anymore.”

Nathan chuckled. “That’s good to hear. Now go and get something to eat.”

“Yes, sir,” Loki said as he stood. “And thanks for offering me an out.”

“No problem.”

Loki headed for the hatch, but paused and turned back toward the captain. “Sir, did you mean what you said? About leaving us behind after three days? Would you really do that?”

“I’m the captain of the last ship capable of defending Earth, Mister Sheehan,” Nathan said as he looked Loki in the eye. “I did it before, and I’d do it again if necessary. I’d hate doing it—probably even more so than I hated doing it the first time—but I’d do it nonetheless, as I expect you would if you were in my place.”

Loki stared at his captain for a moment, finally nodding his agreement. “I would hope that I would have the strength

to, sir.”

“Good luck, Loki,” Nathan said as he stood and extended his hand.

Loki took the captain’s hand, giving it a single shake. “Thank you, sir.” Loki smiled. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

“You’d better.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jessica had been following the river over two hours, yet she had only moved a kilometer closer to the city. The winding path of the river and the forest itself made for slower travel, but it had the advantage of stealth, which was more important. She considered the possibility that making such an effort to stay out of sight might in itself seem suspicious, but after her encounter with the lecherous, old farmer, she figured most people would understand why a young woman traveling on foot would prefer to remain invisible.

The forest itself was surprisingly lush. Green and full, with plenty of undergrowth covering its base, it was unlike wooded areas near her childhood home. When it finally opened up to a small meadow, she felt almost disappointed. The meadow was not terribly large, about one thousand square meters, she guessed. At the inland edge of the meadow stood a large two-story structure. It was too large to be a residence and too small to be a hotel. There was a dirt lot to one side with a long unpaved road that disappeared into the forest on the other side of the building. She studied the building for several minutes. There were no signs of life that she could discern: no vehicles, no clothing hanging on the line to dry, no children's toys lying on the ground. There weren't even any curtains on the windows.

The river ahead bent to the left again, undoubtedly snaking back around as it had done time and again during

her journey. More than an hour ago, she had wished she had driven the truck a little farther before abandoning it on the side of the road. The last two times the river had made such a turn, she had been able to cut across the forest and shorten her time by at least ten minutes.

Jessica looked at the sun hovering low in the western sky. She figured she only had another hour or two of daylight left. After that, traveling through such dense growth would become more dangerous. She was also tired, having not slept in nearly twenty hours. She really needed a place to hole up for the night, so she could enter the city well rested and alert. If the building at the far end of the meadow was indeed abandoned, it would make an excellent place to get some much needed sleep.

She turned inland and walked parallel to the meadow, staying a few meters back inside the forest to remain hidden. Once she reached the appropriate distance from the structure, she broke out of the forest, approaching the building from one corner to reduce the angle of visibility in case there was someone in there. Her instinct was to go into a crouch, approaching the target in a low profile, but that would put anyone who might be hiding inside on guard. Instead, she walked normally across the field as if she were merely trying to cut across to the other side more directly.

Jessica kept her head angled downward as if watching where she was stepping, but at the same time, she kept glancing upward at the building. She checked every window repeatedly, watching for any movement in a systematic fashion. As she grew closer, she spotted torn remnants of old curtains still hanging on some of the upper floor windows. As she closed in, she could make out more detail. It became obvious that the building had been abandoned for

some time. Months, perhaps years, of neglect became obvious with each step.

The ground of the meadow was soft. Jessica was sure that it had rained here recently. The dirt lot on the side of the house, although far more compacted, was also fresh, as it lacked the cracks in the dirt that usually accompanied lengthy exposure to the sun. As she approached the building, something caught her eye... footprints. They were all over the place. There were even some dried up muddy prints on the back deck of the building. Someone had been here, and recently. They were smaller than Jessica's feet, and her feet were of average size for an adult female. She decided they had to be made by a teenager or a smaller than average adult.

Jessica's movements became more careful and considered. The situation had changed. She had to strike a balance between caution and remaining true to her cover as a young woman traveling alone. She stepped up onto the back deck, moving across slowly. The old deck boards creaked with each step. If there was someone inside, they knew Jessica was out there for sure now.

Jessica reached for the doorknob, then hesitated, remembering her cover. Although it seemed to go against every instinct, she instead knocked on the door several times with her knuckles. "Hello?" She continued knocking even harder. "Hello?! Is anybody home?"

The force of her knocking opened the door slightly. She looked down at the door jamb, which was splintered away on the inside. The door had been kicked in. The splinters did not appear fresh, with some degree of weathering. At the very least, they were a few months old. "Don't shoot me!" she hollered as she pushed the door open. "I'm not armed!"

She pushed the door open and stepped cautiously inside. The room was of modest size and appeared to be some sort of an entryway or a storm porch. She moved through into the next room, a large kitchen. It had an industrial feel to it, with multiple oversized, stainless steel sinks; large, two-door refrigeration units; an eight-burner range; and a flat-top griddle. Oddly, the inside appeared better kept than the outside. It wasn't clean, but it was at least tidy, with nothing left out on the counters. She opened a few of the cupboards, all of which were empty. She found the refrigerator empty as well. She flipped the light switch, but nothing happened.

Jessica moved into the next room, a large empty dining room, big enough for several tables at least. The next room was even larger and emptier, with a large natural rock fireplace at one end. There were several doors as well as a staircase leading up to the second floor. One door had large glass panes through which Jessica could see another storm porch on the front side of the building.

She opened the other doors, finding a small bathroom that was in need of cleaning, a closet, another empty room with an empty bookcase covering one wall, and another set of stairs, this time leading down into a basement. She stood there for several seconds, contemplating which direction to explore first. She pulled out a small flashlight that was no bigger than her thumb. She pointed it down the stairs and squeezed it between her thumb and forefinger. A bright beam of light pierced the darkness below, revealing a basement flooded in about a half meter of water.

Jessica spent the next fifteen minutes searching the upper floor of the house as well as the attic space. The upper floor had thirteen rooms and seven bathrooms. Oddly enough, one of the upstairs bathrooms was relatively clean, enough that Jessica felt more than comfortable using it.

There was no running water, but the bathtub in the clean bathroom was full of dirty water, and two large buckets sat on the floor next to it. A little water in the tank of the toilet, and it worked like a charm.

Other than a single mattress that had seen better days and a few ratty old blankets, there was nothing of value left in the old house. The mattress and the blankets had been assembled in the corner room adjacent to the functioning bathroom. The two large windows offered an excellent view of both the road leading in from the forest and the meadow Jessica had crossed to reach the building.

The sun was beginning to set. In another hour, it would be dark. She had no doubt that someone had been living here recently. The questions were how recently and would they be returning anytime soon. She would rig some simple trip wires to make noise if someone came up the stairs. She was a light sleeper, and it would be enough to wake her. With any luck, she would get a good night's sleep and head out at first light. She could see the lights of Winnipeg coming on in the distance, and if she got an early start, she figured she could be walking the streets of the city by noon the following day.

* * *

"How are you doing?" Loki asked as he stepped up next to Josh's bed in the Aurora's medical treatment area.

"Not bad," Josh answered. He watched the nurse insert the syringe filled with a silver liquid into his IV line.

Loki looked over at the nurse on the opposite side of the bed.

"Remember," the nurse said as she finished the injection, "if they make you too uncomfortable, let me know,

and I can signal some of them to become dormant, have them work in rotating shifts instead of all at once.”

“I’ll remember,” Josh said. He waited for the nurse to turn and walk away before he started rubbing his arm above the IV site. “I can feel the little buggers moving up my arm,” he whispered through gritted teeth.

“I thought you already had nanites inside of you,” Loki said.

“I do. They’re just not getting the job done fast enough.”

“Is that dangerous?” Loki asked. “Injecting additional nanites?”

“No, just damned uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Now I’ve got four times as many of the buggers inside me as you did.”

“Why are you in such a hurry, Josh?” Loki asked.

Josh looked around the room briefly, checking to make sure no one could overhear their conversation. “Are you kidding? They’re gonna take the Falcon away from us if I don’t get out of here soon.”

“No, they’re not,” Loki insisted.

“The hell they’re not,” Josh disagreed. “They’re training three crews right now.”

“I know. I’ve been helping them.”

“Are you nuts? That ship is the most amazing thing either of us is ever going to fly. You want them to take that away from us?”

“They’re not going to take the Falcon away from us, Josh.”

“Don’t be so sure. You’re forgetting something: as long as we’re the only ones that can fly her, that makes us special. It’s called job security.”

“They’re just training additional crews so we’ll have backups,” Loki explained. “We’re going to war, Josh. We can’t be expected to fly every mission. Besides, those guys don’t even like the Falcon. You should have heard them laughing at the outdated cockpit displays. To them, it’s an antique.”

“An antique with a jump drive,” Josh added.

“They prefer the newer, high-tech fighters that the Takarans gave us,” Loki said.

“That’s because they haven’t flown the Falcon yet. They’ve only been using her sim-bubble. Wait until they feel the rush of jumping in just above the ground and setting off a triple sonic boom when you appear.”

“Yeah, that was *really* exciting,” Loki said, remembering how terrified he was the first time they had done just that.

“I’m telling you, Loki... It’s only a matter of time. We’ll be back on the bridge pushing buttons instead of turnin’ and burnin’.”

“Turnin’ and burnin’?”

“It’s an old Earth expression.”

“I think you’re overlooking something.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“The captain said they were going to be using the Falcon for recon flights at least several times a day, maybe more. You hate recon flights.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, let them do most of the recon flights. When the shooting starts, those guys are going to want to be in their fighters. In fact, that’s where they’ll have to be, because you and I aren’t trained to fly those ships. We’re trained to fly the Aurora and the Falcon.”

“I can fly anything with an engine,” Josh insisted, “and so can you, for that matter.”

“You and I know that,” Loki said, “and the captain probably knows that as well. But Prechitt isn’t going to turn over one of his fighters to you or me, not as long as he’s got his own pilots to fill the cockpits.”

“You think?”

“I’m sure of it. Well, at least I’m sure he’s not going to let you in one of them. He doesn’t like you.”

“He doesn’t?”

“The point is, Josh, if anything, having other flight teams available to take some of the recon load off our shoulders is only going to make our lives better, not worse.”

Josh looked at him for a moment. “You really think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Josh looked thoughtful. “Huh. Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

“I do hate recon flights.”

“Can you imagine doing them every day? Maybe even twice a day?”

Josh shuddered.

“You know, the major was asking if you would be willing to help train the other pilots as well,” Loki told him.

“I thought you said he doesn’t like me.”

“Maybe, but he does know that you’ve got more experience flying the Falcon than anyone else on board.”

“Hell, there’s no one within a thousand light years that knows how to fly that ship as well as me,” Josh bragged as he continued rubbing his arm in frustration.

“Maybe you should tell the nurse you changed your mind. Maybe have her turn some of those nanites off.”

“Nah. I’m going crazy sitting around doing nothing. Doc says I still got a few weeks of physical therapy ahead of me. The sooner these little bastards finish sewing me back up

inside, the sooner I can get the hell out of here and back in the cockpit.”

“Suit yourself.”

Josh finally started to ease up on rubbing his arms. “I think most of them have made it up my arm now.” He looked at Loki, noticing his outfit. “Is it time?”

“I’m due in the main hangar bay in fifteen minutes.”

“Damn, Loki,” Josh said. “I sure wish I was going with you.”

“I wish you were going *instead* of me.”

“Yeah. Just be careful. You ain’t exactly Sammy the Soldier.”

“And you are?”

“Hell no. People like you and me belong in the cockpit, not boots on the ground. Just remember that.”

“I will,” Loki said.

After an uncomfortable silence, Josh forced a smile. “Say hello to Garrett for me.”

“Sure thing.”

Josh extended his hand to his friend, something he had never done in the past. “Good luck, Loki.”

“Thanks.”

Josh continued to rub his arm as he watched his best friend walk away and disappear through the hatch.

* * *

Luis stared at the center display screen on the forward edge of the tactical console, studying the Celestia’s flight manual as usual. He leaned on his left elbow, his chin supported on his left hand, and nursed his fourth cup of coffee as he read.

A faint beeping caught his attention, causing him to sit up straight. He looked around his console, his eyes squinting and a puzzled expression on his face. Everything looked normal. Then he realized the beeping wasn't coming from the tactical console. He looked to his left, then his right, then turned around in his chair to face aft. The beeping was coming from the elevated comm-center at the back of the bridge.

Luis moved to his right, stepping up onto the comm platform and moving in behind the primary comm console. He found the source of the beeping noise. "Oh crap." Luis ran back down the two steps and aft, sticking his head through the ready room hatch. "Gus! Wake up! Quick!"

"What is it?" Gus asked from the darkened room as Luis ran back to the comm console. He quickly pressed one of the pre-configured buttons to connect to his commanding officer. "Lieutenant Commander Kovacic to the bridge!"

"What the hell is going on?" Gus asked as he came stumbling out of the ready room rubbing his eyes.

"Get to your station and look awake," Luis told him. "I've already summoned Kovacic."

"What the hell for?"

"We've got an incoming message," Luis explained. "It's from Fleet Command."

Gustav blinked, his face a mask of disbelief. "What? Are you sure?"

"It's already passed both primary and secondary authentication," Luis said, interrupting him. "It just passed tertiary as well. The message is definitely *from* Fleet."

"Finally," Gus declared.

"What's going on?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked as he entered the bridge.

“Incoming message from Fleet, sir,” Luis reported. “It just came in a minute ago.”

“Are you sure it’s from Fleet?”

“It already passed all three authentication protocols, sir.”

“Did you check the direction of the incoming signal?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

“I was just about to do that,” Luis said, remembering his cross-training on the basic functions of the communications console.

The lieutenant commander watched impatiently as Luis repeatedly punched buttons in an attempt to determine the direction from which the signal had come. “Is there a problem?”

“Uh, the message has no source signal, sir.”

“How is that possible?”

“If I’m reading this right, the message came in via direct link when we were still docked at the OAP. It’s been in our message buffer all this time. It must have been time coded.”

“What’s that?” Ensign Schenker asked.

“A time-coded message lies dormant in a hidden message buffer until the date and time on the file matches the current date and time,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic explained. “Fleet uses time code locks to issue classified action orders at a later time without risking intercept during transmission. It’s also used when they expect the receiving ship might not be in position to receive the message.” Luis looked at the lieutenant commander, surprised he knew so much about Fleet communication procedures.

“You’re not the only one who’s been reading manuals during watch,” the lieutenant commander said. “What’s the message say?”

Luis and Lieutenant Commander Kovacic both read the message on the screen. Luis’s eyes opened wide and his

mouth dropped open. He turned and looked at the lieutenant commander. "They're kidding, right?"

"What?" Ensign Schenker asked. "What does it say?"

"They want us to land on something called Metis," Luis exclaimed. "What the hell is a Metis?"

"It's one of Jupiter's innermost moons," the ensign told Luis. "Pretty small, too."

"How would *you* know, Gus?"

"I've been staring at those moons for more than a week now, remember?"

Luis looked at the lieutenant commander. "Sir, this has got to be a mistake. This ship doesn't even *have* landing gear."

"They didn't say 'land'," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic corrected. "The word they used was 'settle'."

"Same thing," Luis argued.

"Not exactly," Ensign Schenker said.

"They wouldn't order us to put the ship down on Metis unless they knew it would work, Ensign," the lieutenant commander said.

"You're talking about setting a fifteen-hundred-meter long spacecraft down on a ball of rock that's... what, about a hundred kilometers in diameter?" Luis declared.

"Actually, it's more like sixty kilometers, and that's in length. It's shaped more like a potato than a sphere."

"I stand corrected," Luis said. "A *sixty*-kilometer long *potato*. That's where they want us to 'settle' a ship with no landing gear."

"If it's only sixty kilometers long, how much gravity could it possibly have?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

Ensign Schenker spun around and studied his displays for a moment. "Only 0.005 of Earth gravity, sir."

“Jesus,” the lieutenant commander exclaimed. “You could reach escape velocity from that thing on a bicycle.”

“Hell, the OAP had more gravitational attraction than that,” Gus said. “It’ll be like docking. All you need to do is get us in close, Luis—say, five or six meters—then let gravity take us the rest of the way down. A little burst of counterthrust just before contact to soften the impact, and we’re down.”

“Easy as that,” Luis said.

“It’s just physics, my friend.”

“And suppose there’s not a flat spot large enough for us to park on. Suppose we’re teetering on a ridge or something.”

“There’s barely enough gravity on Metis to hold us in place,” the lieutenant commander reminded him, “let alone put any significant stress on the hull.” The lieutenant commander looked at Luis. “You just have to trust that the planners at Fleet thought this through.”

“You’re both forgetting one thing,” Luis reminded them. “I’m not a pilot. Hell, I haven’t even gotten halfway through the flight manual yet.”

“You’re the only one on deck that has been through basic spaceflight, Delaveaga,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. “You really want one of us to try to land this thing?”

“Could you? Please?” Luis asked, only half joking.

“You’re our pilot, Luis,” the lieutenant commander said, “like it or not. Now get to the helm and start calculating a deceleration burn. We’re going to need to fall into orbit around Jupiter if we’re going to rendezvous with Metis.”

“Won’t the Jung see our burn?” Luis asked as he headed forward to the helm station at the front of the bridge.

“Our deceleration thrust ports face forward,” the lieutenant commander reminded him. “As long as there

aren't any ships in front of us, we'll be fine."

"But why have us set down on Metis?" Luis wondered. "Why not just have us orbit Jupiter, or continue on our way deeper out into the system for that matter?"

"I've been looking at the orbit of Metis," Ensign Schenker said. "It's very close to Jupiter, and its orbit is really fast, only seven hours. It's also tidally locked, which means the same side always faces Jupiter. If we set down on the planet-facing side, it will be practically impossible to spot us. If you were looking from Earth, you'd have to be looking at just the right spot, at just the right angle, and at just the right time. Even then, you'd only have a few minutes to spot us. About the only way anyone *could* find us is if they were on the same orbit at exactly the right distance away. And even *that* is a very small line-of-sight corridor." Ensign Schenker turned around to face the Lieutenant Commander and Luis. "It's probably the best damn hiding place in the entire system, and it's still close enough to Earth to allow communication *and* to allow easy rescue. It's actually a brilliant idea when you think about."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you were sitting in my seat," Luis mumbled as he began running the burn calculations.

* * *

Jessica's eyes popped open at the sound of several thumps coming from the staircase down the hall. Still propped up in the corner of the upstairs bedroom, she glanced back and forth, searching the dark in the room where she had positioned herself for the night. She realized the thumping was the trap she had rigged with some string on the stairs. The thumps were from the rock falling down

the steps. Either the string in the trap had failed to contain the precariously placed rock, or the trap had worked and someone had tripped the string on their way up.

Jessica remained perfectly still. Her pupils fully dilated in the darkness as she listened intently for additional sounds of movement. It took nearly a minute, but she finally heard a faint creak as whoever it was reached the top of the staircase.

Jessica rose to her feet quietly and moved along the wall of the room where she already knew her weight would not cause the floor to make a sound. As she crept along the bedroom wall toward the doorway, she could hear the intruder as they, too, attempted to move in silence. Either they were not very good at it, or they simply didn't care. After all, the falling rock had already revealed their presence. If the intruder had half a brain, they already knew that Jessica was upstairs, and they already knew she would be ready for them. As she moved into position alongside the doorway, Jessica hoped the intruder's poor attempt to conceal their own movement was due to their own lack of intelligence. Stupid people were so much easier to fight.

The wet squishing sound in the hallway told Jessica that the intruder was just outside her doorway. Jessica stayed tight against the wall, her eyes shifting to chest height as the barrel of a weapon began to slowly protrude into the room through the open doorway. The barrel was too wide to be a projectile weapon. It was an energy weapon.

Another second passed, just enough time for the intruder's entire forearm to come through the door. Jessica drew her left arm back across her chest, then swung it across with quick, explosive force as she pivoted slightly and reached for the top of the gun body with her right hand. Having misjudged the intruder's height, the back of Jessica's

left hand struck the intruder in the forehead as Jessica stripped the intruder's weapon away with her right hand.

The intruder cried out in shock and tumbled back into the hallway. Jessica spun to her left, stepping into the doorway as she moved the energy pistol in her right hand and gripping it properly in order to fire.

"Yup," she said, "stupid loses every time." Jessica pulled her small flashlight out of her pocket and squeezed it between her thumb and forefinger of her left hand, shining the powerful beam in the intruder's face. It was a girl, a teenager from the size of her. She was on her butt in the hall, holding her forehead with her right hand as she leaned on her left. "Who are you, and why the hell do you have this?" Jessica gestured with the weapon.

"Don't shoot me!" the girl pleaded, her right hand going up to shield her eyes from the bright beam of light coming from Jessica's tiny flashlight. "I'm not Jung, if that's what you think!"

"Then what are you doing with a Jung energy weapon?"

"How do you know it's not one of ours?" the girl said.

"I'm the one with the gun now," Jessica reminded her, "so I'm the one asking the questions. Now, who are you, and why do you have a Jung weapon?"

"I got it off a dead Jung soldier a couple months ago," the girl finally answered.

"I'm still waiting." A confused expression appeared on the girl's face. "Your name?"

"Synda," the girl said, rubbing her forehead again. "Synda Conklin."

"What are you doing here, Synda Conklin?" Jessica asked.

"I live here," she said. "What are *you* doing here?"

“Just passing through,” Jessica told her. She shined the light down Synda’s body, noticing that her legs were wet from the knees down. “Were you hiding in the basement this whole time?”

“Nobody ever searches a flooded basement,” Synda said as she moved to get up.

“Slowly,” Jessica warned, pointing the energy pistol at the girl as she rose. “Up against the wall, hands high and apart.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to search you for weapons.”

On her feet again, Synda turned to face the wall. “You already took my only weapon.”

“You’ll pardon me if I don’t take your word for it,” Jessica said. “You were coming to shoot me, after all.”

“I wasn’t going to shoot you,” Synda insisted as she placed her hands on the wall. “I was just going to scare you away.”

“You might want to practice being scary,” Jessica told her as she patted her down. The young girl was well developed and was obviously more muscular than most girls her age, but her body felt slightly emaciated, as if she hadn’t been eating well on a regular basis.

Jessica felt something on Synda’s back in between her shoulder blades. She pushed the gun barrel up against Synda’s lower back as a warning not to move as she pushed the girl’s scraggily blond hair to one side, revealing the top end of a knife handle. Jessica pulled the girl’s collar down and saw that the knife was in a scabbard taped to the girl’s back with industrial duct tape. She grabbed the entire scabbard and gave it a yank, ripping the tape from the girl’s back and causing Synda to flinch. Jessica stepped away from Synda, pulled the knife out of its scabbard, and looked

it over. It was of an unfamiliar design and had markings on it similar to those on the small plastic chips she had taken from the old man that had gotten a bit too friendly with her. "Nice," Jessica said. "Get this off a dead Jung as well?"

"Girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do," Synda said, sarcasm in her tone as she lowered her hands and turned around.

Jessica snickered. "I like you."

"You still haven't told me who you are," Synda said.

"Jessica."

"Well, Jessica, since I'm sure you're going to keep my gun, can I at least have me knife back?"

"Not so fast, little girl," Jessica told her. "I said I *liked* you. I didn't say I *trusted* you." She pointed the knife toward the bedroom. "In there."

Jessica followed Synda into the bedroom where she had been sleeping. "This is where you've been sleeping, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" Synda wondered.

"Not hard. Clean bathroom, water supply in the tub, mattress and blankets. A good view to see people coming before they get here as well. I'm surprised you don't have some food stashed up here."

"It's under the loose floorboard in the corner," Synda told her, pointing at the far end of the room. "It's not much, though, just a few cans of beans and some candy bars."

"Why are you starving out here in the sticks?" Jessica said. "The city is only a kilometer away. Surely there are food and work there. There's got to be better accommodations as well."

"It's safer here."

"How so?" Jessica wondered.

"Tiny, little gal like me, all alone. Guys think I'm easy prey... always leads to trouble."

"What? No cops anymore?"

Synda looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Cops? Seriously? There are Jung everywhere you look, but police? Not since the invasion. Where have you been?"

"On the road, mostly," Jessica lied. "I guess I'm out of touch with what's been going on in the cities."

"Right," Synda said, rolling her eyes.

"So, you plan on just hanging out here for the rest of your life? Hope nobody finds you?"

"I was hoping to gather up some supplies and hit the road myself, maybe head north. I heard the Jung aren't too interested in the high country."

"You're gonna need more than a knife, beans, and candy bars," Jessica said.

"Well, I *had* a really nice gun."

"You'd be better off tossing it in the river," Jessica told her. "If the Jung caught you with this, you'd wish you were dead."

"Want to buy it?" Synda asked, a mischievous grin on her face.

"No, but I'll be happy to dispose of it for you," Jessica retorted. Jessica reached into her pocket and pulled out the plastic chips she had taken off the old man. "Ever seen these before?"

Synda's eyes widened. "Yeah. Where did *you* get them?"

"I took them off an old fart who was expecting me to pay more for a ride than I was willing. What are they?"

"Jung credit chips. Did you kill the guy?"

"Nah. Just left him stranded in the forest. How much are these worth?"

Synda looked the chips over as Jessica held her hand out and shined her light on the chips. "Uh, not much really."

Jessica looked at Synda, her head cocked to one side and an accusatory look in her eyes. "You're going to have to learn to lie better if you're going to survive on your own, young lady. How much are they really worth?"

"They're credit chips," Synda admitted.

"What are they worth?"

"One hundred credits each."

"What's a credit worth in NAU currency?" Jessica wondered.

Synda furrowed her brow and narrowed her eyes. "The same. They just replaced all the currency on the planet with their own credit chips. How could you not know that?"

Jessica moved over to the corner of the room and pulled up the loose board. She extracted a can of beans and a candy bar.

"You already took my gun and my knife," Synda said. "Now you're going to eat my food as well?"

"You hungry?" Jessica asked, ignoring her previous statement.

"I've been standing in knee-deep water for eight hours," Synda said. "Of course I'm hungry."

Jessica rolled the can of beans across the floor, then slid a candy bar over to Synda as well. Then she removed another can of beans and a candy bar for herself.

Synda watched as Jessica pulled one of the Jung credit chips back out of her pocket and tossed it over to her. Synda caught the chip, a look of astonishment on her face. "The gun is worth a lot more than one-hundred credits."

"It's not for the gun. It's for the food."

"You're paying me one hundred credits for a can of beans and a candy bar?" Synda couldn't believe it.

“Consider it payment for one night’s accommodations in your fine establishment,” Jessica said as she used the knife she had taken from the old man to open the cans of beans, starting with Synda’s.

“Right.”

“I can take the chip back, if you prefer.”

“No, I’m good with it,” Synda assured her as she started scooping up the beans with her fingers and shoveling them into her mouth.

Jessica sat down on the floor a couple meters away from Synda, facing the large window that overlooked the dirt road. She tipped the can of beans up and poured some into her mouth, savoring the sweetness of the familiar tastes of pork, maple, and brown sugar. “Oh, man, that is so good.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Synda watched as Jessica poured another helping into her mouth. “Been a while since you’ve eaten?”

“Anything familiar, yes.”

“You said you’ve been traveling,” Synda said. “From where?”

“Let’s just say I’ve been a very long way from home for a long time.”

“Where were you? New Britain?”

“Farther,” Jessica said as she chewed.

“Asia?”

“Something like that,” Jessica lied. She needed to bond with the girl in order to extract information from her, but she didn’t want to reveal too much in the process.

“How long?”

“Nearly five months now,” Jessica said as she raised her can one last time to devour the last of its contents.

“So you weren’t even on the continent when they attacked?”

“Nope.”

“So, when did you get back?” Synda asked.

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“I don’t get to talk to very many people these days.”

“Where are your parents?” Jessica asked as she wiped her mouth.

“They died about five years ago in a shuttle crash.”

“How did you survive on your own?”

“I was old enough to take care of myself at the time,” Synda said.

“What were you then, like ten?”

“I was seventeen at the time.”

“So you’re twenty-two now?” Jessica asked, finding it hard to believe.

“Twenty-three in a couple weeks.”

“Huh. I would’ve guessed you were about fourteen by the size of you.”

Synda rolled her eyes again. “That’s what the guy at the recruiter’s office said. I had to pay for age verification testing before I could apply.”

“Apply for what?” Jessica asked.

“Fleet.”

“EDF?”

“That’s the one,” Synda said. “But they turned me down all three times.”

“Too small?”

“Yeah. It really pissed me off, too. I had been training in the gym for years to get in shape. It didn’t seem right, being turned down without even being given a chance to prove myself.”

“They probably have the minimums for a reason, you know,” Jessica said.

Synda looked down at the floor. "Yeah. I've come to realize that now. Guess I'm better off though," she continued, looking up again. "If they had accepted me, I'd probably be dead now like the rest of them."

"EDF got hit pretty hard, huh?"

"From what I hear, the Jung hit every EDF installation at the same time. Then they started picking off the national militias. Those that didn't get killed right away surrendered pretty quickly."

"Yeah, I heard the same thing," Jessica said, remembering the data she had spent weeks poring over during the Aurora's cold-coast toward Earth.

Jessica watched Synda as she finished her candy bar. The girl was small, and her body definitely showed signs of malnutrition, but she had an inner strength about her. "Listen, I need to get into the city tomorrow. I need to find someone."

"Who?"

"Don't worry about who. Do you know how to get into Winnipeg without being noticed by the Jung?"

"Sure," Synda said. "I just don't use them, because they're all through bad areas of the city. Too many jerks and perverts."

"I'm not worried about the jerks and perverts," Jessica said. "I can handle them. I'm just looking to avoid the Jung. Do you know Winnipeg very well?"

"I've lived there for four years now—well, not counting the last two and a half months."

"Then you can show me around? Act as a guide?"

"Sure, but why would I want to do that?"

"You said you don't go into the city because it isn't safe for a girl your size. The jerks and perverts, remember?"

“Yeah,” Synda said. “And these don’t help matters.” She pointed at her breasts.

“Yeah, I’m sure they don’t. Try taping them down and wearing extra shirts. You can bunch your hair up and wear a cap or something. That way they won’t notice you from far away.”

“I tried the cap, but I never thought of taping down the girls.”

“Trust me. It will help.” Jessica looked at Synda. “A lot.”

“Do I get my knife back?”

“In the morning,” Jessica promised.

“What about my gun?”

“We’re tossing it in the river.”

“I thought you were kidding about that.”

“It ain’t worth keeping. If you had pulled the trigger, the Jung would’ve detected the energy discharge and been on you in minutes. I wouldn’t be surprised if they could track the weapon even when it’s just powered on.”

“Okay, I guess we are ditching it. But if I take you into the city, what’s in it for me?”

Jessica thought for a moment. “I’ll take you shopping.”

“Shopping for what?”

“For the stuff you need to head north.” Jessica smiled. “I still got a few one-hundred credit chips left.”

“The stuff I need is going to use up most of your credits,” Synda warned. “Are you sure you can afford it?”

“I don’t plan on hanging around much longer,” Jessica told her as she snuggled into the corner again to get more sleep. “We still have about four hours until daylight. I suggest you get some rest.”

“You’re going to go to sleep here, in the same room as me?” Synda wondered. “How do you know I won’t kill you in

your sleep and just take your credits, my knife, and my gun?”

“The credits aren’t worth anything if you can’t get into the city to spend them,” Jessica told her. “Even if you managed to get in, you’d never make it out again with all that stuff. You need me as much as I need you, perhaps even more so.” Jessica closed her eyes. “Besides, I’m a light sleeper. And with your wet, squishy shoes and all that nylon you’re wearing, I’d hear you coming before you moved an inch.” Jessica opened her eyes again. “Synda, you seem like a smart girl—a little naive, perhaps, but not stupid. I’m the best bet you have right now. Play your cards right, and you’ll be on your way north with everything you need.” Jessica closed her eyes again. “Or I can tie you up for the night, if you prefer.”

* * *

“Cheng,” Nathan greeted Vladimir as he approached the jump shuttle on the forward port elevator pad in the Aurora’s main hangar bay. Vladimir turned around, and Nathan saw the bags under his chief engineer’s eyes and the fatigue in his expression. “You look like crap.”

“I haven’t slept much lately,” Vladimir admitted. “Too many things to fix. If it was not for stims, this shuttle would not be ready to fly.”

“Stop trying to do everything yourself, Vlad,” Nathan told him. “You’ve got plenty of qualified people working for you. Let them fix things for a change. If you keep up this pace, you won’t last much longer.”

“You are correct, of course. Just hurry up and liberate Earth, please. I need a vacation—someplace tropical, I think.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he told his friend as Vladimir departed. “And lay off the stims,” Nathan told him. “That’s an order.”

Nathan turned back toward the shuttle as Loki made his way up the shuttle’s boarding ramp with two Corinari technicians pulling the carts carrying their space-jump suits behind them. Major Waddell was the last one heading up the ramp.

“Major!” Nathan called out.

Major Waddell turned around and spotted the captain. “Sir?”

“May I speak to you a moment?” Nathan asked.

“Of course, Captain.”

Nathan led the major a few steps to the side, away from the others. “Major, I need to make you aware of a few things, things that I felt it best not to burden Mister Sheehan with.” Nathan stopped and turned to face Major Waddell, looking him straight in the eyes. “The Jung are already aware that we have a jump drive—at least, the ones in the vicinity of Earth are. Whether or not their leaders know for sure is impossible to determine. We don’t even know where the Jung homeworld is, so we have no idea how long it will take word of our return to travel from Earth to Jung command. But that is not so much what I am concerned about. What I am sure the Jung do not know is that we have allies in the Pentaurus cluster and that those allies now have jump drive capabilities, as well as technologies that, at the very least, rival if not surpass those of the Jung. It is imperative that the Jung do not discover this information. If they did, it would put your world, as well as all the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster, in grave danger.”

“Captain, I can assure you that I am well trained in resistance against torture...”

“I’m sure you are, Major,” Nathan interrupted, “but we do not know what methods the Jung have available to them for information extraction. The safest approach would be to assume they are able to retrieve information without difficulty. Furthermore, although you may be able to resist torture, I’m not so sure about Mister Sheehan’s resolve. He is a good man, but he does not have your training.” Nathan looked at the major again. “You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, sir,” the major said. “However, according to protocol, I’m afraid I must respectfully ask you to explicitly state your orders for me at this time.”

Nathan took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Very well, Major. If you believe that capture of yourself, Mister Sheehan, or anyone else who possesses knowledge of the jump drive or the Pentaurus cluster is imminent, you are ordered to terminate the lives of those people rather than allow such capture. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“For what?”

“For taking the time to come here and give me the order directly, Captain. I would’ve done it anyway, as I know what is at stake. I’ve been doing this a long time, remember? But it is good to know that my commanding officer has the backbone to issue such an order, sir.”

Nathan eyed the major suspiciously. “Are you trying to make a point, Major?”

“No, sir.” Major Waddell smiled. “Just doing my job, sir.” The major snapped to attention and saluted his captain.

“Good luck, Major,” Nathan said as he returned the salute.

“Thank you, sir.”

* * *

“How long of a burn are we talking about?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked, scratching at his beard. They had all given up shaving over six weeks ago, yet the thickening growth on his face still felt uncomfortable to him.

“That’s the thing,” Luis said from his chair at the Celestia’s helm, “the longer the burn, the less thrust is needed, therefore the lower the reactors can be run. That means that the amount of heat and radiation we generate will be lower, reducing the risk of detection. But it also means that we’ll be *detectable* for a greater period of time.”

“And if we burn hotter and shorter, we’ll be easier to spot but for a shorter period of time,” the lieutenant commander surmised.

“Precisely.”

“Tough choice,” the lieutenant commander said. “Hot and quick and hope they’re looking the other way, or low and slow and hope they’re not looking very closely.” He rubbed his whiskers again. “Don’t suppose there’s a third option.”

“Not that I can think of.”

“What if we tried a combination of the two?” Ensign Schenker suggested. “Wait until the last moment and do a short-duration, low-power deceleration burn, just enough to get us into a high orbit around Jupiter. Once we pass behind the planet, out of sight line with Earth, we go to full power, decelerate hard, and drop down into a lower orbit to rendezvous with Metis. Would that work?”

“I don’t know,” Luis admitted as he started entering the parameters into the helm’s flight computer. He watched as the results began to show on his displays. “It’s possible, but

we're going to have to go to full power pretty fast. Without full inertial dampeners, it won't be a fun ride."

"How long would we have to prepare?"

"We'd have to start the low-power burn in about twenty minutes. The high-power burn would come an hour later."

"So we'd have just over an hour to try to secure everything, so we don't have stuff flying across compartments and slamming into the forward bulkheads."

"There's one other problem, sir," Luis said. "If we were doing a longer approach burn, one that would settle us into the same relative orbit as Metis, we'd have nearly two hours to rendezvous and set down. Using a combination approach, we'll be using most of that time to decelerate. It's going to make the landing on Metis that much more difficult. If we overshoot, we may not make it down before we come back around to the visible side."

"Does that matter?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"It shouldn't," Ensign Schenker said. "We'd have to be running pretty hot to be noticed against Jupiter. The problem is, we don't know exactly *how* good the Jung sensors are."

"Then you'll just have to get us down on the first pass, Ensign," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said.

"Easy for you to say," Luis mumbled as he started checking his burn profile.

* * *

"The shuttle is about to jump," Cameron informed him as Nathan approached the Aurora's port side tactical station.

Nathan watched the main view screen as the shuttle continued flying ahead of them, becoming smaller as the distance between the two vessels increased. Just as the

shuttle was about to fade from view, it glowed blue-white for a split second, then flashed as it jumped away.

"I'll be in my ready room," he announced as he turned and headed aft.

Nathan went straight to his desk and returned to his monitor to study the ship's daily reports. As he took his seat, Cameron entered the ready room as well.

"Did you tell him?" she asked, her face impassive.

"I told him."

"How did you tell him?"

"I was quite specific in my orders."

"How did he react?" Cameron wondered.

"He acknowledged that he understood the order," Nathan explained. "Then he said he would have done exactly as I ordered regardless. He knows the score."

"The man scares me," Cameron said. "One minute he's polite and professional; the next minute you'd swear he's about to tear someone's head off, especially with the Takarans."

"The man has been through a lot."

"We all have, Nathan."

Nathan shook his head. "Not like him. We give orders and push buttons. We watch the destruction unfold as data feeds on various monitors. We may fly into harm's way, but we don't stand in the thick of it with nothing more than a gun and some body armor. People like Waddell, Jessica, Sergeant Weatherly... those are the type of people who do."

"You did back on Haven," Cameron said.

"Only for a brief time," Nathan said, waving the comparison off with one hand, "and not because I chose to, but because I had no alternative. It's not the same. If I had known what was going to happen on Haven, I never would have left the ship."

Cameron sighed. "Sometimes I can't tell if Waddell even cares if he lives or dies."

"Maybe he doesn't," Nathan said. "Maybe that's not a bad thing, though, as long as he cares about getting the job done."

"Kind of a cold way to look at things, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," Nathan said. "But perhaps it's also the best way to look at things, given the circumstances."

"Perhaps," Cameron agreed. "You know, we are taking a big risk by sending them to Tanna. We know nothing about this resistance. For all we know, they could be an intelligence gathering unit for the Jung."

"Trying to fill the conspiracy-theory void left by Jessica being away?"

"Somebody has to," she said.

"We both know we have no choice. We need propellant. We need intel on the Jung. The Tanna resistance has the highest probability of providing us with useful intelligence with the least expenditure of resources."

"Is that how you look at our crew now?" Cameron said, one eyebrow raised. "As resources?"

"I was speaking about propellant," Nathan said, "but I suppose I *should* look at the crew that way as well."

* * *

"Engineering reports reactor one is running at ten percent," Ensign Souza reported from the Celestia's comm station. "Reactors two, three, and four are all holding at less than one percent."

"I've got our nose down as far as I can while continuing to align the deceleration thrust ports with our actual course," Luis said. "Any more and our center of gravity will

be too far off to compensate for it with maneuvering thrusters.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic answered.

“Coming up on the first burn threshold in twenty seconds,” Luis added as his eyes double-checked his flight displays. He had run over his procedures at least a dozen times in the last twenty minutes, even referencing them against the Celestia’s flight manual. Although the manual covered all operational aspects of piloting the massive starship, it offered absolutely no advice for ‘settling’ the ship onto the surface of a small moon, even one with as little gravity as Metis. To Luis, the fact that the authors of the manual never considered such a maneuver was in itself a bad sign. “Ten seconds. Powering up outboard mains. Engines one and four show ready. Five seconds.”

They had been cold-coasting for two and a half months. This would be the first time they would be doing anything on the bridge other than staring at unchanged displays or running training simulations on their consoles. It was also the first time in over two months that all eight of the men living on the Celestia’s isolated command deck were on the bridge at the same time. Months of mind-numbing tedium followed by an hour of intense maneuvering seemed an odd lifestyle to Luis. Fortunately, if he could successfully set the ship down on the surface of Metis, it would likely be the end of his flying career.

The countdown display reached zero. Luis pressed the button on his console, executing his preprogrammed command to fire their only two operational engines at a small fraction of their capable output.

“Mains are burning at one percent,” he announced. There was almost no sensation that anything was happening

other than a barely audible rumble reverberating through the ship's framework. "Throttling up slowly to ten percent."

"I'm not feeling anything," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said, seeming surprised.

"At such a low thrust level, you won't," Ensign Schenker said. "Even with only one reactor running at only ten percent, that's enough power for the inertial dampening systems to compensate. When we hit phase two of our approach, trust me; we'll feel it."

"Looking forward to it," the lieutenant commander said as he rolled his eyes.

"Ten percent thrust and holding," Luis reported from the helm. "We'll maintain this thrust level for another fifty-seven minutes. That should slow us down enough that Jupiter's gravity will pull us into a high orbit."

"I'm assuming you double-checked your calculations," the lieutenant commander said.

"They aren't my calculations, sir," Luis answered. "They're the flight computer's... and yes, I did double-check them, several times, in fact."

* * *

A small flash of light appeared in the night sky above Tanna. The flash appeared to move laterally against the background of stars for a brief moment before it faded away.

The night air of Tanna rushed into the jump shuttle as its rear cargo hatch split in half horizontally. The two halves separated and swung in opposite directions, one upward and one down. A few seconds later, both halves were

parallel to one another as well as to the line of the shuttle itself, the bottom half now forming a deck of sorts that extended out the back of the shuttle.

Major Waddell and Loki stood just inside the aft end of the shuttle facing the open cargo hatch, fully encased in their jump rigs.

“Are you ready?” Major Waddell asked over the helmet comm.

“*No...*” Loki’s voice trembled.

“Good. Remember, radio silence from this point forward.”

“*No...*” Loki repeated, trembling even more. He turned and looked at the Major as the technicians unplugged the comm-lines from both their suits. “*No...*”

Major Waddell looked at Loki’s face. He could see his mouth forming the word ‘no’ in repeated fashion. He gave him a thumbs up sign and pushed him toward the aft end of the ramp. Holding Loki’s left arm at his elbow, the major guided the frightened pilot in a jog toward the aft edge of the ramp where they both jumped off into the darkness.

Without the suit-comms turned on, Major Waddell couldn’t hear Loki screaming as they fell. With the air rushing past their helmets, he also couldn’t hear the fizzle of the shuttle’s jump field. He did see the light of the departure jump as it reflected off the top of the clouds they were falling toward. A few seconds later, those very same clouds enveloped them.

CHAPTER THREE

“All hands report ready for burn, sir,” Ensign Souza reported from the Celestia’s comm station. “All supplies are secured, all loose equipment has been tied down, and all personnel have positioned themselves with their backs against aft bulkheads and facing forward.”

“They made sure that nothing forward of them could come flying aft, right?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

“Yes, sir. Everyone knows what to do.”

“Very well.” The lieutenant commander turned forward toward the helm. “Time to maximum burn mark?”

“One minute,” Luis reported from the helm.

The lieutenant commander looked around his command chair. “Sure wish they’d thought to put seat belts on this thing.”

“With full inertial dampeners, we’re not supposed to need them,” Ensign Schenker said.

“I’m sure that will be a comforting thought if I go flying back-first into the tactical console, Ensign.”

“Forty-five seconds,” Luis reported.

“Tell engineering to stand by to bring the reactors up to full power,” the lieutenant commander ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Souza answered.

“Ten seconds until we slip behind the horizon and lose line of sight with Earth,” Ensign Schenker reported from the sensor station.

“Thirty seconds to burn,” Luis announced. His attention darted about the helm console, as he performed last moment checks of all his systems. As best he could tell, everything was ready for full power.

“Be ready to pitch over into tail-first attitude as soon as we duck behind Jupiter,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic reminded Luis.

“I’m ready, sir.”

“Three seconds to line-of-sight horizon,” Ensign Schenker reported.

“Two.....”

“Engineering, bridge,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic called over his comm-set.

“One.....”

“Engineering. Go ahead, sir,” Tilly’s voice answered over the comm-set.

“Zero.”

“All reactors to full power,” the lieutenant commander ordered.

“We’ve lost line of sight with Earth,” Ensign Schenker announced.

“Helm, pitch over.”

“All reactors to full, aye,” Tilly acknowledged.

“Deceleration thrusters at zero. Pitching over,” Luis answered. “Fifteen seconds to max burn.”

“As soon as those reactors are at full power, bring up the inertial dampeners as much as possible, Mister Tilly,” the lieutenant commander added.

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Tilly answered.

“Bring up all sensors and navigational systems,” the lieutenant commander ordered. “I want active tracking of all objects between us and Metis, especially Metis.”

“Aye, sir!” Ensign Schenker said.

“Pitch maneuver complete,” Luis reported. “Ship’s attitude is level to flight path,” Luis announced. “Flying tail first. Five seconds to max burn.”

“Bridge, engineering. Reactors one through four at full power. Bringing up inertial dampeners.”

“Four.....”

“Very well. Comms, all hands, brace for hard deceleration burn,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic ordered.

“Three.....”

“All hands! Brace for hard deceleration burn!” Ensign Souza announced over the ship’s comm-network and loudspeakers as he placed both hands on his forward facing console.

“Two.....”

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic placed his hands on either armrest of his command chair, also bracing himself.

“One.....” Luis braced himself against his console as he pressed the button to initiate the burn sequence he had programmed earlier.

“Zero.” Luis put his left hand against the edge of his console as the one-second execution delay expired, and the engines began their gradual increase in power. “Mains are hot,” Luis announced. “Throttle-up sequence initiated.”

At first, all they felt was a low rumble reverberating throughout the ship, much as they had when they first pulled away from the Orbital Assembly Platform over Earth two and a half months earlier. The vibrations quickly grew in intensity as electrical energy from the ship’s four antimatter reactors poured into both engines’ propellant acceleration tunnels, sending the gases rocketing out the thrust ports at incredible speeds.

Luis sank into his seat with increasing force as the engines throttled up. The inertial dampening systems

attempted to keep pace with the rapid increase in the amount of thrust being generated by the Celestia's two main outboard engines. Unfortunately, they had not been properly calibrated and tested prior to departure, resulting in a lag in performance.

"Passing twenty percent thrust," Luis announced with a little difficulty.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic looked around. "Not really feeling it. The inertial dampeners must be working."

"The burn curve has just started, sir," Luis warned. "It's going to get worse."

The lieutenant commander continued to look around as he was pushed into his seat with steadily increasing force.

"Dampeners at ten percent," Ensign Souza reported.

"Passing twenty-five percent thrust," Luis announced.

"Okay, now I'm starting to feel it," the lieutenant commander struggled to announce.

"Passing thirty percent thrust."

"Dampeners at twenty percent power," Ensign Souza added.

"Passing thirty-five percent thrust," Luis struggled to report.

"How high do we have to go?" the lieutenant commander was barely able to ask.

"One hundred percent of our current thrust capability, sir," Luis reported.

"Dampeners at thirty percent..."

"Passing forty percent thrust," Luis announced. He knew that the inertial dampeners, even at less than half their rated performance levels, were already having a significant effect. Without them, most of the crew would already be dead or, at the very least, unconscious.

"We're at fifty percent of max thrust!"

“Jesus!” the lieutenant commander swore as the bridge shook violently.

“Dampeners at forty percent power and still rising!” Ensign Souza reported.

“Fifty-five percent!” Luis could barely make out the readings on his console due to the vibrations.

“Forty-five percent!” Ensign Souza reported.

“Passing sixty percent thrust!” Luis could feel the pressure on his torso lifting slowly as the ability of the inertial dampeners to counteract the force of acceleration continued to improve.

“Inertial dampeners are at fifty percent!”

“Sixty-five!” Luis reported.

Luis continued to report their thrust levels as the Celestia’s main engines burned at an ever increasing rate. Right along with him, Ensign Souza also relayed the power levels of the inertial dampening systems as they were relayed to him from engineering.

“Coming up on max burn!” Luis reported.

“Inertial dampeners are at eighty percent power!” Ensign Souza added.

“Max burn!” Luis reported. “Engines one and four are now at full power, sir!”

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic waited, expecting to hear the same report from Ensign Souza, but did not. “Mister Souza?”

“That’s it, sir,” Ensign Souza reported. “Engineering reports they can’t raise the power levels in the inertial dampening systems any more than eighty-five percent, not in their uncalibrated state. Too much risk of sudden failure.”

“Sir,” Luis said, “if the inertial dampeners were to suddenly fail while we’re at full power...”

“I know, like a bug on a windshield.” The lieutenant commander looked around the bridge. The inertial dampeners were doing their job. The ship was being shaken violently, but it was holding together... for now. “How long do we have to maintain this burn, Mister Delaveaga?”

“Twenty-three minutes, sir,” Luis said, no happier about the situation than the lieutenant commander.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic sighed. “Ensign Souza, tell engineering to dial the power levels on the inertial dampeners back down to eighty-percent. Let’s not push our luck.”

“Yes, sir!”

“And tell him to feel free to take it down even farther if he feels it’s necessary.”

* * *

Unable to see anything in the darkness outside his helmet, Loki watched the displays on the inside of his helmet visor as the automated navigation system of his Corinari space-jump rig guided his descent. The rig’s terrain-following sensors clearly depicted the narrow opening of the canyon as it rushed up toward him. Loki tried not to imagine the dark canyon walls about to envelope him on both sides. His breathing quickened, as did his pulse, which felt as if it were in his throat. His long descent through the atmosphere of Tanna had been harrowing enough for one day.

The lines on his visor representing the canyon walls slid up and to the sides of his visor, indicating that he had now fallen below the upper ridges of the canyon. The walls were closing in on him as the canyon narrowed. He felt small servos in his backpack activate as the system initiated a slow right turn to match the bend in the canyon. As he

turned, he began to see faint images, as the tiny amount of light reflected off Tanna's third moon faintly illuminated the massive rock walls. Those flashes of visibility only made matters worse, turning the imaginary lines on his visor into real-world obstacles threatening his very life.

The altimeter readout on his visor counted down the meters to touchdown. He followed the lines that compared his actual flight path to the one the navigation system was trying to follow. For the most part, it was doing a good job, with only minor variations that were quickly corrected whenever a servo hummed from behind him.

Where is that landing site? Loki wondered. He was falling at five meters per second, which seemed too fast to him. The numbers in the display were green, and green meant good.

The rig's automatic navigation system performed two more gentle turns, following the canyon's snaking curves and adjusting for the gusts of wind that danced off the canyon walls.

I'm getting awfully low, he thought. *Any time now...* "There!" The flat clearing appeared on his visor as a long, green trapezoid moving from left to right as it came out from behind the canyon wall around the next bend. He could almost see the moonlight reflecting off the tall grass as it waved in the night breeze. Within a minute, the trapezoid was passing under him. The far end was also coming toward him awfully fast, and he was still falling at just under five meters per second. He was thirty meters above the landing site, which itself was nearly a kilometer in altitude above the planet's sea level.

Twenty-five meters and falling. The trapezoid on his visor was rapidly becoming both wider and shorter. His forward velocity was still two meters per second, and his descent

rate was still five. Tuck and roll was not going to work, not at that combination of speeds.

Twenty meters and falling. The trapezoid was now wider than his visor. All that was left was the horizontal line representing the far end of the landing field. On the other side was a forty meter drop, at the bottom of which was a rocky canyon floor.

Fifteen meters and falling. Servos hummed, and his forward speed began to fall. One and a half meters per second, then one, then one half.

Ten meters and falling. More servos hummed. His body swung forward slightly under his canopy.

Five meters still to fall, and Loki appeared to have all but stalled in his descent. He drew his arms up and crossed them in front of his chest, hugging the reserve chute pack. He tucked his feet and knees together just as he had done in practice. He bent his knees slightly.

The ground hit the soles of his boots hard, harder than they had during his landing practice jumps in the Aurora's hangar deck. His knees almost buckled, but he managed to twist his body to his right and allow the little bit of forward momentum remaining to carry him forward and down onto his left side. He rolled over once before rolling himself back in the opposite direction to avoid getting tangled in his own chute lines.

"Retract! Retract! Retract!" He called out to his rig management computer through the comm-set built into his helmet. He could feel his back humming as the motors winched his main chute back into his jump pack for easy storage. The last thing he needed was for a gust of wind to fill up his chute, pick him up, and drag him over the edge of the cliff.

Loki remained face down in the tall grass, fighting to keep his body steady as the motors in his jump pack reeled the billowing parachute back in. Several times, he felt the parachute catch on something, threatening to pull him across the field toward the chute, instead of pulling the chute toward him. Finally, the motors stopped, and the cover on the pack slammed shut.

Loki relaxed for the moment, lying face down on the grass in the darkness of the Tanna night. After several moments, he finally got to his hands and knees, then onto just his knees. He reached up and unlocked his helmet, pulling it up and off his head.

The air on Tanna was fresh and warm, even in the dead of the early morning hours. He could hear the distant roar of the waterfalls, the same ones that he and Josh had inadvertently flown through during their first visit to this world. At least he knew he had landed in the right spot. But where was the major?

Loki looked around the clearing as he quickly unbuckled his chest pack and the main pack on his back. Remembering his instructions, he remained low, staying on his knees as he removed his jump gear and prepared it for disposal.

There was very little light in this narrow part of the canyon, as the high walls blocked a direct view of any of Tanna's moons. Loki thought he heard movement in the field behind him, but like his own gear, the major's was painted a dull black and gray with antireflective coatings and, therefore, was nearly impossible to see in such poorly lit conditions. Loki's orders had been to remove his jump gear, stay low, and stay put. Major Waddell was to find him. If he did not, Loki was to seek better cover as close to the landing site as was safe.

With his gear off and piled neatly on the ground, Loki took a position on the ground, tucked safely behind his pile of gear, on the side that left the least amount of open field behind him. With his sidearm drawn and ready, he watched and waited.

* * *

“Have you even considered what message you might send?” Vladimir asked as he cut his dollag steak. “Assuming the lieutenant’s super jump shuttle actually works,” he added as he stabbed a piece of the meat and put it into his mouth.

Nathan looked across the dining table in the captain’s mess at his friend. “You don’t think it will work?”

“Oh, I’m sure it will. It may take longer than his original estimates, but he will make it work. He is a very smart man.”

“I still think it’s a waste of time,” Cameron said as she picked at her salad.

Nathan looked surprised. “You think it’s a waste of time to send a message back to the Pentaurus cluster?”

“No, I think it’s a waste of time to fiddle around with the hybrid jump drive concept. We already know the two technologies don’t work well together.”

“But if the lieutenant is correct in his theories, the range will be doubled, maybe tripled,” Vladimir exclaimed.

“And how long has he been working on it?” she asked. “Nearly three weeks now? He could have outfitted another shuttle with a standard jump drive in the same amount of time, and we’d be guaranteed another functioning jump ship, which we could sorely use right now.”

“She does have a point,” Nathan said.

Vladimir waved his hand, dismissing Cameron's point. "If it works, we could build more of them—not just to send a call for help back to the cluster, but to communicate within the core. Just think of it; the Jung have to wait months, perhaps years. Jung command, wherever that may be, probably does not even know we have returned yet. They probably will not for many months. A jump shuttle with that kind of range and without the need to recharge between jumps? It could carry messages between a command post and just about anywhere in the core within a matter of minutes. That is a tactical advantage that rivals any jump-enabled warship. Communications, intelligence, and logistics." Vladimir nodded. "That is what wins wars, my friends."

"Since when did you become an expert in the art of war?" Cameron asked.

"You forget, I spent years as a ground pounder on Earth. I was even transferred to officer training before Fleet saw my aptitude scores and offered me a spot at the academy." Vladimir shoveled a load of boiled roots into his mouth. "I learned a few things along the way."

"Like not to talk with your mouth full?" Cameron said. Vladimir just opened his mouth even wider as he chewed, leaning closer to her so as to annoy.

"He's got a point as well," Nathan said as he pushed his friend away from Cameron. "Besides, I didn't authorize Lieutenant Montgomery's project with the hopes of getting a message back sooner. I did so because I felt the idea needed to be explored. Also, I had decided to heed my executive officer's advice, as well as that of my chief of the boat, and no longer use our ship as a test vessel. To be honest, I don't expect a lot of help from the Pentaurus cluster."

“Really?” Vladimir said. “After all we did for them?”

“I don’t think it would be a matter of motivation,” Nathan assured him. “Isn’t that right, Major?”

“Indeed,” Major Prechitt, who had been quietly enjoying his dollag steak, agreed. “The people of Corinair will undoubtedly do whatever they can to provide support, but they also have to worry about their own survival. Not only is their world in need of rebuilding, but their infrastructure is currently unable to support the creation of any significant defenses. For now, they have to rely on the Takarans to protect them. After so many decades of being dominated by the Ta’Akar, it is not an easy thing for my people to accept.”

“I suspect that Tug has his hands full as well,” Cameron said. “We did destroy quite a few Takaran ships while we were there.”

“Yes,” Nathan agreed. “The few he has left are spread pretty thin protecting the worlds that were once ruled by Caius. There are outside aggressors that might try to take advantage of the power vacuum and take worlds that are not theirs.”

“They were planning on retrofitting their warships with jump drives, were they not?” Vladimir asked.

“Eventually, yes,” Major Prechitt said. “But for the short term, any increase in military capability on the part of the Takarans could destabilize the tenuous peace that now exists within the cluster.”

“When we left, they were in the process of turning over one warship to each world and training their people on how to operate and maintain their ships. Tug’s intent is to create a balance of power first, then increase it evenly by having everyone upgrade their ships with jump drives at the same time.”

“It is a delicate balance, to say the least,” Major Prechitt agreed.

“Nevertheless, we *are* planning on sending word back,” Cameron said.

“Of course,” Nathan said. “Better to ask for help and be denied than not to ask when help would have been forthcoming.”

“Nathan,” Vladimir began, pointing his fork at his friend, “you do realize how dorky you sound when you quote historical figures, do you not?”

“What message *do* you plan on sending?” Cameron asked.

“A brief report on the situation, as well as a request to send whatever assistance they might be able to provide on short notice,” Nathan told her.

“You’re not planning on asking for anything specific?” Major Prechitt asked.

“Like what?” Nathan said.

“Like more dollag steaks?” Vladimir suggested. “We have to keep our strength up.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of ordnance, propellant, consumables, medical supplies,” the major said. “Maybe even more volunteers. You might also ask for mining equipment. If we are to continue fabricating our own munitions and spare parts in order to fight a war, soon we will need to begin harvesting more raw materials to feed the fabricators.”

“You might want to allow the crew to send messages back to their families,” Cameron said. “That would be good for crew morale.”

Vladimir forced his food down so he could comment. “You might want to warn them about that black hole as well.”

“It might be prudent to send all of the intelligence that has been collected since we left the cluster,” Major Prechitt said. “I suspect that both the Takaran and the Corinari analysts could conduct a more in-depth analysis than Lieutenant Commander Nash was able to perform on such short notice, given our limited intelligence assets.”

“That is an excellent idea,” Nathan said, pointing at the major with his dinner fork.

“More so than you might think,” Cameron added. “The more they know about everything, including our own state of readiness, the current operations under way on Earth and on Tanna, and of course about the survival of the Celestia, the better chance they might send us something we can utilize.”

“I doubt they will have the means to send much back to us in the way of supplies,” Nathan said, “at least, not for a while. When we left, the Corinairans had two cargo shuttles equipped with mini-jump drives that they were using to ferry food from Ancot to Corinair. The Takarans were also in the process of retrofitting a cargo ship with a jump drive in order to support the more devastated worlds in the cluster, but again, that ship will probably not be available.” Nathan set down his fork and pushed his plate aside. “People, I think it’s best that we operate under the assumption that no significant assistance will be coming from our allies in the Pentaurus cluster. For the foreseeable future, we are on our own.”

* * *

“Are you looking for a place to set down?” Luis asked as the last few seconds of their hard burn ticked away.

"I'm looking," Ensign Schenker said. "We're still at a bad angle, though. You're going to need to get closer and get between the tip of Metis and Jupiter."

"I thought we were landing on the long side," Luis said.

"We have to land on the tip pointing toward the planet if we want to maximize our concealment," the ensign answered from the sensor station.

"How wide is the tip?" Luis asked.

"About thirty-four kilometers."

"That's only half as much as the length," Luis complained. "Are you sure we have to land there?"

"Jesus, Delaveaga," Schenker said, "how much room do you need?"

"The more the better," he mumbled.

"It's not like you're landing an airplane, Ensign," the lieutenant commander reminded him. "You should have zero forward velocity relative to Metis when we set down, right?"

"That's the idea, sir," Luis answered. He glanced at the burn timer, struggling to read the numbers as the ship continued to shake violently from the main engines. "Forty seconds to shutdown."

"We're still closing on Metis at two hundred forty meters per second," Ensign Schenker reported. "We're going to overshoot."

"By how much?" Luis asked.

"A few kilometers at least."

"That's okay. I can move us back closer with maneuvering thrusters."

"Before we become visible again?" Lieutenant Kovacic said.

"Hopefully." Luis glanced up at the view screen. Jupiter filled the entire screen, except for a small vertical strip to their starboard side. The long, irregularly-shaped moon was

coming up on them quickly, slightly to starboard of them. Luis tried to ignore the images on the screen, concentrating only on the displays on his console. He punched in a command, and the ship shifted slightly to port.

"You're moving closer to Jupiter?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said, staring at the view screen.

"Just a touch, sir," Luis answered. "I don't want to skip off the surface of Metis as we pass by her." Luis glanced at his burn timer again. "Twenty seconds." He glanced up once again. This time, he could make out details of the surface of Metis as they passed by them at a much greater speed than he would have thought.

"We're blowing past her," Ensign Schenker announced.

"I know! I know!" Luis answered, frustration in his voice.

"I found a spot to set down!" the ensign said. "I'll mark the coordinates and send it to your console!"

"How big is it?"

"Big enough!"

"How big?" Luis asked again.

"At least two kilometers long by maybe one point seven wide."

"You're kidding, right? Is that all you could find?" Luis asked, trying to hide his sense of panic at the idea of setting a fifteen-hundred-meter long ship down on a patch of Metis only two thousand meters long.

"That's all there is," Ensign Schenker said. "Longest and flattest spot on the facing tip. There are a couple other spots that are bigger, but they've got ridges and such jutting up at least ten meters in places. No idea what that might do to our hull."

"Probably poke some ugly holes in us," the lieutenant commander surmised.

"I thought you said the gravity on Metis was too low to do any damage to us when we set down," Luis said.

"You really want to risk it?"

"Five minutes to line-of-sight horizon with Earth," Ensign Schenker said.

"Ten seconds to shutdown," Luis announced, some relief evident in his voice. At least their long, bone-rattling deceleration burn would be over with. Luis glanced at the alternate display on his console as the tracking image of the landing site appeared on the screen. "Okay, I've got the LZ on my screen," Luis announced. The scraggly, blue line representing the small clearing on the tip of Metis was getting smaller by the second as the Celestia passed the tiny moon.

"Distance to Metis is five hundred meters and rising," Ensign Schenker reported.

"Three seconds," Luis said, counting down the final seconds.

"Separation rate of twenty..." Ensign Schenker reported as the distance between the Celestia and Metis increased.

"Two."

"Ten."

"One."

"Five.....two."

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic looked at Luis, expecting him to shut down the main engines.

"Zero separation rate!" Ensign Schenker reported.

"Ensign?" the lieutenant commander said.

"Just a sec..."

"Closure rate of four meters per second," Ensign Schenker reported as the Celestia's main engines continued to burn. "Six.....ten!"

The ship's two operational main engines suddenly cut out completely. Luis looked down at his console. "That's it! The mains are out of propellant! All we've got left is what's in the maneuvering systems."

"Four minutes to line of sight," Ensign Schenker reported. "It's going to be close."

"How close?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"We're just under two kilometers ahead of Metis," Ensign Schenker explained. "At our current rate of closure, we'll have forty seconds to land before we break the line-of-sight horizon."

"Can we increase our closure rate?"

"I'd rather not, sir," Luis said. "We'd just have to slow down again, anyway."

"Can you put us down in forty seconds?" the lieutenant commander asked, his own doubts obvious on his face.

"Can I put us down? Sure, no problem," Luis answered with a shrug.

"In one piece?" the lieutenant commander clarified.

"You're not helping, sir," Luis said.

"Sorry." Lieutenant Commander Kovacic turned around to face Ensign Souza at the communications console at the aft end of the bridge. "Tell everyone to prepare for landing."

* * *

Loki remained frozen in the night, his weapon pointed out over the pile of his jump-rig gear. It was so dark he could hardly see the end of his weapon, let alone anything beyond it. Despite the overwhelming fear, he managed to keep his finger off the trigger, just as Marcus had taught him.

"Don't shoot me," Waddell whispered from the darkness directly in front of Loki.

Loki's eyes widened at the closeness of the major's voice. "Major?" he whispered.

"Who else?" The major's head rose up from behind Loki's pile of gear as his hand pushed Loki's sidearm to the side. "At least you didn't have your finger on the trigger."

"How the hell did you get so close without..."

"Practice," the major whispered. "Is this all your jump gear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Sprinkle this over it," he instructed as he handed him a small container.

"What is it?"

"Gear eraser," the major said with a grin as he looked about for any signs of movement in the area.

Loki followed his instructions, opening the container and sprinkling the contents all over his jump gear. "Now what?"

"Strike the lid against the bottom of the case. That'll make the case start to burn. Then just toss it on the pile."

"Won't someone see it?" Loki wondered.

"Did you see mine?" the major asked.

Again, Loki did as he was told, striking the lid against the bottom of the container and lighting it on fire. He tossed the burning container onto the pile. The powder instantly began releasing an acrid gray smoke with a glowing pale-blue ball in the middle of the pile.

"Won't they be able to see this on infrared?" Loki asked.

"It's not really a burn," the major told him. "It's more like a chemical breakdown. At least, that's what they tell me. We just call it a cold burn." He looked at Loki. "Go ahead; touch it."

Loki looked at the major, then at the smoking pile. He held his breath, then moved his hand slowly down toward

the glowing, smoking pile. There was no heat. It was almost too cold to even touch. "That is so freaky."

Major Waddell looked at him. "Earth expression?"

"Yeah."

"Let's head out," the major told him. "We've only got a few hours before sunrise, and we need to get down off this plateau before then."

"What about this? Will it burn out?"

"In ten minutes, you'll never even know it was there," Major Waddell said as he headed off into the darkness.

* * *

"They didn't give you any trouble at all," Synda said under her breath.

"Money talks," Jessica told her as they made their way down the streets of outer Winnipeg, "or in this case, Jung credits."

"Yeah, well, you might want to buy something so you can get a few less valuable chips. By the look of that gate keeper's face, your bribe was considerably more than he expected. You keep flashing hundred-credit chips and someone's going to try to take them from you."

Jessica smiled at the thought. "Duly noted. Why is it this place is so infested with unsavory characters, anyway?" She wondered as she examined the type of people roaming the streets.

"Prison was hit by a stray bomb," Synda said.

"Stray bomb?" Jessica snickered. "No such thing."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't *drop bombs* from orbit and hope they hit something important. That type of ordnance has its own

precision targeting systems. Every one of those weapons had an assigned target before they left their rails.”

Synda looked at Jessica. “How would you know?”

“I heard a few things.”

“Like what?”

“Like there is some kind of underground resistance in this city.” Jessica looked at Synda. “Is that true?”

“Yeah, they hit the downtown shopping district last week. Seems like they hit it every week.”

“How do they *hit it*?” Jessica asked.

“From what I hear, about a dozen of them charge in and just start shooting anything and anyone in sight.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“From the news broadcasts on the net.”

“Yeah? Well, don’t believe everything you hear,” Jessica told her as she turned onto one of the main streets that led deeper into the heart of the city.

“Where are you going?”

“To the downtown shopping district.”

“Why? We can get everything we need in one of the closer districts,” Synda said, “preferably one that doesn’t get attacked on a weekly basis.”

“I like to go where the action is,” Jessica told her as her pace quickened.

“Well if you want to go downtown, you’d better get off the main roads.”

“Why?”

“Too many checkpoints,” Synda said. “They try to control the flow of people in and out of downtown, but it doesn’t work as well as they’d like, from what I hear. Best to travel back streets. It’ll take longer, but you can usually avoid the checkpoints and even the wandering patrols if you’re careful.”

Jessica slowed her pace a bit more, letting Synda catch up. "Lead the way, then."

"Me?"

"I'm paying you, remember?" Jessica looked at Synda, who didn't look very confident in her role as a guide. "You do know your way around, right?"

"Yes, it's just that I've never actually been all the way downtown—at least, not since the invasion."

"How far do you usually get?"

"We already passed it," Synda answered sheepishly.

Jessica stopped in her tracks, turning to look at Synda, who also stopped. "Exactly how many times have you come into the city since the invasion?"

"Including today?" Synda looked at Jessica's face. Her employer did not seem amused. "Three times."

"And how far did you get each time?"

"The first time, that little market back there," she said pointing over her shoulder.

"And the second?" Jessica asked.

"I didn't get past the gatekeeper. I didn't have any money, and I wasn't willing to give him the alternate form of payment he'd suggested."

"Great." Jessica looked around, wishing she could have brought a personal navigation unit along with her. "But you do know how to get there, right? Downtown?"

"Sure, I used to work down there. I know it like the back of my hand."

Jessica sighed. "Well, I guess that's better than nothing." She held out her left hand, pointing with her open palm down the street ahead of them. "Lead the way."

Synda swallowed hard and started down the street. "Sorry," she mumbled as she passed Jessica.

* * *

Luis wiped the perspiration from his brow as he initiated small bursts of the Celestia's reverse thrusters to slightly increase the ship's orbital speed and thereby decrease their closure rate on Metis.

"Two minutes to line-of-sight horizon," Ensign Schenker reported.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic stood to Luis's right, watching over his shoulder. "Are you sweating, Delaveaga?"

"Hell, yes."

"Well, don't, Ensign. You've got this. Trust me."

"I wish I could, sir," Luis answered. "I just wish this thing had a landing guidance system like the training shuttles. I don't even have a reference point to tell when I'm lined up over the center of the landing area."

"I think I can help you with that one," the lieutenant commander said as he moved over to Ensign Schenker on the port side of the bridge. "Schenker... our external cameras. Can you take some of the lateral cameras and point them straight down?"

"Sure. Which ones would you like?"

"The bow, one on either side of the widest point of our forward section, another two on either side of our drive section, one just aft of the deceleration thrusters, and one on our stern." The lieutenant commander watched as Ensign Schenker opened separate windows on his main console display, each showing a separate camera view. "Great. Now adjust the angles so you can see straight down beneath us and at least as far outboard as the edges of the landing area."

"I see what you're doing," Ensign Schenker said.

“Great. Once you’ve got them dialed in, throw them up on the main view screen, and spread them out in roughly the same shape as the cameras are positioned.”

“I’m going to need at least one forward facing camera, sir,” Luis said. “Maybe at a forty-five degree angle.”

“That’s no problem,” Ensign Schenker told him.

“Put that one dead center above the others,” the lieutenant commander instructed.

A few moments later, all eight windows were up on the main view screen.

“What the... How the hell is that supposed to help me?” Luis asked.

“Don’t you see?” the lieutenant commander said. “The centermost edges of each of those windows represent points along the outline of our hull. All you have to do is try to get the spacing between the inside edges and the outer edges of the landing area all equal.” The lieutenant commander looked at Luis, seeing the confused look on his face. “It will make more sense once we get over the landing site,” he assured him.

“Can’t we just use the docking sensors?” Luis asked.

“Won’t work,” Ensign Schenker said. “They’re designed to range against a hard target, not water ice and dust. Best I can do is call out your estimated range as you descend.”

“Estimated?” the lieutenant commander asked.

“Based on our known speed and velocity changes since our last accurate range reading to Metis. Even our short-range sensors weren’t meant for such close-range readings, sir.”

“That’s better than nothing, I guess,” Luis said. “I just wish I had a visual range reference of some sort.”

“You can’t tell how far we are from the surface by the camera views?”

“Not really, sir,” Luis told him. “Not without a visual reference on the ground of a known size.”

“Remind me to talk to Fleet about this little oversight when we get back,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said.

“With pleasure, sir.”

“I have an idea,” Ensign Schenker said.

“What?”

“Give me a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute, Gus,” Luis said.

A ninth window appeared on the main view screen, this one situated in the middle and filling up most of the space between all of the other camera views.

“What are you doing, Schenker?” the lieutenant commander asked.

They watched as, one by one, four tight circles of light appeared along the four edges of the window in the middle of the main view screen. The balls began to swing, one after the other, across the surface of Metis as it passed slowly below them until each light had reached the opposite side of the window.

“That’s really pretty, Ensign,” the lieutenant commander said as Ensign Schenker added two bright green perpendicular lines across the window. “Really, it is, but...”

“As we descend, the ovals of light cast on the surface will come closer together. When they reach the center, we should be approximately five meters above the surface of Metis. That’s the best I can do with these angles.”

“No, no, that helps!” Luis said. “It will also help me keep the ship level in relation to the moon’s surface!” Luis turned his head away from his console for the first time since they had finished their hard burn. “Gustav, you’re a genius!”

“You can thank me later,” Ensign Schenker replied. “Just put us down safely for now.”

Luis readjusted himself in his seat behind the helm console, feeling more confident than before. "Sir, you know the layout of these consoles, right?" Luis asked.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I know how to use them," the lieutenant commander admitted.

"I just need someone to call out changes in our rate of descent and our closure rate," Luis said. "That way, I can keep my focus on the flight controls and the displays on the main view screen."

"I think I can handle that much," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said as he sat in the navigator's chair to Luis's left.

"Schenker, if you can keep calling out our distance to target as well as our time to line-of-sight horizon with Earth, that would help as well."

"Got it. By the way, *now* you have one minute to line of sight."

"Funny."

"Okay, so you want me to read what now?" the lieutenant commander asked, looking over the navigation console.

"Rate of descent and closure rate," Luis repeated, leaning over to point the readings out to him. "The closer we get, the more often you need to call them out. Call them out as descent something and closure something."

"Right." He looked at the readouts. "Descent ten. Closure fifteen. Do I need to say meters per second?"

"No, that part doesn't change."

"Fifty seconds to line of sight," Ensign Schenker reported. "Range to center of target is five hundred meters. Don't forget; that range is from our forward sensor array, which is at least two hundred meters back from our bow and a good five hundred meters forward of our midship line."

"Can you just convert it for me before you call it out?" Luis begged. "Just add the five hundred meters each time."

"As you wish, but it's an estimate either way."

"Gus, come on!"

"Just give him what he wants, Schenker," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic ordered.

"Forty seconds to line of sight. Eight hundred fifty meters to center of target."

"Thank you," Luis said as he adjusted his maneuvering thrusters and fired a small burst.

"Altitude is thirty meters and falling," Ensign Schenker added.

"Descent still at ten. Closure at fifteen." The lieutenant commander looked up at the windows on the main view screen. "You're drifting right, Luis."

"I got it," Luis answered as he fired the starboard maneuvering thrusters.

"You're yawing left now," the lieutenant commander said.

"Damn it," Luis said. "With most of our forward decks missing, our center of gravity is off. Our back end mass is out of proportion to our designed CG."

"Line of sight in thirty," Ensign Schenker reported. "Seven hundred out. Twenty up."

"Just use less thrust on the forward maneuvering pods," the lieutenant commander said.

Luis glanced at him. "You have been reading the manuals, haven't you?"

"Ain't much else to do around here," he mumbled. "Still descending at ten and closing at fifteen."

"Killing the yaw and easing her back to starboard," Luis said. He watched the main view screen as the spacing in the windows decreased on the right and increased on the left in

relation to the shifting outlines of the landing area on the surface of Metis as it passed under them.

“That should do it,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said as he, too, watched the windows on the main view screen.

“Line of sight in twenty,” Ensign Schenker called out. “Five fifty out. Ten up.”

“Slowing our descent,” Luis announced as he fired the bottom-side thrusters.

“Descending at five. Closing at fifteen,” the lieutenant commander reported. “Descending at two.”

Luis cut the thrusters.

“Descent rate at zero,” the lieutenant commander reported. “Still closing at fifteen.”

“Ten seconds to line of sight,” Ensign Schenker reported. “Four hundred out. Altitude holding at five meters.”

“We’re not going to get down before we pass the horizon,” Luis moaned.

“Don’t worry about it,” the lieutenant commander said. “We’re five meters above the surface of Metis. That can’t make that much difference.”

“We’re going to kick up some dust when we set down,” Luis warned.

“Line of sight in five seconds.”

Luis watched the main view screen. The four ovals of light from their spotlights were practically touching one another and forming a cross on the surface below them. It was like targeting crosshairs on a hunting rifle.

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this,” Ensign Souza said from the comm station.

“Crossing line-of-sight horizon,” Ensign Schenker announced. “Two fifty out. Holding at five meters.”

“Firing forward docking thrusters,” Luis announced.

“Zero descent. Closure dropping,” the lieutenant commander reported. “Closure at twelve.....eleven.....”

“Two hundred out,” Ensign Schenker reported.

“Ten.....”

“Our aft end has crossed into the landing zone,” he added. “You’re clear on all sides to set down.”

“Eight.....”

“As soon as I get her to come to a stop,” Luis said.

“Closure down to five,” the lieutenant commander said as Luis continued to burn the forward docking thrusters.

“Just a bit more,” Luis mumbled.

“Three meters. Two. One...”

Luis pressed a button on his console, killing the forward docking thrusters.

“Zero... almost,” the lieutenant commander said.

Luis quickly switched scales. “We’re still drifting forward at about half a meter per second.”

“Close enough,” the lieutenant commander said. “I’m sure we dock up at greater speed than that.”

“Yeah, but docking arms give a little when you make contact,” Luis said. “Moons don’t.”

“Just put us down already,” Ensign Souza exclaimed.

Luis punched in more commands. “Setting up two docking thruster burns: one to push us down toward the surface and another to stop our descent.” Luis turned to Ensign Schenker. “How close do we need to be for Metis to grab us?”

Ensign Schenker shrugged his shoulders. “I’m surprised it hasn’t already.”

“Well, here we go,” Luis announced as he activated the first burn.

The Celestia hovered five meters above the tip of Metis, nearly centered over the space they had chosen as their landing site. Jupiter loomed large over them, nearly filling the entire sky above their heads.

Short, simultaneous squirts of accelerated propellant shot out of the topside docking thrusters located all around the perimeter of the ship, nudging her downward toward the moon below.

“Descending at one half meter per second,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic reported.

The four ovals of light in the center window on the main view screen merged, crossed, then began separating out in opposite directions as the ship descended.

“Four meters,” Ensign Schenker reported. “Three meters.” His voice was becoming tenser with each announcement.

“Picking up speed,” the lieutenant commander stated. “Point seven meters per second.”

“Two meters! She’s got us!” Ensign Schenker declared.

Luis activated the second firing sequence.

Another set of short, docking thruster bursts shot out from all around the Celestia, this time toward Metis, slowing her descent and kicking up dust from the surface below as her shadow came up to merge with the vessel herself.

“Half meter,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. “Quarter meter! Comms, all hands brace for impact!”

“One meter and falling!” Ensign Schenker announced.

There was nothing more that Luis could do. The weak gravity of Metis had hold of the Celestia and was pulling her down to the surface. If he fired another burst of docking

thrusters, he risked pushing them away from the moon again and having to thrust back downward. Every thruster he fired created heat signatures that someone looking their way with the proper equipment might be able to see.

He grabbed the sides of his console and held on.

The Celestia slowly settled the last meter down to the surface of Metis. Her aft end made contact with the surface first, sending a wave of dust up around her curved underside. As soon as the aft end made contact, the bow of the ship came down and made contact as well, sending even more dust forward and to either side.

The bridge rocked as the ship made contact with the small moon, her empty hull moaning as the forces were transferred through her frame. The shaking seemed to last several seconds but was far milder than Luis had expected.

“We’re down!” Ensign Schenker reported.

“Hey, that wasn’t so bad,” Luis said, feeling somewhat proud.

“Nice work, Ensign,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said, reaching over and patting Luis on the shoulder. “But don’t get too cocky. The inertial dampeners were still running at forty percent.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Everyone all right?” the lieutenant commander asked as he rose from the navigator’s chair.

“Everyone aft reports they’re fine, sir,” Ensign Souza said.

“Get rid of those windows and give me the forward view,” the lieutenant commander ordered. A moment later, the main view screen showed only a cloud of dust swirling about the outside of the ship. “Jesus, Delaveaga. You

weren't kidding about kicking up some dust." He turned to Ensign Schenker. "I don't suppose that will go unnoticed."

Ensign Schenker shrugged again. "If they're looking, maybe not. I just don't know, sir."

"Well," the lieutenant commander sighed, "not much we can do about it now. Schenker, go through all the external cameras and check the area out. Also, look at the hull whenever possible for signs of external damage, especially across our underside."

"Aye, sir."

"Luis, shut all the flight systems down, and power down the flight console. Your job is over."

"Gladly, sir," Luis answered.

"Souza, tell engineering to shut everything down including the backup fusion reactors. We'll run on batteries for now. After that, tell them to go over everything. Look for any damage due to our landing. We'll do the same on our deck."

"We can't run on batteries for more than a few days, sir," Ensign Schenker warned.

"We can fire up one of the fusion reactors every few days while we're on the far side to recharge them," the lieutenant commander said. He turned back toward Ensign Souza. "Tell Tilly to figure out how often we'll need to do a recharge cycle. We're going to have to go dark and cold twenty-four seven here, people. We no longer have the luxury of keeping our hot side pointed away from our enemy, and we sure as hell can't run the heat exchangers on a regular basis. I want us to be a cold patch of moon, so let's get to work."

* * *

By the time Loki and Major Waddell made it down to the river at the bottom of the narrow canyon, the morning sun was already high in the sky over Tanna. The canyon floor was lush, green, and heavily overgrown. The fact that there were already well-worn trails made the going easier, but it also kept the major on edge, always on the lookout for what he referred to as 'locals'.

As they approached the falls, the forest became damp from the mist that traveled out in all directions. They were on the opposite side of the lake at the base of the falls, at least half a kilometer away, yet the roar of the falling water was nearly deafening.

Major Waddell stopped and stared at the massive waterfall on the far side of the lake. Even from this distance, it was awe-inspiring. It came pouring over the top of the mesa on the far ridge of the canyon, then fell at least seven hundred meters to the lake below. He turned and looked at Loki. "You flew through that?" he asked, pointing at the falls with a grin on his face. "Are you serious?" He laughed heartily. It was the first time Loki had ever seen the major smile, let alone laugh. "Why?"

"We didn't have a choice," Loki answered.

The major looked around, holding his arms up and out to indicate all the open space between the falls and the opposite side of the canyon.

"We came flying around that bend in the canyon back there," Loki explained, pointing back to his right. "We were going so fast, we swung wide left. Josh barely had time to level off before we plowed into the side of the waterfall. If he hadn't, we wouldn't have made it through. We'd probably still be at the bottom of this lake."

The major laughed again. "Your friend is either an amazing pilot or absolutely crazy." He turned and continued

down the trail.

"A little of both, unfortunately," Loki mumbled.

"I'm surprised you made it through at all," the major commented as they walked.

"We entered them pretty high up," Loki said. "If we had hit them lower, the water would have had a lot more force behind it. At least, that's what Lieutenant Yosef said."

"But you were still flying when you came out the other side."

"I don't know that I'd call it flying," Loki said. "More like falling forward, really. One turbine was out. The other two were sputtering... Too much moisture got into them."

"No surprise there."

"It really was some amazing flying Josh did that day. Quick thinking, too, shooting off those drones and stuff to make it look like we crashed. Bought us the time we needed. Of course, at the time, I just thought he was crazy." Loki plodded along behind the major. He had never spent any time in such a place. His homeworld was a relatively barren world that had been reformed and heavily landscaped to suit the needs of his people. Other than its oceans and a few of its yet undeveloped equatorial wastelands, there was very little that was natural about his homeworld. "How much farther do you think we have to go?"

"According to the logs from your flight, the cave should be on the far side of the falls, about four hundred meters up the canyon. The bridge we went over a ways back was the big river. There are three more small ones that we'll have to cross yet."

Loki stopped in his tracks. "Uh, I don't know how to swim."

Major Waddell also stopped, turning back to look at Loki.
“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

The major smiled again. “Relax, kid,” he said as he turned and continued forward. “They’re only knee deep where we’ll be crossing.”

“You’re sure about that?”

* * *

“*Bridge, environmental,*” Devyn called over the comm-set from the aft end of the Celestia.

“Go ahead,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic answered over his comm-set.

“*Sir, we’ve got a problem. The command deck shows a drop in pressure. It’s been steadily losing pressure ever since we set down.*”

“Are you saying we’ve got a hole somewhere?”

“*No, sir, more like a slow leak from a bad seal or in a feed pipe in the walls. Honestly, sir, it could be a million different things.*”

“Don’t you have sensors that tell you where the leak is located?”

“*Normally, yes, but most of them haven’t been installed yet. All I can monitor are the individual compartment sensors.*”

The lieutenant commander rolled his eyes in frustration.
“What do we do?”

“*We need to close all compartments on the command deck so that I can monitor each one of them individually. That will at least tell us if the leak is in one of the compartment structures.*”

"And if it's *not* in one of the compartment structures?" the lieutenant commander wondered.

"Then it would have to be in the system itself, like in one of the oxygen lines between decks."

"Which would mean?"

"It would mean our problem would be much worse, sir."

* * *

Loki stood along the river's edge staring at the fast-moving water flowing past them. "This does not look like the last one," he told Major Waddell.

"It's a little deeper, yes," the major admitted. "It's moving a little faster as well."

"A little?" Loki turned and looked at the major. "Maybe we should look for another place to cross."

"It would take too long. We're running out of light."

"What are you talking about? It's not even noon yet."

"In two hours, the sun will be at our backs," Major Waddell explained. "That means the canyon wall we have to climb will be in direct sunlight instead of shadow."

"So we'll be hot."

"And we'll be highly visible to people in the valley over there," the major said, pointing to their right, "including the Jung."

"I didn't think of that," Loki admitted, looking at the river again. "This side isn't so bad. It's fast, but it only looks to be waist deep. It's the other side that I'm worried about. All that green water. It looks really deep over there."

"I have an idea," Major Waddell told him. "See that big rock just up river, the one in the middle?" Major Waddell pointed at the massive rock. "If we can get to that rock, I

can swim across the deep side with a line and pull you across after me.”

“Uh, the water looks to be deep on both sides of that rock, Major,” Loki said, “and fast, too.”

“It’s shallow enough here that we can walk out halfway, then work our way upstream to that rock. You see the tan area of water just downstream of the rock? That’s got to be a sandbar of some sort, probably created by the flow of water around the rock.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“No,” the major said, “but I’m willing to go first.”

Loki sighed. “Okay. It can’t be any worse than jumping out of a perfectly good shuttle at the edge of space.”

Major Waddell pulled a bundle of thin cord from his pack and handed one end to Loki. “Tie this around your chest, up under your armpits.”

“This little thing? Are you sure it’s strong enough?”

“This little cord could hold ten of us,” the major assured him. “This way, if you lose your footing and get swept away by the current, I can haul you to me on that rock.”

“If you say so,” Loki said. “You know, I haven’t dried out yet from the last river we crossed.”

“Be thankful we’re not in the high mountains,” Major Waddell told him.

“Why?”

“The water would be melted snow. Very cold.” Major Waddell unbundled the cord as he walked out into the river, letting the cord drift downstream. He tied the opposite end of the cord around his own chest and then continued out across the river.

Loki watched from the shore as the major waded out into the waist-deep water. As he had suspected, the river was moving faster than it looked. The water was bubbling up

higher on the upstream side of Major Waddell, while there was a trough forming on his downstream side. The major was leaning into the current to steady himself, and more than once he looked as if he were about to lose his footing. The major was both taller and heavier, and Loki worried that the current might be more than he could handle.

In only a few minutes, the major had made it to the middle of the river and had worked his way upstream along the underwater sandbar that led to the downstream side of the rock. He removed his pack and tossed it onto the flatter, upper side of the rock. He then climbed up. He looked neither fatigued nor concerned, only wet from his mid-torso down.

The major looked all around the rock, sizing up the area as if deciding whether or not his plan would work. He motioned for Loki to join him. Loki groaned as he began to wade out into the river.

A minute later, Loki was himself waist deep in the rushing current, leaning hard upstream to steady himself. The water continued to move deeper with the upstream side splashing at his left armpit. For reasons he did not understand, he couldn't help but hold his hands up high above the water as if he were afraid to get them wet.

His breathing was quick and his pulse raced as he took one careful step after the other, constantly struggling to stay upright against the pull of the water. Every instinct in him screamed for him to turn around and head back to shore. As he plodded along step by step, one thought kept racing through his mind. *Why is it that humans love the water so much?* The stuff seemed way too dangerous to him at the moment.

Soon, the moment had passed, and he found himself on the sandbar heading upstream with the water level down to

his waist once more. Once he arrived at the downstream side of the rock, he removed his pack and tossed it up, then took the major's hand and scrambled up the side of the rock to join him.

"Okay," Loki sputtered, feeling out of breath. "That was scary."

"I'm afraid that was the easy part," Major Waddell warned him. The major pointed to the other side of the river. The water near the rock was deep green, indicating deep water. The current also appeared to be quite powerful. The green portion extended for a good twenty meters before it looked to be more shallow and moving more slowly. "That's the scary part."

Loki stared at the water as it rushed past them. He felt his pulse racing again. He looked at the major, who was pulling something out of his pack. "What are you doing?"

"Testing the currents," Major Waddell answered. He pulled a meal bar out of his pack and tossed it a few meters out into the deep water. The current immediately grabbed it and swept it downstream.

"With a meal bar? We're supposed to eat those, you know."

Major Waddell didn't answer, just kept his eyes on the meal bar as it continued riding the river's currents downstream. After about twenty-five meters, the bar began to move toward the far shore until, finally, its downstream motion stopped all together. It bounced gently in a swirling pocket of water for a minute or two, then drifted into shallow water along the far side of the river, only thirty or so meters downstream of them.

"Did you see that?" the major asked. "The current took it straight in to shore."

"So?"

“So, we use our packs as floats, jump out as far as we can, kick a bit, and let the current take us the rest of the way. A piece of pie.”

“I believe the expression they use is ‘a piece of cake’,” Loki said, “but it was a good attempt. And for the record, I don’t think it is a piece of cake.”

“I’ll go first, of course,” the major explained as he picked up his pack. “That way I can haul you in if the current tries to carry you farther downstream.”

“Maybe we should rest a bit first,” Loki suggested, trying to buy time.

“The sun, remember?” Major Waddell said, pointing at the sky. He put his pack on backward with the pack on his chest instead of his back. “Fasten the strap’s buckle for me,” he instructed.

Loki fastened the buckle on the major’s back, connecting the two straps together so they would not slip off of the major’s shoulders. “Are you sure these things will float?”

“The fabric has thousands of tiny, air-filled cells,” the major explained. “It’s supposed to protect the contents, but it also makes the packs buoyant.”

“Enough to hold us up?”

“No, but enough to keep your head above water, since you can’t swim.”

“Then why are you using it?” Loki asked. “You know how to swim.”

“To make sure it actually works before you try it,” the major said with a grin. “Now put yours on.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that,” Loki said as he picked up his pack.

Major Waddell buckled Loki’s straps together behind him in the same fashion, then patted him on the back. “We’re all set.” He tossed the bundle of cord that connected them out

into the currents. "Remember, if something happens to me, and I end up being swept downstream, you have to haul me in, so be ready. If that happens, try to haul me in to the sandbar so I can stand and walk my way back up here."

"Got it," Loki answered.

"Good luck, kid," the major said. Without hesitation, the major moved to the far side of the rock and turned around to face the river. After taking three deep breaths, he ran toward the edge of the rock and leapt out over the river with his hands holding onto either side of his pack and his elbows out. The major's feet pierced the water first, and the rest of his body followed with little splash. He rocked back and forth slightly as his hands let go of his pack and jutted out to the sides to steady him. The current quickly grabbed the major and took him downstream, just as expected.

The major kicked with his feet and paddled with his arms in an attempt to get across the deep part of the river as quickly as possible, but he seemed to make little headway. Loki began to worry that the current was not going to have as much effect on the major as it had on his meal bar.

The major started kicking and paddling more vigorously, and Loki became more concerned. Major Waddell had already traveled at least twenty meters downriver, and the current did not appear to be moving him toward the opposite shore as he had predicted.

Loki began quickly pulling in the loose slack in the cord that connected the two of them in preparation to haul the major back toward the center of the river and out of danger. Then, just as he was about to pull the cord taut, the major stood up in water that was only chest deep and barely moving.

"Ha-ha!" Loki laughed in both excitement and surprise. "You did it!"

Major Waddell gestured for Loki to keep his voice down.

After Major Waddell made it close to the far shore and was only standing in knee deep water, he motioned for Loki to jump in. The major demonstrated the proper positioning for Loki's hands, the same position he had used. Loki nodded his understanding, grabbing his pack in similar fashion with his elbows out. He took several steps back, took three deep breaths just as the major had done, ran across the rock in three bounding strides, and jumped off into the water.

Loki had never jumped into any water before, not even a swimming pool. His entry was far less graceful than Major Waddell's had been. Loki's entire body hit the water at once, causing a tremendous splash. He was surprised to find that the seemingly soft water felt like a wall, slamming the pack into his chest and stinging his face. He immediately felt unstable as the initial force of his impact caused his body to go under the water. His arms shot out unevenly and he rolled over onto his back before breaking the surface. Now his pack was floating on the water, with Loki dangling under the pack just beneath the surface.

Loki thrashed about with his hands and feet, struggling to upright himself. He tried not to panic, but he could not get upright. He twisted and turned as he tried to roll back over, and for a moment, he thought his head was above water. He gasped for air. A whole new wave of panic swept over him as some of the water found its way into his lungs. His reaction was to cough, which forced the last of the air from his body. He fought the urge to take another breath, well aware that his head was still underwater, as he continued to thrash about in his attempt to right himself.

The cord tied around his chest suddenly yanked at him with incredible force, spinning Loki around. He instantly felt

the wind on his cheeks, and he sputtered and gasped as he drew precious air into his lungs.

He heard the major yelling out from the shoreline, "Arms out!" He followed the major's advice, spreading both his arms and his feet out as far as he could to steady himself, floating with his pack under his chest and riding with his head above the water.

Loki could feel the cord digging into his back and his armpits as Major Waddell pulled him toward the shore. He coughed and sputtered as water tried to work its way up out of his lungs. He could hear the sound of the major splashing in the shallow water as he ran out to grab Loki. When the major's hands finally did grab Loki by his shirt and pull him toward the shore, it was almost euphoric.

With his feet finally under him, Loki stumbled through the shallows to the shore, the major helping him along.

"Damn, kid!" the major said as Loki collapsed on the shoreline, his legs still in the water. "I thought you were going to drown out there!"

Loki coughed and coughed, then finally held up one hand, a single finger in the air. "Not so loud," he warned in between coughs. "The locals."

Major Waddell smiled at Loki, grabbed his hand, and pulled him to his feet. "Right," he answered, laughing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jessica followed Synda from one street vendor to the next, occasionally stepping in to pay for something the young woman wanted to purchase for her eventual trip north. She pretended to look at various items herself, feigning more interest in some things than in others while really having no interest in them at all.

The open-air market place at the heart of the downtown shopping district was nothing more than a small cluster of streets that had been permanently blocked off to form the market. According to Synda, many of these had been formed in the earlier days immediately after the invasion. With many of the buildings damaged or destroyed by the attack, people had taken to setting up in the streets, often in front of their own half-destroyed shops or residences, in order to trade what they still had for what they needed. The Jung had moved quickly to replace the impromptu barter system with their own credit chips in order to better control the markets and the finances of the city, but with so many buildings still under repair, the open street markets had become the new standard. The Jung had simply moved them to officially designated locations in order to keep traffic flowing smoothly through the city.

The downtown marketplace was the largest in Winnipeg. While some markets specialized in certain types of merchandise, the downtown market carried everything.

Thus, it was the one that attracted the largest crowds as well as the best prices.

As Jessica pretended to shop, she eyeballed members of the crowd. Most appeared to be going about their day, but a few seemed out of place: a man who seemed to scan the crowd out of the corner of his eye more so than Jessica, a woman who moved from vendor to vendor not really looking at anything, and a third man who followed the woman around and kept looking back at the first man to see what he was doing.

There was something else suspicious as well. She had seen at least a half dozen men, all with fair skin and clean-cut hair. They were all wearing civilian clothing, but they carried themselves differently, as if this environment felt unfamiliar to them.

The most suspicious thing of all was that she had not seen a single Jung soldier since they had arrived at the marketplace. They had spotted several patrols along the way and had managed to avoid them, but here, in the busiest marketplace in the city, there were none.

Jessica moved closer to Synda, who was completely absorbed in the only shopping she had been able to do since the invasion over two months ago. Jessica pulled at her arm, getting her to casually move away from the ears of other customers. "You said this place had been attacked several times in the last few weeks, right?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't there any Jung guards around?"

"I don't know. They move around a lot, never staying in one spot for very long except at the regular checkpoints. Maybe you just didn't notice them."

"When did you say the last attack here was?"

"Sunday, I believe."

“And before that?”

“Friday. I remember because it was a holiday, and there were a lot of people killed.”

“What about the one before that?”

“Wednesday. They called it the hump day attack.”

“Let me guess. The one before the hump day attack was on a Monday, right?”

“Yeah, I think it was.” Synda looked at Jessica. “You don’t think...”

“Nah,” Jessica assured her. “Nobody’s that stupid.” She pushed Synda back toward the vendor. “Keep shopping.”

“I thought you wanted to find someone.”

“I’m working on it.”

Synda shrugged her off and returned to her shopping. Jessica moved to the next vendor and examined their wares as she stole glances at the crowd. She spotted another man doing more looking than shopping. Two clean-cut, fair-skinned men stood against a building talking.

A bus pulled down a side street as Jessica moved around the corner vendor’s stand. She saw the bus pull to the side of the road and stop, but no one got out. As she pretended to study the items on display, she stole several more glances at the bus down the street. There were shadowy figures moving about inside the bus. Then the doors on the bus opened, and a man in an officer’s uniform stepped out and looked around—only it was a uniform Jessica had never seen before. The officer, once satisfied that no one was looking, signaled to someone inside the bus. A moment later, more than a dozen men dressed in full battle armor and carrying energy weapons emerged from the bus and quickly moved into the nearby building.

Jessica’s eyes snapped back to the merchandise she was pretending to shop for as the bus pulled away moving

toward her. It passed slowly behind her and across the main street, being careful to avoid shoppers. It moved at least two blocks down before stopping again and unloading more armed men, who also disappeared into a building.

Jessica looked back to her right, spotting Synda still at the same vendor stand arguing with a woman about the price of something. Jessica looked beyond her, noticing another bus stopping more than a block away. It stopped on the corner, and all manner of people exited the bus and made their way into the market—women, children, and at least five nervous-looking men of mixed races, each with one thing in common... unusually bulky jackets for this time of year.

Jessica moved purposefully toward Synda, maintaining a casual pace so as not to draw attention. Her eyes darted about. Left and right, up and down, through the windows, and along the tops of buildings. There was movement in one of the shop windows, and for a moment, she could swear she saw the silhouette of a soldier.

Jessica finally got to Synda's side. "Something's up," she said under her breath. "We need to go."

"But I just found..."

"Now," Jessica snapped, grabbing Synda's arm and pulling her toward the side street.

An explosion went off directly behind them, knocking them both to the ground. Jessica felt a sharp pain in her right knee as she hit the road. Debris showered her and Synda as her ears rang. She could hear muffled screams of pain and panic in the distance. Her head was pounding, and for a split second, she wasn't sure where she was or what had happened.

But only for a second.

Jessica rolled over onto her back, sitting slightly upright as her head cleared and her senses returned to perfect clarity. There was smoke everywhere. Through the smoke, she could see bodies lying in the street, bleeding. Some were intact. Others were merely the shredded remains of what had once been human beings. People were running in every direction, screaming and shouting in panic as they fled the danger.

Jessica looked to her side and found Synda moaning but moving and very much alive. She reached out for her. "Synda!" She grabbed the young woman's shoulder and gave her a firm shake. "Are you all right?"

"What?"

Jessica could tell that Synda's senses had not yet recovered from the blast. Gunshots rang out from several directions. They were immediately met by the metallic zing of the Jung energy weapons. Jessica scrambled to her feet, grabbing Synda by the upper arm and dragging her reluctantly to her feet as well. She pulled her along, practically throwing her against the wall before joining her there herself.

Jessica grabbed Synda's face with one hand. "Snap out of it!" she ordered, shaking her head slightly.

Synda pushed Jessica's hand away. "What the hell?"

"They're attacking again!"

"What?" Synda looked around, the sound of the battle bringing her back to reality. "What's going on? A shoot-out?"

"Did they have firefights before?" Jessica asked as she pushed Synda toward a recessed doorway a few meters farther down the street.

"Firefights?"

"Shoot-outs!" Jessica said. "Did they have shoot-outs with the Jung before?"

“No, never. They just set off bombs and shot up some Jung soldiers before they could return fire. They were usually gone in less than a minute.”

“I fucking knew it!” Jessica swore. “The moment I saw them climbing off that bus!”

“What are you talking about? What bus?”

“This is an ambush!” Jessica told her as the firefight continued. “The Jung knew they were going to hit today.”

“How would they know?” Synda said. “Do you think someone told them?”

“Probably not.” A blast from a Jung energy weapon struck the building just past their doorway, causing Jessica and Synda to duck back against the door. It had come from the opposite end of the street from where the bomb had gone off. More energy weapon blasts immediately followed. Gunshots rang out from the opposite direction as the resistance returned fire from the new threat. Jessica could hear more Jung energy weapons fire coming from two more directions. They were more subdued, and it sounded like they were coming from opposite ends of the main streets.

“They’ve got them boxed in!” Jessica said. Several Jung troops clad in body armor charged past the doorway as they continued to fire. More gunshots rang out. One Jung soldier fell to the ground directly in front of them, a gunshot wound to his neck gushing forth blood. Several more soldiers charged forward, jumping over their fallen comrade, their energy rifles answering the gunshots in rapid fire succession. The last Jung soldier in the charge stopped momentarily at the side of the fallen soldier, checking to see if he was alive. Gunshots suddenly struck the pavement near the last Jung soldier, causing him to stumble backwards and nearly fall to his left. He charged toward Jessica and Synda in the doorway.

Jessica turned and faced Synda, shielding her with her body as she screamed out. "Please don't hurt us!" she begged.

The Jung soldier nearly fell against them as he scrambled to the safety of the doorway. He looked Jessica in the eyes. "Stay on this place, and no harm on you will come." Jessica enthusiastically nodded her agreement. The Jung soldier peered back around as several more of his comrades charged past him.

As the Jung soldier was about to leave the safety of their doorway and join the attack, Jessica reached down and pulled the soldier's sidearm from his holster and shot him in the back.

"Sorry. Changed my mind," she announced as she took aim and shot him in the head. She reached down and peered out around the edge of the door. Seeing that the other troops were still down at the far end of the street and engaged with the resistance, she stepped out with the stolen energy pistol aimed at the rest of the soldiers down the street and quickly picked up the dead soldier's energy rifle. "Here," Jessica said, tossing the pistol to Synda. "Take this."

Synda caught the pistol with both hands. "I thought you said it wasn't safe to have one of these!"

"The situation just changed," she said, giving the energy rifle a quick once-over. "Stay on my ass, and feel free to shoot any Jung that try to come up behind us."

"What? Where are we going?"

"To make contact with the people I came looking for," Jessica informed her as she raised her rifle and opened fire.

A quick spray of the end of the street took out all four Jung soldiers that were supposedly firing at resistance members near where the bomb had detonated. Jessica

looked down at the weapon, surprised that it had offered no kick at all, unlike the Corinari firearms that kicked nearly as much as their own projectile weapons.

“Let’s move!” she ordered as she charged across to the doorway on the opposite side of the street. Synda followed her, falling into her when they reached the far side of the street.

“What the hell?” Synda asked. “Why didn’t we just run that way?” she asked, pointing down the street in the direction the Jung had come from.

“Bad idea,” Jessica said. “That’s where they came from. What if there are more coming?”

“Well, why did we even move? I mean, here, there, it’s all the...”

“They can probably track their own weapons,” Jessica said as three more Jung came back around the corner from the main street. They immediately opened fire on the doorway on the opposite of the street, where Jessica and Synda had been standing a moment ago. Jessica waited a few seconds for them to come farther down the street, then swung her weapon out and opened up on them, cutting them down in short order.

“How did you know that?” Synda said.

“Why do you think the resistance isn’t using Jung weapons?”

“Because they didn’t have any?”

“You had one.”

She looked at the weapon she was holding. “Should I even be carrying this?”

“I’m pretty sure they can only track them when they’re fired,” Jessica told her. “Otherwise, they would have shot at where I was instead of the last place I fired from.” Jessica looked out from the doorway, checking both ends of the

street. "Come on," she said as she stepped out of the doorway and headed down the street in the direction the soldiers had originally come from.

"I thought you said more might come from that way," Synda said, sounding confused.

"Those three left the fight to come back and find us," Jessica explained. "That means there are no more coming from this direction, otherwise *they* would've come for us."

"Who are you?" Synda asked as they reached the corner.

Jessica peered around the building, looking in both directions and finding no Jung soldiers. "Little girl, you wouldn't believe me even if I told you." Jessica turned around and headed toward the main street where the bomb had been detonated and the sound of the battle.

Synda watched her run back the way they had come, even more confused than before. "Try me!" she begged, running after her.

Jessica charged back up the street, coming to a stop against the wall on the left a few meters short of the corner. She inched forward just enough to see that the street was clear of Jung forces to her right. She then moved to the corner and peered around to the left, spotting eight more Jung soldiers tucked into doorways on either side of the street. They were firing on six members of the resistance trapped at the end of the street. The resistance was trying to return fire from four directions at once, and they were doing a poor job of it as two more of their group fell to Jung energy weapons fire.

Jessica raised her energy rifle and swung it around the corner. Her first shot took out the Jung soldier in the doorway nearest her on the opposite side of the street. Her next shots killed two more in the next doorway. By the time she moved her aim to the third doorway on the opposite

side of the street from her, its occupant was already turning toward her to open fire. Before he could do so, several bursts from one of the resistance member's automatic weapon struck the soldier's side, knocking him off balance. Jessica fired again, leaving him a smoldering pile of body armor and limbs.

Several blasts from Jung weapons streaked past her as Jessica ducked back. The soldiers on her side of the street knew that someone was attacking them from behind with one of their own weapons. While their body armor appeared to be effective against projectile weapons, it did little to protect them against their own energy weapons.

She heard two more *zings* as blasts of energy struck the building just above Jessica's head from behind. "Fuck!"

Synda leaned out from the doorway where she had been hiding and fired at the two unsuspecting Jung soldiers that had fired on Jessica from behind, killing them both. "Holy shit!"

"I told you to watch our backs!" Jessica yelled as she turned around and sat on the ground, her back to the main street. She quickly flipped her rifle around, changing hands so her left hand was now on the trigger and her right was on the barrel stock. She scooted backward a tiny bit, then quickly laid on the ground as she turned both her head and the rifle to her right.

Three Jung soldiers were charging right at her from barely four meters away. Through the first soldier's face shield, Jessica could see the look of surprise on the young man's face as she put the first blast directly into his chest. The soldier's legs collapsed under him, and his momentum carried him forward as he fell, exposing the soldier behind him to her next shot. It, too, found its mark, causing the wounded Jung to fall forward and land on top of the first.

The third one was already trying to come to a stop as he brought up his weapon, but he was too late. Jessica's next shot hit the soldier in the upper, right shoulder, causing him to rotate to his right as he stumbled forward, tripping over the bodies of his two fallen brothers. The soldier's weapon discharged as he spun, the blast taking a chunk out of the corner of the wall and spraying chunks of brick and plenty of dust and debris into Jessica's face as she continued to fire.

Her next two shots struck the last Jung soldier as he toppled over the first two, one shot landing in his neck and the other in the side of his head. His weapon flew through the air, landing well past Jessica. The third Jung soldier struck the ground, lying face to face with Jessica less than half a meter away. Jessica looked at the dead soldier's face, twisted with horror and pain. His eyes were fixed open as the side of his helmet continued to smolder.

"Damn!" Jessica swore. She rolled away from the dead soldier, scrambling back to her feet as she switched the gun back around so her right hand was her trigger hand once again. It took only two more well-placed shots to deal with the remaining Jung soldiers between her and the last four surviving resistance members. "COME IN!" she hollered at them, gesturing for them to come toward her as she stepped out in the open to better cover their retreat. "MOVE YOUR ASS!"

The last four members of the resistance glanced at Jessica, surprise and bewilderment on their faces. One of them did not hesitate to do as she demanded and immediately charged toward her. A moment later, another followed, then finally the last two.

The first resistance fighter came charging around the corner and headed straight for the doorway where Synda

had been hiding. The second resistance fighter was right behind him, hollering, "Get it open! Get it open!"

The first resistance fighter pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the door, swinging it open. "I got it!" he announced. The second resistance fighter ducked through the doorway, and another one followed him.

The third resistance fighter came charging down the street and headed for the open door.

Synda's mouth dropped open. "Tony?" she mumbled.

The third resistance fighter glanced at Synda as he passed, a confused look on his face.

As the last man came charging down the street, more Jung soldiers rounded the corner after him. Jessica opened up, cutting the first few down as the last resistance fighter went past her. She backpedaled to the corner, firing repeatedly as she went and sending their pursuers diving for the cover of the doorways on either side of the street that was littered with the bodies of dead and maimed civilians as well as those of their own troops.

The last resistance fighter fell as he turned the corner, rolling over several times in the street.

"Move it!" Jessica called out.

"Come on, Jessica!" Synda yelled, pointing at the doorway. "This way!"

Jessica fired around the corner again, keeping the Jung soldiers pinned down in their doorways. She reached into her pocket and pulled out one of the Jung credit chips. She pinched it between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, bending it just enough to jam it into the trigger housing of the energy rifle. With the trigger stuck in the depressed firing position, the weapon continued in rapid fire mode. Jessica swung it back and forth several times, then laid it down on the ground. It was still pointed down the

street toward the cowering Jung soldiers as it continued to fire.

Jessica charged back down the side street, following Synda and the fourth man through the doorway. The fourth man pulled the door closed behind him and locked it, then charged down the stairs to the right of them with Jessica and Synda hot on his tail.

They ran as fast as they could down three flights of cement stairs, nearly stumbling along the way more than once. When they reached the bottom, they followed the fourth man through the fire door into the building's underground parking garage.

Jessica came flying through the door no more than two steps behind the fourth man, Synda another step behind her. She stopped dead in her tracks as she was met on the other side of the door by the fourth man's weapon pointed directly at her face.

"Whoa!" she yelped, holding her weapon up and aiming it right back at him.

"Drop it, bitch!" the fourth man ordered.

"Fuck you," Jessica said. "You drop yours."

"I'll pull the trigger, bitch! I swear I will!"

"So will I," Jessica promised, "and I'll bet mine hurts more," she added with a maniacal grin.

"Hey, we're on your side, remember?" Synda said.

"No, I don't remember," the fourth man said angrily, his blood still surging with adrenaline. "At least, I don't remember inviting either of you to the party." He took aim at Synda as well, causing her to drop her energy pistol out of instinct.

"We don't really have time for this, fella," Jessica said.

"Who the fuck are you?" the fourth man asked.

“Come on, Mack!” Tony called out from deeper in the parking garage. “We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Tony! It’s me!” Synda cried out.

“Shut the fuck up!” the fourth man ordered.

“We just saved your asses,” Jessica reminded him. “You might want to show a little respect.”

“What?” He furrowed his brow.

“Tony,” Synda pleaded.

“How the fuck does she know you?” Mack wondered, suspicion creeping into his voice.

“I have no fucking idea,” Tony insisted. “I’ve never seen this guy before!”

“Guy?” Synda said, surprised.

“Hey, the least you could do is let us go with you,” Jessica insisted, “at least until we all get away.”

“Not while you’re carrying Jung burners,” Mack insisted.

“Then give us one of your guns,” Jessica suggested, seeing one stuffed into Mack’s belt.

“You have two choices,” Mack said, “you drop your weapon and come with us, or we all go down right here.”

“Now that doesn’t sound like much fun,” Jessica said calmly.

“I don’t believe this!” Tony declared.

“Ain’t no way I’m letting you see our escape route and live,” Mack said, “not unless I can keep my eye on you afterward.”

Jessica sighed, lowering her weapon. “Fair enough,” she said, handing it to him butt first.

Mack took the weapon and tossed it to Tony, who quickly removed the energy pack, dropped it on the ground, and smashed it with the butt of the now-useless rifle. He then swept the pieces under the nearest car and tossed the rifle under there as well.

Mack picked up Synda's dropped energy pistol and disposed of it in similar fashion. He then turned to Jessica. "Now it's your turn to move your ass," he said, smiling.

Jessica rolled her eyes and followed Tony and the other two resistance fighters, breaking into a run to chase them down the garage. They turned the corner and ran toward a row of six small delivery trucks, each of them backed up so close to the wall that they were nearly touching it. The resistance fighters ducked between two of the trucks. One of them slid up the roll-up, side loading door and hopped inside, the second one hopping in behind him.

Jessica climbed into the back of the delivery van as well and turned toward the back of the van. The back door was open, revealing a ragged hole in the concrete wall that led into a space between the walls. She followed them in and to the left where there was a big hole with a simple wooden ladder leading down. Jessica laughed. "Didn't see that one coming."

* * *

"You're making considerable progress, Mister Hayes," Doctor Chen said. "The extra doses of nanites do seem to be helping. You're sure they're not bothering you too much?"

"Not at all, Doc," Josh said. He looked at Lieutenant Yosef, who was glaring at him. "In fact, you can give me another dose if you think it will speed things up."

"I expect you've got more than enough of them inside you as it is," the doctor told him, "but I will talk to Doctor Galloway about it and see what she says."

"When will I be able to sleep in my own bed again, Doc?" Josh said.

“If all goes well, in a few days. You’ll still have to take it easy, however.”

“What about going back to work?”

“I’m afraid that may take weeks.”

“How about simulator time?”

“Josh, you were exposed to all sorts of things,” Doctor Chen explained, “high-intensity electromagnetic fields, exotic particles, and different kinds of radiation, many of which I don’t even understand. You need to give yourself time to heal completely. Don’t be in such a hurry.”

“Loki is already back at it,” Josh said.

“You were in the front seat with no canopy over you. Loki was in the back with most of the canopy around him intact. Your exposure was far more severe.”

“But I will get better, right?”

“I cannot make you any promises, Josh,” Doctor Chen reminded him. “You know that. You are making excellent progress, however. That alone is very encouraging.”

Josh sighed. “Right. Thanks, Doc.”

Doctor Chen put her hand on Josh’s shoulder. “Try to get some rest, Josh. I’ll come by and check on you in the morning.” Doctor Chen looked at Lieutenant Yosef and smiled politely as she departed.

Lieutenant Yosef smiled back from the other side of Josh’s medical bed. “Thank you, Doctor.” She waited a moment for the doctor to leave the room before speaking. “Why are you lying to your doctor?” she scolded.

“I’m not lying.”

“The hell you’re not,” she said. “I can tell you’re in pain. It’s those nanites you’ve overdosed on, isn’t it? That’s why you’re in pain.”

“Overdosed? How do you overdose on nanites, Kaylah?”

Kaylah looked him in the eyes. "Look at me and tell me the nanites aren't causing you any pain."

Josh looked at her, then off to one side.

"No, no, no. In my eyes."

Josh looked her in the eyes again. "The nanites are not causing me *much* pain."

"Wow," Kaylah said. "I didn't think that would work."

"You didn't think what would work?"

"I was sure you'd look me in the eye and lie your ass off."

"Yeah, well, normally I probably would. But Loki keeps telling me I need to be more honest, especially with you."

She smiled. "He's a smart guy, smarter than I expected."

"Hey, I told the truth."

"Yeah, but you lied to your doctor, Josh," Kaylah reminded him. "How is she supposed to take care of you if you lie to her?"

"I only lied about the pain the nanites are causing; that's all. I can handle it, all right?"

"No, it's not all right."

"Look, the extra nanites are helping. You heard her."

"I also heard her tell you not to rush your recovery, Joshua."

Josh rolled his eyes. Every time she called him Joshua, he knew he was about to lose an argument.

"Why *are* you in such a hurry to recover, anyway?" she asked.

"Because if I don't get my ass back in the cockpit, they're going to replace me. *That's* why."

This time Kaylah rolled her eyes. "*That's* stupid."

"They're training replacements as we speak, Kaylah."

"They're not replacements, Josh. They're backups. The captain would never replace you. You're probably the best

pilot we have. The captain has said so himself, and on more than one occasion, I might add.”

“It’s easy for you, Kaylah,” Josh argued. “You’re a member of the original crew. You’re Fleet trained, *and* you’re a lieutenant now. Your job is practically guaranteed. I’ve got no formal training and no rank. I’m not a member of anything. Hell, when Loki starts talking about orbital trajectories and such, my eyes start crossing.”

“You’re just being silly now.”

“Nice,” Josh said, crossing his arms.

“Come on, Josh. I can guarantee you that the captain is *not* going to replace you.”

“That’s what Loki said.”

“Maybe you should listen to him.”

“And if I don’t fully recover?” Josh wondered.

Kaylah reached out and cupped his cheek with her hand. “Then we’ll strap your nanite-riddled body to the helm so you don’t fall out of your chair and embarrass yourself while flying the ship.” She smiled at him.

“Funny.”

* * *

“I suspect the leak is in one of the main transfer lines,” Devyn said over the comm-set.

“What do we do?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

“First, we need to get everyone moved onto the bridge as soon as possible.”

“Why the bridge?”

“The bridge was designed to be a self-contained environment. Although it is currently being fed by the ship’s other environmental systems, it can be sealed off from the

rest of the ship and run independently for extended periods of time."

"How extended?"

"It was designed to support up to twenty people for at least a month. The problem is, the system isn't completed. There are no scrubbers, no oxygen production cells, no air purifiers, no humidity controls..."

"Okay, I get your point," the lieutenant commander said. "But if it isn't completed, why move us in here?"

"I can pump the air in the other compartments on your deck into the holding tanks for the bridge."

"You want to depressurize the rest of the command deck?"

"Yes, sir. The bridge has an airlock. It has two of them, actually: one leading topside via a rescue tunnel and another leading into the main corridor. You pass through it whenever you come and go."

"I didn't even realize that was an airlock," the lieutenant commander admitted, looking toward the port exit. "I still don't see what moving us to the bridge accomplishes. You said the leak was in a transfer line, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why depressurize the rest of the command deck?"

"Because if I keep the main transfer line pressurized, it will eventually deplete the aft resources as well. We don't have the production capacity to continually feed both sections, not if we continue bleeding oxygen into the outer hull spaces."

"So moving us to the bridge isn't really fixing the problem as much as it is isolating it."

"Yes, sir... in the hopes of preventing it from becoming worse while we find a solution."

“Very well, Ensign,” the lieutenant commander said with a sigh. “Keep on it. We’ll start moving immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

The lieutenant commander looked at the others. “Well, you heard the lady. Go round up everything we have and bring it here: food, water, blankets, pillows, medical kits... anything and everything.”

“Where are we going to put it all?” Luis said.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic scratched at his cheek through his beard. “Well, we can haul some mattresses into the ready room and turn it into a dorm. It’s small, so it will be easier to keep warm.”

“There’s not enough room in there for all eight of us,” Ensign Souza said.

“We’ll hot rack,” the lieutenant commander said. “Four and four on twelve-hour rotations. We can use the bridge break room as our galley. And we have a functioning head.”

“What about the supplies?” Ensign Schenker asked. “Where do we store all that stuff?”

“Anywhere and everywhere,” the lieutenant commander said. “We’re only using two consoles now. There’s plenty of room in here for everything. So let’s get to it. The sooner we get moved in, the less oxygen we waste.”

* * *

The old cargo elevator came to a stop on the third floor. Jessica waited as the leader of the resistance team, the one they called Mack, raised the heavy, wire cage door. On the other side was a long corridor with an odd collection of furniture, scenery flats, and folding platforms piled along one wall. There were cobwebs strewn from the high

windows along the corridor, and everything was covered with dust.

“What is this place?” Jessica asked as they continued down the hallway.

“It’s the old theater complex,” Synda said. “The university built a new one a few years ago. They were planning to tear this one down before the invasion. I guess their plans got delayed a bit.”

“A little risky bringing us to your hideout, isn’t it?” Jessica taunted.

“This isn’t our main base. It’s just a rally point we use on occasion. We’ve got lots of places like this,” Mack bragged. “Once we’re done with you, we’ll never come back here again.”

“Clever,” she said, rolling her eyes.

They turned the corner at the end of the hall and entered a large, black room with high ceilings, catwalks near the ceiling on three sides, and a glass window up high along the fourth.

“Why do I feel like I’m in a video studio?” Jessica said.

“They called this the Studio Theater,” Synda told her. “I went to a one-act play in here once. It was terrible.”

“Artie, take watch,” Mack ordered. Artie disappeared through a door in the far corner. “Now, about you two,” Mack said as he stood and faced them in the middle of the empty, black room.

“What about us?” Jessica asked. She was getting tired of dealing with Mack and was beginning to think she had made a mistake coming to his aid.

“Who are you, and more importantly, how do *you* know *him*?” Mack asked pointing first to Synda and then to Tony.

“I’m telling you, Mack, I don’t know either of them,” Tony insisted.

“Tony, it’s me, Synda.”

Tony looked at her oddly. “What?” He leaned forward to get a better look at Synda as she removed her cap letting her hair hang freely.

“Easy!” Mack warned, raising his weapon in response to Synda’s sudden movements.

“Holy shit. I thought you were dead,” Tony exclaimed.

“I could say the same about you,” Synda said.

Tony looked down at her jacket. “What happened to...”

“Duct tape. Her idea,” she said, pointing at Jessica, “to keep the pervs away.”

Tony nodded.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Jessica said.

“So you do know them,” Mack said, even more suspicious than before.

“I know her, yeah,” Tony said, “from the gym. We used to spar together.”

“With her,” Mack laughed. “Did she slap you around much?”

“You’d be surprised,” Tony told him. “I *don’t* know her, though,” he added, pointing at Jessica.

“Therein lies the problem, doesn’t it?” Mack said. “None of us know who *you* are,” he said to Jessica. He turned to face Synda. “How do *you* know her?”

“I caught her trying to sleep in my place outside of town. She hired me to take her into the city, act as her guide. She said she was trying to find someone.”

“Really?” Mack said, turning back to look at Jessica. “Now that *is* interesting. And who exactly is it you’re trying to find?”

“No one you’d know,” Jessica answered.

“Don’t be so sure. I know a lot of people in this city. Try me.”

“No thanks.”

“I said, ‘try me,’” Mack repeated, raising his weapon.

Jessica sighed. “If you must know, I was trying to make contact with the resistance. I thought it was you. Now I know I’m mistaken. My apologies.”

“What makes you think we aren’t the resistance?” Mack said.

Jessica looked him squarely in the eyes. “Because *you’re* too stupid.” She smiled at him, taunting him further.

“Wow,” Mack said, taking a step back. “*You’re* insulting the guy with the gun, and *I’m* the one who’s stupid.”

“Now you’re catching on,” she added.

Synda looked at Jessica like she was crazy.

“Well, it looks like you’re the one who’s stupid, lady, because we *are* the resistance,” he announced, his hands held out at his sides.

Jessica snickered. “I don’t think so.”

“He used to be spec-ops,” Tony said.

Jessica laughed again. “Doubtful.”

Mack was becoming more agitated with every word that came out of Jessica’s mouth. “And why would you doubt that?”

“You don’t have the moves,” Jessica told him. “And of course, there’s that stupid thing I mentioned earlier.”

“I’m getting really tired of your smart mouth, bitch,” Mack said as he pointed his automatic weapon at her face.

“Mack, come on!” Tony pleaded. “Let’s just ditch her and...”

Mack swung his head toward Tony. “Shut up!”

That was all she needed.

Jessica’s right hand shot out and up, her palm turning outward as she grabbed his gun hand and pulled it down. At the same time, her left hand shot up, her left palm flat as

she jammed it into his elbow. The opposing forces popped his elbow joint from its socket, dislocating his forearm and causing him to release his grip on his weapon.

Mack screamed out in pain as Jessica ripped the gun from his hand. Without missing a step, she balled up her left hand, drew it back toward her, and fired a quick jab at his nose, knocking him backward.

Jessica spun around with her newly acquired weapon to take aim at the other two men, but when she saw they were already taking aim at her and Synda, she stopped, turned her weapon toward the ceiling, and held her free hand open. "Don't shoot! I'm done!"

"Drop it!" Tony demanded, his weapon held high and ready.

"Not this time," Jessica told him as she slung the weapon over her shoulder.

"YOU BITCH!" Mack screamed. "YOU BROKE MY FUCKING ARM!"

"Stop whining, you crybaby," Jessica said. "It's only dislocated. Be a man and pop it back into place." She turned back toward the other two men who were still nervously pointing their weapons at her. "Look, I came looking to make contact with the resistance. You four obviously aren't who I'm looking for, so we'll be on our merry way."

"How the fuck were you able to do that?" Tony asked, looking at their leader lying in the fetal position on the floor as he cried in pain.

"Because unlike your fearless leader there, I *am* spec-ops," she finally admitted. She turned toward the door to leave, then stopped and turned back. "I've got to warn you. If you continue following this moron, not only will you be stupid, but you'll also be dead." Jessica turned to Synda. "Are you still on the clock?"

Synda moved to follow Jessica toward the exit.

“Wait!” Tony called out after her, lowering his weapon.

Jessica turned back around to face them.

“He said he was spec-ops,” Tony said. “He knew all kinds of shit, had all kinds of guns. He said if we formed a cell and harassed the Jung, sooner or later, the resistance would contact us.”

“And how long have you been doing this?” Jessica asked.

“A few weeks,” Tony told her, “ever since word got out that the Aurora had returned.” Tony looked at her. “We were just trying to do the right thing, to fight them.”

“By blowing up civilians?” Jessica wondered.

“Mack said it was necessary, that we needed to make it look like it was the Jung’s fault innocent people were dying in order to get more people to join the fight.”

Jessica shook her head, barely able to contain her anger. She looked at Tony. “Mind if I hit him a couple more times?” she asked, her fists clenched.

“Synda,” Tony pleaded.

“I believe him,” Synda told Jessica. “I know him. He’s okay.” Synda looked at Tony. “Stupid, but okay.”

“Lady, we don’t know what we’re doing here. That much is obvious. We just lost two thirds of our group out there.”

“Well, that would be because of Mister Spec-Ops’s totally random, nine-day attack schedule, wouldn’t it?” Jessica said in disgust.

“Just tell us what we should do?”

“I think I’ve wasted enough of my time on you amateurs today,” she said, turning toward the door again. “You’re on your own.”

“Wait!” Tony called after her. “You said you wanted to contact the resistance, didn’t you?”

“So what.”

“Maybe we can help you.”

Jessica stopped and turned back around. “How?” she asked, her expression doubtful.

“I know the right message boards,” Tony explained, “where to post, what threads to watch. That’s how we’ve been trying to make contact with the resistance.”

“You think it’s as easy as posting in a net forum?” Jessica asked in amazement. “You need code words, code phrases, encryption algorithms...”

“That’s what we figured,” Tony said. “Maybe you have them?”

“I don’t, actually,” Jessica admitted.

“But, if you’re spec-ops...”

“I’ve been off-world for a while,” Jessica mumbled. She looked at the three of them, Tony, his friend, and their leader lying on the floor. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I just know I’m going to regret this,” she said as she moved back toward Mack lying on the floor. “You go find some ice somewhere,” Jessica instructed Tony’s friend, “or some chemical cold packs. Tony, you hold tough-guy down while I pop his elbow back into place.”

* * *

Loki gazed out at the valley below from his perch at the edge of the cave opening high on the canyon wall. They had been waiting in the cave for several hours now in the hope that Garrett, or friends of Garrett, would show up wanting to use the cave as a surveillance point.

“I miss the sunlight at times,” Loki said as he checked to see if his pants were still wet.

“Yes.” Major Waddell looked up at the sky. “The sun is not as intense on my world. Nor is the sky so bright.”

“On Haven, it was more amber than blue. Most of the light was reflected off the main planet.”

“I have read about it,” the major said. “Are your pants dry?”

“Almost.”

“How long did it take for the local resistance to make their appearance the last time you were here?”

“Not sure,” Loki admitted. “An hour or two maybe. They said they frequently used this cave as a vantage point to observe the valley below.”

“Of course, at the time, there was something of interest for them to observe.”

Loki looked at the major, confused.

“The diversionary crash site that your friend created.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess you’re right. Now that I think about it, they didn’t say if they came here routinely.”

“It is of no matter,” the major told him. “We can wait as long as is necessary. We have plenty of meal bars and an abundance of fresh water,” he added, pointing to the massive falls in the distance to their right.

“I thought we only had seventy-two hours.”

“We have seventy-two hours in which to make contact with the Aurora. The time available for us to complete our mission is unlimited as far as we know—as long as we continue to update the Aurora. If they wish to pull us out, they will say as much.”

“Can you make contact from here?” Loki wondered.

“We have a clear line of sight to the comm-coordinates from this position,” Major Waddell assured him. “We have already missed the first scheduled contact window. We were still on the move at the time. I intend to use the next one.” He looked at his watch. “In two hours.”

Loki continued staring at the valley below. He could see clusters of buildings here and there, usually in naturally occurring open spaces in the forest or at points where the rivers widened or turned sharply. Some of them appeared rustic, while others appeared far more advanced. In the distance, there was a larger town where two rivers merged. He could also see the site where Josh had fired their drones and missiles in order to create a diversion. He wondered if Josh had even considered the fact that he had been firing weapons into a populated area, although he doubted that Josh was aware of the population in the valley at the time.

“Seems like a really nice place to live down there,” Loki said.

“Yes, it does,” the major agreed. “Very peaceful. I just wonder what their lives are like under Jung rule.”

“All I ever knew was life under Ta’Akar rule,” Loki said. “When the Ta’Akar withdrew from our system, things became worse: more crime, more corruption, less work. Our family was doing well when I went into flight school. By the time I graduated, we were dirt poor and unable to pay my loans.”

“Is that why you ended up on Haven?” the major asked. “As a debtor?”

“No, I was lucky. I was actually *paid* to work there. It was the only flying job I could find at the time.”

“Were you able to repay your loans?”

“Almost. I still owed a few thousand credits when we got caught up with the Aurora.”

“In your absence, aren’t your parents responsible for your debt?”

“I never got the chance to find out. There was no way for me to make contact with them before we left for Earth. Tug promised to take care of the debt on my behalf.”

"I'm sure he did so," the major commented. "He seemed an honorable man... for a Takaran."

"You really don't like them, do you?"

"It is not a matter of *liking* them," the major explained. "It is a matter of *trusting* them... which I do not."

"I guess I can understand that, considering all that's happened." Loki paused for a moment, thinking of what it must have been like for the major, as well as all of the Corinairans. "So you don't trust *any* of them?"

Major Waddell sighed. "With most men, I grant them basic trust as a courtesy. However, until I know them to be trustworthy, my trust in them is limited."

"And with Takarans?"

"With Takarans, it is different. I consider them to be unworthy of my trust."

"Even if proven otherwise?"

"I have yet to be presented with that situation," the major said.

"You trust Tug, don't you?"

"I have not yet had the need to put my trust in him directly."

"Would you? I mean, if the situation arose."

"Possibly. Although it would not be an easy thing for me to do."

"Is it because of your son?" Loki asked, hesitant to bring up the subject of the major's deceased child.

"In part, yes, but it is more the subjugation my people endured for more than three decades."

"Wasn't life under Ta'Akar rule peaceful?"

"Yes, I suppose it was. Our lives were good for the most part. But no man chooses to be ruled over, especially not a Corinairan."

"Yeah, I've heard that about the Corinairans."

“We are a proud people,” the major said, “perhaps too much so at times.”

“I heard that the Corinairans are of Scottish descent from old Earth.”

“I have heard that recently as well.”

“Are you planning on visiting Scotland?”

“Assuming the opportunity ever presents itself, perhaps. To be honest, I had not really considered it.”

“I would definitely want to go,” Loki insisted.

Major Waddell smiled. “You remind me of my son... always curious, always wanting to see what is over the next hill. He, too, was full of thought and wonder, just as you are.”

“Yeah, Josh says I think too much.”

“How can one ‘think too much’?”

“He says it keeps me from making quick decisions.”

“Perhaps that is a good thing.”

Loki shrugged, his attention returning to the valley below as he continued to let the sun beat down upon him.

* * *

“Captain on deck,” the guard at the entrance to the Aurora’s flight operations center announced as Nathan, Cameron, and Abby entered the compartment.

“As you were,” Nathan ordered as he made his way deeper into the facility. “Major.”

“Sirs, ma’am,” Major Prechitt greeted. “Jump Shuttle Two is in position, approximately one hundred kilometers off our starboard. The pilot reports they are ready for the first test jump.”

“Very well,” Nathan answered as he looked through the main windows across the aft bulkhead of the compartment

at the main hangar bay below.

Major Prechitt nodded at the flight operations officer. "We'll be tracking them on view screens three and four."

Nathan looked up at the row of view screens hanging at select angles from the ceiling of the flight controller's pit in the middle of the room. View screen three was receiving the visual feed from one of the Talon fighters acting as the chase ship. The other view screen displayed flight data from both the experimental jump shuttle and the Talon chasing it.

"It will take them a few moments to accelerate up to their assigned jump speed for the first test," Lieutenant Montgomery explained from the controller's pit. "The first two jumps will be at one light hour, the third and fourth jumps at one light day, and so on."

"And there are no other power sources on the shuttle other than the ZPED?" Nathan asked.

"There are two fusion reactors on board," Abby explained, "the same as any other shuttle. However, they do not provide any power to the shuttle's jump drive, only to the rest of the shuttle's systems."

"All jumps will be powered by energy fed into the jump drive directly from the mini-ZPED," Lieutenant Montgomery assured the captain.

"And if the ZPED or the jump drive fails?" Nathan wondered.

"If that should be the case, even if the shuttle survives, they will be stranded and unable to jump back," the lieutenant answered.

"The shuttle's course is parallel with ours, Captain," Cameron said. "If necessary, we could jump forward incrementally for at least a light year without coming too close to the 72 Herculis system."

“True, if the failure leaves them on their original course,” the lieutenant agreed. “If not, we could always dispatch Jump Shuttle One to search for them.”

“The pilots *are* aware of the risk?” Nathan asked.

Lieutenant Montgomery looked puzzled. “Of course, Captain.”

“Just checking.”

“Twenty seconds to jump point,” the flight controller reported.

“How will we know if the first jump was successful?” Cameron asked.

“The test shuttle’s second jump will be the return jump a few minutes later,” the lieutenant said.

“Ten seconds.”

All eyes were glued to view screens three and four over the flight controller’s pit as the countdown continued. When the countdown reached zero, the test shuttle disappeared in a blue-white flash of light as expected. There was a banter of communications between the flight controllers and the Talon that had been chasing the test shuttle as it veered away to clear the area before the test shuttle jumped back again.

“So far, so good,” Cameron mumbled.

“If this works,” Nathan began.

“I know. I know.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know,” Cameron repeated.

“The possibilities are endless,” Nathan continued under his breath.

“Enough.”

Another bright flash of blue-white light appeared on view screen three as Jump Shuttle Two completed its second jump. A small round of applause rose from the room.

“Congratulations, Lieutenant,” Abby said. “I must admit that I was skeptical, but you seem to have done it.”

“Of course, that was only the first jump,” Lieutenant Montgomery admitted, “and it was only a single light hour. There are still many more test jumps to conduct.”

“How many more?” Nathan asked.

“At least thirty jumps.”

“Assuming all the jumps are successful, how long until the shuttle will be ready to travel back to the Pentaurus cluster?”

“We will need a few days to study the test data and to make additional calibrations to the system as indicated by that data. In addition, I would like to conduct longer-range testing in order to determine its maximum, single-jump range.”

“How far do you think that might be?” Nathan asked.

“I am quite confident that it can jump two light years at a time. I suspect, with a few modifications and refinements, it may be able to jump considerably farther.”

“Let’s keep it at two light years for now, Lieutenant,” Nathan said.

“But Captain...”

“That wasn’t a request, Lieutenant,” Nathan said.

“Of course, sir.”

“As time and resources permit, we will arrange for further development of your ZPED-powered jump drive,” Nathan said, “but for now, we need that shuttle to complete its first mission.”

“Understood, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

“Please inform me of the results of your test jumps once they are complete, Lieutenant,” Nathan instructed as he turned to depart.

“Yes, Captain.”

Nathan paused for a moment. "Well done, Lieutenant."
"Thank you, sir," the lieutenant answered proudly.

* * *

Major Waddell sat watching the distant canyon wall. The mist from the falls created rainbows in the afternoon sun as the breeze sent the mist wafting past them and into the valley below. The sun was already low in the sky and would descend behind the far ridge within a few hours at most.

A beep sounded from his comm-set, followed by several more beeps. He recognized the tones, reached over, and nudged Loki, who had fallen asleep in the afternoon sun.

"What?" Loki asked as he woke. He looked over at the major, who was getting up from his seat on the edge of the cave and picking up his weapon. "What is it?"

"Motion detectors picked up movement on the trail leading up to us. Someone is coming."

Loki scrambled to his feet and moved back into the cave. "What do we do?"

"Take a position over there," Major Waddell explained, "on that side of the mouth of the cave, just outside. I will be on the opposite side. We will wait for them to enter the cave, then we will have the advantage."

"Why don't we just go hide in the back of the cave?"

"Because if they are not those we seek, they will have the advantage, and we will be trapped. Do as I say."

Loki quickly made his way to the far side of the cave, stepping carefully down from the mouth of the cave and into the mist-covered bushes on the outside of the cave's wide entrance. By the time he had gotten in position and turned around to see the opposite side of the cave entrance, the major had disappeared. It took him several seconds to find

any sign of the major in the thick bushes on the far side of the cave entrance, and even then, all he was able to make out was the upper sleeve of his camouflaged uniform shirt. Loki pulled out his sidearm and held it at the ready as he waited for the visitors to arrive. He did not have to wait long.

Four men, each dressed in the same heavy, protective jackets and pants that Garrett and his men had worn, made their way up the trail to the mouth of the cave. They made very little noise, using only hand signals as they entered the mouth of the cave and spread out with their rifles held ready. As soon as they were well past the entrance, but before they could move far enough into the cave to seek cover, Major Waddell stepped forward just enough to be seen. "That's far enough, gentlemen," he stated calmly. His rifle was held tightly against his shoulder, the weapon sighted on the nearest member of the group.

The four men spun around, bringing their weapons to bear in the direction of the major's voice.

"Loki," the major added as he took another step forward.

Loki swallowed hard and stepped forward, his sidearm held out and supported by both hands in the fashion that Marcus had taught him back on the Aurora. He tried to look as confident as the major in his stance but seriously doubted he had achieved the desired appearance.

The two men farther back turned their weapons toward Loki as he stepped from the bushes on the opposite side from the major. Three of the men looked unnerved. One of them did not.

"Put the weapons down," Major Waddell urged.

"And if we choose not to do as you ask?" the closest man asked.

“Not a good option, I assure you,” Major Waddell told him. “We don’t want to hurt anyone. We’re looking for a man named Garrett.”

“You look for this man in a cave?” The man laughed. “Is that really where you expect to find a man?”

“We found you,” Major Waddell said. “Now put your weapons down.”

“I think not,” the man said, standing his ground with confidence.

“That’s a mistake,” the major warned.

“Possibly,” the man admitted, “but surely not as big as the one you just made.” The man smiled.

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki noticed movement in the bushes. He turned his head to the right and saw the barrel of a gun poking out from the brush. He began to swing his weapon over when he felt something press firmly against the base of his neck... something cold, metallic, and round. “Major?” Without moving his head, Loki’s eyes moved toward the major on the far side of the cave entrance. He, too, had a man laying a gun barrel to the back of his neck, and another man was taking the major’s rifle from him.

Loki felt the other man guarding him pull Loki’s sidearm from his hand, after which, the man holding the gun to Loki’s head shoved him forward, nearly knocking Loki over. He stumbled along, finally ending up on his knees next to Major Waddell in the center of the cave opening, both of them with their hands held behind their heads.

The man that had taken the major’s rifle handed it to their leader, the man that had refused to give up his weapon. He looked over the major’s close-quarters automatic weapon, intrigued by its design. “You are obviously not Jung,” the man said. “The Jung do not use

projectile weapons—unless, of course, you are simply trying to appear to not be Jung.” He looked at the weapon some more.

“If I were only trying to appear to not be Jung, wouldn’t it make more sense for me to carry a weapon like yours?” the major asked. “One indigenous to your world?”

“To my world?” The man laughed. “This is not my world. Nor is it his, or his, or his,” the man said, pointing at each of his men. “Actually, he was born here, so I guess it is his world.”

“That wasn’t the point I was trying to make,” Major Waddell said.

“I understood your point,” the man answered as he handed the weapon back to the other man. He stepped closer to Major Waddell, squatting down in front of him to speak face to face. “Who are you, and what planet do you claim as your own?”

“My name is Waddell, and I am from the planet Corinair.”

The man looked at the Major, rubbing his beard. “I have not heard of this world. What star does it orbit?”

“Darvano.”

The man shook his head. “I have not heard of Darvano, either. Of course, there are many stars in the sky. One cannot know them all, I suppose.” He looked the major over. “Whose uniform do you wear?”

“Alliance.”

“Alliance? What alliance?”

“Between the people of Takara, the people of Corinair, and the people of Earth.”

“Earth? Now that is a planet I have heard of.” The man looked at Loki. “And you? You are with this alliance as well?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Are you from this place, Corinair, just as your friend here?”

“Not exactly.”

“You speak differently than he does.”

“We’re not from the same world, just the same region of space.”

The man stood and walked towards his men, speaking to them in hushed tones. Loki tried to understand them, but they were speaking in their own language. Finally, the man took two steps toward them. “You say you wish to speak with a man named Garrett.”

“That is correct,” Major Waddell answered.

“And why would you expect to find him in this cave, of all places?”

“This is where I met him before,” Loki said. “A few weeks ago.”

“And why do you wish to find this man?”

“We wish to speak with him.”

“About what?”

“We were hoping he could help us.”

“Ah, I see,” the man said.

“Do you know Garrett?” Major Waddell asked.

“Perhaps,” the man said, squatting down in front of the major again. “But how do I know that you are telling the truth? How do I know that Garrett would want to speak with you?”

“He gave me something,” Loki said as he started to bring his right hand down from his head. He suddenly felt the gun barrel in the back of his neck again and saw two more guns pointing at him from behind the squatted man. “It’s in my belt in the back of my pants,” he told them. He felt someone pull up his camouflage shirt and pull the small knife and its protective sheath from his pants. The man tossed the knife

to his leader, who was still squatting in front of Major Waddell. The man pulled the knife from its sheath and inspected the handle and the blade, taking note of the decorative carvings on both portions. If he recognized them, he did not show as much by his expression. For a moment, Loki was sure they were going to be executed on the spot.

The man stood again. "I will take you to see Garrett," he announced, holding up the knife to indicate that it was the reason he was doing so. "However, your clothing will draw suspicion. We can travel along the trails until we reach the village, but then we must find you suitable attire before you can enter. There are many who watch for any opportunity to gain favor with the Jung. You two are such an opportunity. During this journey, you must do as I say without hesitation. If you do not, I will have you killed. I will not allow either of you to put me or my men in danger. Is this understood?"

"Of course," Major Waddell said. "Can we put our hands down now?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"I wasn't able to transfer as much breathable air as I'd hoped, sir," Devyn said over the comm-set. "The pressure in the command deck just isn't high enough, and we don't have any powered pumps available on your deck."

"So how much time does that leave us?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"With eight of you, maybe a few weeks, but I have another idea, sir. If one of the civilian techs up there can link up a data pad camera with my monitor here, I might be able to talk someone there through some workarounds to try to prolong your life support."

"Is that possible?" he wondered.

"I won't know until I get a good look at exactly what systems have been installed in the bridge's environmental support system bay."

"Is it accessible with the rest of the command deck depressurized?"

"Yes, sir. It's actually part of the bridge. Most of it is in the forward starboard corner behind the view screen shell. It's accessible via a hatch on the starboard side behind the auxiliary console."

"I've got a better idea, Ensign. Why don't you come up here and take a look for yourself."

"Sir?"

"I was joking, Ensign," the lieutenant commander said.

"Sir," Ensign Hartson interrupted, "she could, you know."

“What are you talking about?”

“There are a couple of EVA suits in the port-side, engineering maintenance airlock in the EVA prep room. It was part of the last supply load just before we left. I put it in there myself. I figured Command wanted it there in case someone needed to go outside the ship to fix something.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you knew, sir. You *were* in charge of the detail.”

“That was two and a half months ago, Ensign. Did it ever occur to you that it may have slipped my mind?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic shook his head as he keyed his comm-set mic. “Uh, Ensign Oswalt? I may have been kidding when I told you to come up and look for yourself. However, it has just come to my attention that we have a pair of EVA suits on board. In fact, they’re back there with you guys.”

“Sir, if we have a pair of EVA suits, why don’t we just move you all back here?” Devyn suggested over the comm-set.

“There are eight of us, Ensign. There are only two suits.”

“Two is all we need. One person suits up here, brings the empty suit to the bridge, and cycles in through the airlock. Then someone there puts on the empty suit and comes back with him. We just have to do it eight times.”

The lieutenant commander looked at Luis, who had been listening to the exchange. “Well now I just feel stupid.” He keyed his comm-set mic again. “Will that work? That’s a long walk in a heavy EVA suit.”

“We can turn off the artificial gravity anywhere in the ship, sir. In fact, we’ve already shut it down in most of the command deck as well as many of the areas back here to save power.”

“Isn’t that going to use up more air, though?”

"It doesn't matter, sir. We've got plenty back here, and we've got scrubbers and oxygen production cells."

"Who's going to do all those EVAs?"

"We can take turns, sir. I should go first, though, so I can take a look at the environmental systems up there. If I can fix them, we won't need to move everyone back here."

"What do you think?" the lieutenant commander asked Ensign Schenker, who had become their de facto science expert over the last two months.

"They'd have to stay inside the ship," he said. "This close to Jupiter, there's too much radiation outside."

"Really?"

"It's at least a kilometer's walk," Ensign Schenker reminded him.

"That's true," the lieutenant commander agreed. "Inside it is, then."

"Do we even know if there are connecting corridors between us and them?" Luis wondered.

"There's only one way to find out," the lieutenant commander said, keying his comm-set once again. "Suit up, Ensign. It looks like you're going for a walk."

* * *

"Nice place you've got here," Jessica commented as they walked through the main room.

Tony looked around the room at the collection of mismatched furniture and boxes of various items he had managed to collect over the last two months during the transition to Jung rule. "It's not like I could hire a decorator. We were invaded, remember?"

"Where is it safe to sit?" Synda asked.

Tony quickly moved some boxes off the couch to make room for her.

"Sorry," Jessica apologized. "I forgot. I've been out of touch with current events."

"What did you mean before when you said you were off-world?" Synda wondered as she sat down. "Where were you? On one of the mining stations in the belt or something?"

"Classified," Jessica told her, attempting to avoid the topic.

"Right."

"You think Mack's elbow is going to heal?" Tony asked.

"He'll be out of commission for a while, but yeah," Jessica said. "Probably safer for you all that way, anyway."

"He's not such a bad guy once you get to know him."

"Sure, once you get past the killing of innocent civilians," she sneered. "Now, how were you people trying to make contact with the resistance?"

"Through this net-site," Tony said, moving toward his net terminal.

"Is that safe?" Jessica wondered. "Can't they trace your location?"

"Normally, yes," Tony admitted. "But we're bouncing through these anonymous, mobile routing servers. There are dozens of them all over the world. People have them in their cars, boats, you name it. They connect through the sat-net. It effectively hides the transmission source from the Jung. They've been trying to defeat it ever since the network started a few weeks after the invasion, but it's next to impossible since they're always moving. It's all encrypted as well."

"Impressive," Jessica said. "Give me a piece of paper and a pen," she told him.

Tony dug through the piles of stuff strewn about, finally producing a pen and a scrap of paper. Jessica quickly jotted down a message and handed it to Tony. "Post this."

Tony looked at the piece of paper. It was a meaningless collection of numbers, letters, and punctuation marks. "I'm assuming this gibberish will mean something to somebody."

"Send it exactly as written, spaces and all, and it will."

* * *

"You will wait in here," one of the Tanna men instructed Major Waddell and Loki as they entered the large, dimly-lit building. "We have sent for Garrett."

"How long are we to wait?" Major Waddell asked.

"As long as it takes," the man said as he turned to exit.

"Are we prisoners?"

The man turned back. "You will not be allowed to leave this building for the time being. If that is what you call being a prisoner, then yes, that is what you are." The man continued out the door, locking it behind him.

"Then we are prisoners," Loki surmised.

"I don't think so," Major Waddell said, "not really. Look around. Tools, machinery, metal. This is some kind of machine shop or fabrication facility. There are too many things here that we could use as weapons. There aren't even bars on the windows." The major shook his head. "No, they only mean to keep us safe and out of sight for now, probably for our own safety as much as theirs."

"Then why did you challenge them?"

"Just a demonstration of strength—to let them know that we would object to being detained against our will."

"I don't get it."

“It’s better that they do not see us as being easily intimidated, or controlled for that matter. Trust me.”

“Okay.”

Major Waddell walked around the darkened room examining the tools and equipment. “This is not what I expected.”

“How so?”

“From the way your reports described Garrett and his men, I pictured a more meager existence.”

“What, like mud huts and wood-burning stoves?”

“Maybe not that extreme. This appears to be a considerably industrialized society.”

“Is that so surprising?” Loki wondered.

“Not really, I suppose. I imagine the Jung would have little interest in conquering a bunch of backcountry woodsmen. Of course, it is possible that they were less technologically advanced prior to the arrival of the Jung. For all we know, all this industrialization could be a direct result of the Jung’s occupation of this world.”

The door opened again, and the same man stepped through. He moved to one side of the doorway to make room for another man.

The second man was older with a more commanding presence than the one that had led them from the cave down into the city. He was tall, well dressed, and had a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. He walked toward them with a confident stride. “The young man who bears the name of an ancient god,” the man exclaimed. “I did not expect to see you again, especially not this soon.”

“You must be Garrett,” Major Waddell said.

“That I am,” Garrett confirmed as he reached out and shook Loki’s hand in greeting. “Where is your other young friend, Joshua?”

“He could not come,” Loki explained. “This is Major Waddell.”

“Is he your leader?” Garrett asked.

“I am in command of this expedition, if that is what you are asking,” Major Waddell said.

“I am told you wish to speak with me, that you require my assistance.”

“We seek information,” Major Waddell said.

Garrett looked at the major for a moment, suspicion in his eyes. Finally, he pointed at Major Waddell. “I mean you no disrespect, Major, but I do not know you.”

“You barely know him,” the major pointed out.

“I suppose this is true,” Garrett admitted.

“He’s okay, Garrett,” Loki assured him.

“What type of information do you seek, Loki?” Garrett asked, choosing to ignore the major.

“Do the Jung have propellant storage facilities?”

“I would expect they have many,” Garrett said. “How could they operate without them?”

“Do they have any nearby?”

“Why do you ask?”

“We...”

“We seek to disrupt their supply lines,” Major Waddell said, interrupting Loki, “to make it more difficult for them to deploy and support their forces.”

Garrett eyed the major again. “An odd request.”

“How so?” Major Waddell asked.

“Granted, the strategy is logical. It just seems strange that you would come here to ask me such a question.”

“We thought you might know,” Major Waddell said. “It’s as simple as that.”

“I think not,” Garrett said, tapping his finger to his whiskers on his chin. “To come to the surface of Tanna

involves considerable risk, as does attempting to make contact with people such as us. Why not simply send that magical ship of yours to look for such facilities?"

"It is still being repaired," Loki said.

"Surely you have others."

"It's complicated," Loki said, remembering that the major had warned him to give up as little information as possible during the conversation with Garrett.

"Yes, it always is." Garrett smiled. "It is the complications that I am interested in," he continued. "*That* is where opportunity lies."

"It is simply a logistical problem," Major Waddell lied. "We have many such ships, but they are all on assignments, many of them seeking out the very facilities we are inquiring after. We are simply trying to cultivate all possible intelligence sources."

Garrett smiled. "Well presented, Major. However, I have some reservations."

"Such as?"

"You claim to be members of a powerful alliance, one made up of multiple star systems, Earth being among them. You claim you intend to defeat the Jung. Yet I have only seen three men and one small ship—an impressive little ship, admittedly, but hardly a threat to the Jung."

"You might be surprised," Major Waddell said.

"Indeed, I would very much like to be just that... surprised." Garrett turned and took several steps away from them before turning around again. "I know of many such facilities," he announced, "both far and near. But divulging such information carries grave risks to not only myself, but to everyone in this valley."

"A bit of an exaggeration, perhaps," Major Waddell said.

“Hardly. You see, Jung justice involves punishing not only the perpetrators of a crime, but also those around them. They believe it places additional pressure on the individual to behave, knowing that his or her actions might endanger innocent people. Most of the people in this city would turn me in to the Jung in the blink of an eye if they thought it would protect them or their families against such broad, sweeping punishments. So you see, you ask a lot of me, and you offer nothing in return.”

“We did not come with the expectation of negotiating the price of a commodity,” Major Waddell stated. “We were only seeking information.”

“Information *is* a commodity, Major,” Garrett told him, “at least, it is on Tanna.”

“I am not authorized to negotiate on behalf of the Alliance,” Major Waddell stated plainly.

“Then you have come ill-prepared.” Garrett turned around to walk away again. “A pity since the facilities you seek are within reach.”

“Why don’t you talk with our captain?” Loki suggested.

Major Waddell glared at Loki as if he had committed a terrible mistake.

Garrett stopped in his tracks. “He is nearby?” he asked without turning around.

“Near enough...”

“Mister Sheehan,” Major Waddell interrupted.

“Oh, come on, Major. We need information. He has it. He wants to be compensated for his risk, and he questions who and what we are. Why not just show him?”

“We are not authorized to...”

“Then call the ship and ask,” Loki said.

“You can contact your ship so easily?” Garrett asked, having turned back around.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Major Waddell assured him.

“When is the next contact window?” Loki asked, wanting to cut through all the subterfuge.

Major Waddell looked at his watch and sighed. “In less than an hour, actually.”

“I would very much like to speak with your captain,” Garrett said as he moved a step closer.

Major Waddell grabbed Loki by the arm and pulled him away from Garrett, taking several steps back as he turned away from their hosts. “This is not a good idea, Mister Sheehan.”

“Why not?”

“We know nothing about this man. He could be a Jung spy for all we know.”

“He’s one guy, Major. What’s he going to do, take over the entire ship by himself?”

“Possibly, or destroy it.”

“You’re just being paranoid.”

“That is part of my job.”

“Just ask the captain,” Loki said. “Let him decide.”

Major Waddell sighed again. “You have put us in a very dangerous position, Mister Sheehan.”

Major Waddell turned back around to face Garrett. “I will make contact with our ship and pass on the idea to my captain. I cannot promise that he will agree. I would not be so inclined were I in his position.”

“I understand,” Garrett said. “And how long will this take?”

“At least seven of our hours. We have very limited contact windows that only last a few minutes. We will send the request to our ship, and the response should come during the next scheduled contact.”

“Excellent,” Garrett said, obviously delighted with the outcome of their conversation.

“I will need a clear line of sight to your eastern sky.” Major Waddell pointed to one side of the building. “That direction.”

“There is a storage yard behind this building. It is contained within high walls. You will not be noticed.”

“Our communication equipment uses lasers aimed at a precise point in space. Will this be detectable by the Jung?”

“Doubtful, but I cannot guarantee this.”

“Where do I go?”

“I will show you the way,” Garrett said, walking past the major as he headed for the back exit.

“What do you think the captain will say?” Loki mumbled nervously.

“I am certain he will be beside himself,” the major answered.

* * *

The Celestia’s unfinished corridors were dark and gloomy. The effect was intensified as Devyn’s helmet lights threw long shadows at odd angles down the corridor walls ahead. It had taken her nearly ten minutes to travel just from the engineering section’s transfer airlock, down the long corridor, and around the starboard side of the main cargo deck.

“How are you doing, Devyn?” Luis called over her helmet comms.

“Fine. I just wish we could turn on some lights in here. This place is creepy.”

“Sorry, we’re running on batteries right now.”

"It's hard to judge distances and such with just the helmet lights," she told him as she moved to one side of the corridor to avoid some exposed wiring in the wall. "There are a lot of open panels with exposed wiring. I don't think any of it is hot, but I still don't want to go anywhere near it."

"Good idea," Luis agreed. *"How far have you gotten?"*

"You're not tracking me?"

"Battery power, remember?"

"I just started around the starboard side of the cargo bay."

"Maybe you should take a peek in there and see if there's anything useful."

"Maybe I should stick to business for now, and not waste time and oxygen."

"You said oxygen wasn't an issue aft," Luis reminded her.

"True, I did say that." Devyn came to one of the main cargo hatches and stopped to read the label on the door. It was covered with a fine dust. She wiped it away with her gloved hand. "I'm at cargo bay door S4, the one farthest aft. How is it there's dust inside a spaceship?"

"There's dust everywhere," Luis told her over the comms. *"It's one of the universal constants—that and cockroaches."*

"I don't suppose we can spare power for the hatch?" she asked.

"Sorry."

Devyn dropped the handle to the cart she had been pulling behind her, moved to the left side of the door, and opened the small access panel. She pulled a hand crank out of the small compartment recessed into the wall and inserted one end into the socket in the wall. She began turning the crank, causing the large cargo hatch to split vertically down the center. A fine stream of dust fell from

the door as it slowly opened. Once the door was open about a meter, she stopped cranking and stepped through it.

Devyn stepped into the massive starboard cargo bay. She stopped just inside, turning her body slowly from left to right and back again as she scanned the bay with her helmet lights. "There's a lot of stuff in here."

"Like what?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked over the comms.

"Looks like equipment mostly. Most of it is still wrapped in plastic and has the lift bars attached. It was probably waiting to be installed."

"Can you be more specific?" the lieutenant commander asked.

"Not really, not without taking time to examine them. Some of the containers farther forward are pretty big. It looks like they might be entire compartments."

"Nothing we can use right now, then?"

"Doesn't look like it, sir. Like I said though, I'd have to take a closer look to be sure."

"Maybe later, after everyone is safely aft," the lieutenant commander said. *"Continue forward, Ensign."*

"Aye, sir."

After securing the cargo bay door, Devyn continued heading forward, pulling the cart containing the second EVA suit down the unlit corridor. "You know, none of these auxiliary cargo holds are even installed," she said as she shined her helmet light into the openings in the corridor wall on her right. "I can see the inner hull in the distance through the hatch cutouts."

"Seriously?" Luis asked, surprise in his voice.

"Yeah. Frames, spars, the works. It's weird." She paused for a moment as she stood in the opening panning her

helmet lights back and forth. “You don’t realize how big the ship really is inside until you see it this way.”

Devyn continued forward, making her way around the main cargo bay until she finally reached the forward bulkhead. The main hatch to the next section was closed and painted red. “I’ve reached the next bulkhead,” she announced. “The hatch is red.”

“So?” Luis asked.

“So, red is bad, right?”

“Red means no pressure on the other side,” Luis reminded her. *“You’re already in a depressurized area, so what does it matter?”*

“Just checking,” she said as she pulled the lever and unlocked the hatch. The hatch swung open with ease, a small amount of dust falling slowly from the hatch ring in the reduced gravity of Metis. She pulled the hatch all the way open and turned to shine her helmet lights into the next compartment before entering. Her eyes went wide. “Oh, crap.”

“What is it?” Luis asked. *“What’s wrong?”*

“There’s no deck on the other side.”

“What do you mean, ‘there’s no deck’?”

“I mean there is no deck,” she said. “No deck, no walls, no ceiling—just a big empty space. A few structural supports and cross bracing, but the nearest compartments are at least fifteen meters away. It looks like they didn’t finish installing all the forward compartments on this level—at least, not all the way back to this bulkhead.”

“What about on the other side?”

Devyn turned to her left, held onto the hatch frame, and leaned out through the hatch opening. “Nope. That side is even farther away.”

"What about above you?" Luis asked. *"Can you tell if they finished that level?"*

"Give me a moment." Devyn turned around, putting her back to the open hatchway. She held on to both sides of the hatch and leaned backward into the opening, looking up as best she could. "Nope. I can see the bottom of the missile deck, but neither A nor B deck come all the way back to the main hangar deck yet."

She shifted her angle from side to side as she attempted to get a better look. "I think there's a beam or a catwalk of some sort up there. It looks like it goes from the main hangar deck to the last installed compartment on B deck."

"Do you think you can make it across there?" Luis asked.

"I'm not sure. It's hard to tell from this angle. I'll have to climb up one deck and take a closer look at it."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"Going across that beam or climbing up one deck?" she said as she closed the hatch and locked it once more.

"You know what I mean."

"I'll let you know."

* * *

"Sorry, it's not exactly a feast," Tony said as he handed Jessica a plastic tray of food.

"Are you kidding?" she answered as she eagerly accepted the steaming, hot tray from him. "Beats the hell out of molo and boiled dollag."

Tony looked confused as he handed a similar tray to Synda before sitting down to eat his own tray of food.

"So you were in Fleet Special Operations?" Synda asked.

"Isn't that, like, spy shit?" Tony asked.

“Something like that,” Jessica said as she took her first bite.

“How did you like it?” Synda wondered.

“Couldn’t really tell you.”

“Classified?”

“Nothing like that,” Jessica answered, not wanting to get into specifics. “Things changed, the Jung came along, and I got pushed into something else.”

“Like what?” Synda wondered.

“Now that part *is* classified,” Jessica told her.

“But the Fleet is gone,” Tony said. “The EDF was destroyed. What little was left went underground—at least, that’s the rumor.”

“Rumor?” Jessica said. “I thought you guys were trying to hook up with them.”

“Well, yeah, but since we still haven’t been able to, I couldn’t tell you if there really is an underground resistance or not.”

“But there are reports of strikes all over the world,” Synda argued. “I see them on the news-vids online all the time.”

“They could just be local wannabes like us,” Tony said. “It’s not like they’re all wearing uniforms and waving the same flag and stuff. They’re all like us: a bunch of guys with guns and shit, shooting at the Jung and blowing stuff up.” Tony looked down at the floor. “Not that it’s accomplishing much.”

“It wasn’t your idea to blow up those people, was it?” Synda asked.

“No, but I didn’t argue against it, either,” he said, looking away. “It all made sense the way Mack explained it and all. Besides, he had all the guns.”

“That guy was scary,” Synda said.

“Yeah, he can be,” Tony said. “He just really wanted to fuck with the Jung as much as possible.”

“People like that just want an excuse to shoot their guns,” Jessica warned. “They can always find a way to justify their violent acts.” She swallowed the last of her food and chased it down with the remaining contents of her water bottle. “Don’t beat yourself up about it too much,” Jessica told Tony. “And don’t be dumb enough to fall in with that type again,” she added, pointing at him.

“I should have done like everyone else,” Tony said.

“How’s that?” Jessica asked.

“Do my job, stay out of trouble, and steer clear of the Jung. Most people say the Jung won’t bother you if you just do your part.”

“What’s *your* part?” Jessica said.

“The Jung want to build a better society for all,” Synda said, rolling her eyes. “They say our leaders have been lying to us for centuries, keeping us under their control, feeding us the ‘myth of freedom’,” she explained. “It’s all a bunch of crap. They just want obedient laborers.”

“Maybe, but most people prefer it to starving or sleeping in the street,” Tony said.

“That’s the way it works,” Jessica said. “Make the alternative bad enough, and anything looks good. That’s how propaganda works.”

A faint chime sounded from Tony’s network terminal on the other side of the room. Tony turned his head, somewhat surprised, and listened for the sound to repeat.

“What?” Jessica wondered.

The chime repeated. “That’s not possible,” Tony said, rising from his seat in earnest.

“What’s not possible?” Jessica asked.

Tony dropped into the chair in front of the network terminal. He hesitantly touched the angled view screen with the index finger of his right hand, disbelief on his face. "We got an answer," he exclaimed.

"Already?"

"It's true," Tony added. "The resistance does monitor that message board." Tony turned to face Jessica, who was already making her way across the room toward him. "After trying for so long, I was beginning to think Mack made all that stuff up. But we got an answer."

"How do we know it's really from the resistance?" Synda wondered, appearing somewhat suspicious.

"What does the message say?" Jessica asked, coming to stand next to Tony.

"It has an attachment. It's a join-key."

"What's a join-key?" Synda asked.

"It's a single-use, short-lived invitation from the sender to create an encrypted comm-tunnel through one of the MARSs."

"The what?" Synda wondered.

"Mobile Anonymous Routing Servers," Tony reminded her. "I told you about them."

"Is this comm-tunnel secure?" Jessica asked.

"You know how they say that no net-link is completely secure?"

Jessica looked at Tony out of the corner of her eye as she studied the screen. "Yeah?"

"This is as close as you can get to proving that wrong."

"How short-lived?"

"The key is supposed to be good for a minute from the time of post. Then the session limit per key is usually five minutes or less."

"Accept it," Jessica told him.

“Wait, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Synnda said.

“Are you sure?” Tony asked.

Jessica nodded. “Do it.”

Tony tapped the spinning key icon on the screen with his finger. The entire screen turned black. A moment later, a white box appeared in the middle of the screen. “This is too cool.”

“Why did it go all black?” Synnda asked.

“Black means secure,” Tony explained. “You know, all the doors and windows are closed and the lights are turned off. If it turns white, that means the key expired and the secure tunnel is open. If it turns red, you’re dead.”

“Dead?” Synnda repeated.

“As in, you’ve been traced and the Jung are about to break down your door.”

“Does that happen often?” Synnda asked.

“As far as I know, it’s never happened.”

“Why is the box empty?” Jessica wondered.

“They have to start the conversation,” Tony explained.

Jessica looked at the top right corner of the white box. “I suppose that’s the countdown timer.”

“When it hits zero, the tunnel closes automatically.”

“According to that, we’ve got less than two minutes remaining,” Synnda commented.

“Like I said, short-lived,” Tony said.

“They’re being cautious,” Jessica said.

A message began spelling out across the top of the white box on the view screen. “They’ve started,” Tony announced, leaning forward.

Jessica peered down to read the message as it typed out across the top of the box.

“They’re asking who you are,” Tony said.

“In plain text? No encryption?” Jessica asked, somewhat surprised.

“The tunnel itself is encrypted,” Tony reminded her.

Jessica frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Besides, you’re down to just over a minute now.”

“Move over,” Jessica ordered as she took his seat and began to type.

Tony watched over her shoulder as Jessica typed in a string of what appeared to be random numbers and letters.

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s my service ID number.”

“That?”

“I scrambled it using an old spec-ops code we learned at the academy. Nobody uses it in real life. If they are the resistance, they are also members of the special operations division, which means they would know this code.”

“Hardly what I’d call secure,” Tony said.

“It’s just a small test,” Jessica assured him. “If they are EDF, they’ll have access to the service database.” Jessica typed in ‘What’s my name?’ after her service ID number. A few seconds later, they answered.

“Nash, J. D., Ensign, SO-4,” Tony read over her shoulder. “Is that you?”

“In the flesh,” she said as she typed.

“R Q C E D F C A?” Tony asked as he watched her type. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Request contact EDF Command Authority,” Jessica mumbled.

“You’re asking to speak to something that doesn’t exist,” Synda said. “They blew up their command center when they surrendered.”

“They blew up the complex,” Jessica corrected.

"They want to know why," Tony commented, seeing the return message.

Jessica glanced at the countdown timer in the upper, right corner of the screen. There were only forty-five seconds left. She quickly typed her response.

"Are you kidding me?" Tony exclaimed.

"What?" Synda wondered, unable to see the screen.

"She replied, 'Message from Aurora Actual'," Tony told her.

"What does that mean?"

"They're not going to believe you," Tony warned.

"They're asking for my security code," Jessica said as she typed it into the net-terminal.

"Holy crap!" Tony exclaimed. "They're asking for the message!"

"No way," Jessica said as she typed a response.

"F 2 F?" Tony wondered.

"Face to face," Jessica explained, glancing at the timer as it passed the twenty-second mark.

"There's no way in hell they're going to agree to meet with you face to face," Tony insisted.

"They will if they want the message," Jessica said.

"This woman is nuts," Tony told Synda.

"Quick, give me something to write with," Jessica said.

Tony handed her back the pen and paper. He peered over her shoulder at the screen as she jotted down the last message and the countdown timer neared zero. "What the hell is that?"

"It's coded," Jessica explained as the time expired. The white box on the screen vanished, and the black screen faded back to its usual background image, which in Tony's case was several women in lingerie.

"Can you decode it?"

“Give me a minute,” Jessica said as she worked at the coded message.

“Somebody want to tell me what ‘Aurora Actual’ means?” Synda asked.

“It means she claims to be carrying a message from the captain of the Aurora,” Tony said.

“The ship that was lost?”

“Yeah, but it came back a few weeks ago. Took out a couple Jung ships before it disappeared again—at least, that’s the rumor.”

“I heard that, but I figured it was some kind of reverse propaganda from our side,” Synda said.

“It’s true,” Jessica said.

“The Aurora *is* back?” Synda asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know where she is now,” Jessica said, “but I jumped out of her cargo airlock from low Earth orbit yesterday.”

“From orbit?” Tony asked, finding her claim to be somewhat unbelievable. “As in *space*?”

“Yup, we do it all the time,” Jessica said. “Well, it was only my second time, to be honest.”

“Jesus,” Tony exclaimed. “What’s that like?”

“Actually, it sucks,” Jessica said as she finished decoding the message. She held up the scrap of paper for Tony to see. “Do you know where this is?”

“Yeah. It’s in the middle of nowhere.”

“Can you be a little more specific?” Jessica urged.

“Farmland, northwest of the city.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

“As long as we don’t get hassled by the Jung along the way, a few hours. How long do we have?”

“Four hours,” Jessica told him.

“Then we’d better get moving.”

“Maybe I’d better go alone,” Jessica told him.

“Right. You’d get detained before you even reached the edge of the city. Your accent alone is enough to make them suspicious, not to mention the general lack of fear in your eyes, like hers.” Tony pointed at Synda.

“Hey!” Synda objected.

“No offense, Synda,” Tony said, “but your eyes say mouse. Hers say tiger.”

Jessica laughed. “I like this guy,” she remarked as she stood up and moved toward her knapsack. “Guess you’re driving then,” she added as she walked past him.

“I’m not splitting my earnings with you though,” Synda told him as she followed Jessica.

Tony looked at Synda as she passed him. “Wait, you’re getting paid for this?”

* * *

“I suppose you heard about the message,” Nathan said to Vladimir across the dining table in the captain’s mess.

“What message?” Vladimir wondered as he shoveled his first bite of breakfast into his mouth.

“Cameron didn’t tell you?”

“Cameron never tells me anything,” Vladimir said. “Jessica is the one who tells me everything, and she is not here.”

“Right.” Nathan took his first bite. “We got word from Waddell and Loki. Seems their friend, Garrett, wants to meet with me.”

Vladimir looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Waddell thinks Garrett is suspicious of us. He thinks talking with us will help.”

“The major thinks this?”

“Actually, I believe it was Loki’s idea,” Nathan said.

“So they want to bring him here?”

“Either that, or I go there.”

“Well, you can’t go there.”

“Sure I can. I’m the captain, remember?”

“That is why you cannot go.”

“Oh, yes, that whole ‘captain of a ship at time of war’ thing.”

“Yes, that,” Vladimir said as he took another bite of his breakfast, “and because Jessica would kill you if you did.”

“And she won’t kill me for bringing the leader of an armed resistance group, one that we barely know, aboard ship?”

“No, she will probably kill you for that as well.”

“Great.”

“Did Major Waddell tell you why Garrett is suspicious of us?” Vladimir wondered.

“Something about having only seen three men and one small ship.”

“Then perhaps bringing him aboard will sufficiently impress him. Did the major say if Garrett knew of a source of propellant?”

“Actually, he did. At least, he alluded that there was one nearby.”

“So, then,” Vladimir said as he finished his meal, “this Garrett wants to negotiate some sort of payment for this information.”

“Apparently,” Nathan said, still picking at his food.

“You are not convinced this is a wise move?”

“No, I’m not,” Nathan admitted, pushing his plate away. “Part of me wants to just take our time, wait for the Falcon to be repaired, and do a little recon on our own.”

“And the other part?”

“The other part of me is really nervous since we’re running on empty tanks,” Nathan said. “If it weren’t for that damned singularity, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“You know, we are actually very lucky,” Vladimir told him.

“How do you figure?”

“We go jumping about... jump, jump, jump. We don’t even think about it. But every jump could be our last. There is so much out there that could destroy us: singularities, rogue planets and asteroids, strange anomalies that we’ve never heard of. The list is endless.”

“Yeah, but the odds are astronomically slim, right?”

“One thing I have learned,” Vladimir said, “is that the impossible often happens to you, Nathan.”

“You’re not exactly making me feel better, Vlad.”

“I am only speaking the truth.” Vladimir poured himself another glass of juice as he continued speaking. “My point, Nathan, is that everything we do has risk. Some has big risks, some has small. Your job as captain is to find the smallest risk with the biggest rewards. Sending Major Waddell and Loki to Tanna is a small risk. Two men. Well, three if you count the pilot.”

“Actually, a shuttle has a flight crew of three,” Nathan pointed out.

“Okay, five men.”

“And one jump shuttle.”

“And one jump shuttle,” Vladimir agreed. “Still, much smaller risk than taking the whole ship into the 72 Herculis system.”

“I understand your point, Vlad,” Nathan said.

“Then it is settled,” Vladimir announced, clapping his hands together. “They will bring this Garrett to our lovely ship, and he will be so impressed with us that he will provide

all the information we need, and he will ask for little in return." Vladimir picked up his glass of juice and poured it down his throat all at once. "Ah!" he yelled. "This stuff is so disgusting!"

"Then why do you drink it?" Nathan wondered.

"I am told it has lots of vitamins." He looked around the compartment, checking for his cook. "I suspect your cook may be lying to me."

* * *

Devyn stood, straddling the ladder tunnel that led to D deck below her and pulling on the rope attached to the neatly packaged EVA suit she was to deliver to the bridge. "There has got to be a better way to do this," she complained as she pulled the bundle to the top of the ladder.

"There's almost no gravity here," Luis said over the comms. *"How hard can it be?"*

"The suit weighs more than I do," Devyn told him, "low gravity aside."

"According to Gustaf, it only weighs two kilograms on Metis."

"It's still cumbersome."

"But it's only one deck."

"Actually, it's two, remember? Plus, there's a gap of at least two meters between each deck, so it's more like three. And this thing may not weigh much on Metis, but it's still bulky and difficult to manage, especially when you're maneuvering it up a narrow ladder tunnel."

"I see your point."

"We're working on a better solution for the next trip," Tilly announced over the comms from the aft end of the

ship.

“Great,” Devyn said as she pulled the cumbersome bundle through the top of the tunnel and set it to one side. “I’m sure the next guy will be very grateful.” Devyn leaned against the wall next to the ladder for a moment to rest. She looked down at the long, dark corridor ahead of her, then down at the EVA suit bundle again. “You might want to repack this thing,” she told Tilly. “Make it long and narrow. It would be easier to maneuver up the ladder tunnels. Maybe put a shoulder strap on it so you can sling it over one shoulder. As it is now, it’s really cumbersome to carry.”

“But it doesn’t weight anything on...”

“Yeah, I know,” Devyn interrupted. “You don’t seem to get it. It’s not the weight of the thing; it’s the shape. You’re forgetting that ladder tunnels weren’t designed with EVA suits in mind, especially not when you’re carrying an extra one with you.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Tilly said. *“Meanwhile, just drag it behind you.”*

“It won’t damage it?”

“It’s in a protective bag,” Tilly reminded her. *“It’ll be fine.”*

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Tilly promised. *“Besides, the bag is packed in the order you would put it on, except for the helmet, of course, which is on top. The life support pack is on the bottom of the bag, and it’s a hard-shell case. Everything else is stacked on top of that.”*

Devyn sighed. “Okay. Give me a minute to stow my rope, and I’ll be on my way forward again.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Luis told her.

Minutes later, Devyn found herself standing at another open hatch, once again staring at the large gap between her

position and the last B deck compartment that had been installed prior to the Celestia's hasty departure from Earth. "It isn't a catwalk; that's for sure."

"What is it?" Luis asked.

Devyn stared at the complex trusswork that extended from the outside edge of the compartment she was in, stretched forward, and connected to the B deck compartment on the far side of the gap. "It looks like one of the main trusses that form the spine of the ship."

"You mean the ones that contain the inner pressurized sections of the ship?" Tilly asked.

"Yeah, I guess. There is a spongy-looking wall on the other side of the truss."

"This is Darcy," one of the civilian technicians stuck on the bridge called over the comms. *"That's the inside of the inner hull. The spongy-looking stuff is insulation. You can walk along the main truss all the way to the next installed compartment. We used to do it all day long while we were installing the forward compartments. It's easy."*

"You did it in an EVA suit?"

"Well, no. It was pressurized then."

"What do you think, Devyn?" Luis asked.

"What would happen if I fell?" Devyn wondered. "I mean, in this gravity, and at this height, would I be injured?"

"Doubtful," Ensign Schenker said, jumping into the conversation. *"In this gravity, you wouldn't accelerate much. It'd be like jumping off a table. However, depending on where and how you land, the suit might get damaged."*

"Well, that wouldn't be good," Devyn said.

"You'd also have to climb back up," Luis added.

"That would suck as well."

"Wait," Darcy called out. *"There's a safety runner along the truss. We almost never used it, because we were*

working in zero gravity most of the time. You can hook onto it as a precaution. It runs the length of the truss."

"What about the EVA pack?" Devyn wondered. "How the hell am I going to get that across?"

"Hang it on the same safety runner and pull it along behind you," Darcy suggested.

Devyn's eyebrows went up inside her helmet as she contemplated the idea. "Yeah, that would work." Devyn turned around to prepare the EVA pack sitting on the floor behind her for the trip across the truss. "Hey, Luis?"

"Yeah?"

"Remind me never to volunteer to go first."

* * *

Major Waddell stepped through the back door of the machine shop and walked across the dimly lit room toward the others.

"Did you get an answer?" Loki asked as the major approached.

"Yes, I did."

"Finally. These metal stools are not very comfortable."

"Nothing is comfortable for six and a half hours straight," the major said.

"So?"

"The captain wishes to invite Garrett to accompany us back to the Aurora, where he and Garrett can speak directly."

"You think that will work?"

"Do I think what will work?"

"Do you think the captain will convince Garrett to share the location of the propellant with us?"

“Of course he will,” Major Waddell said. “The only reason he wants to meet with the captain directly is so he can negotiate for greater return for the information.” Major Waddell looked at the guard by the front exit. “Hey!” He looked at Loki. “What was his name?”

“Palmot.”

“Hey, Palmot!” Major Waddell called out. “Tell Garrett we have received an answer from our ship. We need to depart as soon as possible if we are to reach our extraction point in time.” The guard ducked out the front door a moment later.

“How much time do we have?” Loki asked.

“Oh, we have plenty of time,” Major Waddell said. “I just want to get moving. That’s all. Being stuck here makes me nervous.”

* * *

Devyn made her way slowly along the massive truss inside the open, inner hull of the Celestia, sliding her feet centimeters at a time, one after the other. The extra physical effort was causing her to breathe harder, and her EVA suit’s environmental systems were having a hard time keeping her visor from fogging up.

“How’s it going?” Luis asked.

“It’s not too bad,” Devyn panted, “just slow going. The chest pack on this thing makes you have to lean away from the truss, so you can’t exactly balance upright. And my damned visor keeps fogging up.”

“What about the EVA bundle?”

“It’s hanging from the safety runner at the beginning of the truss,” Devyn explained over her helmet comms. “I’ve got a pull line attached to the bundle and to me. When I

reach the end of the section, I'll stop and pull the EVA bundle to me."

"Make sure you've reconnected your safety line to the next runner section before you move the EVA bundle over."

"You bet. It may be light, but it's still cumbersome. I've got two lines on it. I'll connect the new one to the safety on the next truss section before I disconnect the old one."

"Good thinking," Luis agreed.

"I'm at the end of the first section of safety runner," Devyn announced as she came to a stop. "I'm transferring my safety line to the next section." She held on with her left hand while she disconnected the carabiner from the safety runner with her right and reconnected it on the other side of the safety runner's attachment bracket. "Okay, I'm reconnected," she reported as she turned to her right slightly to face back the way she had come. "I'm going to pull the EVA pack to me now."

"Copy that."

Devyn reached down to the line hanging from one of the attachment points on the right side of her waist and pulled at it with her right hand. The EVA pack hanging five meters behind her slid easily along the safety runner, traversing the entire distance with a single tug in the light gravity. "Well, that was easy." She connected the second safety cable's carabiner to the safety runner on her side of the runner's attachment point, then disconnected the other cable from the other side of the runner and let it hang freely. "Okay, the EVA pack is on the next section as well. Moving on."

"So, you only have to transfer one more time, and then you're on the last section, right?" Luis asked.

"That's right," Devyn confirmed. "Darcy was right. This isn't that hard after all, even in an EVA suit."

"Once you get to the other side, all you have to do is go up the ramp and through the hatch and you're on the command deck," Luis said happily. *"Then it's just a short walk to the bridge airlock. You'll be here in no time."*

"No time he says," Devyn mumbled. "What has it been so far, like an hour?"

"Forty-seven minutes, actually," Ensign Schenker corrected over the comms.

"At least when you go back you won't be hauling an extra EVA pack," Luis pointed out.

"Always looking for the silver lining, aren't you?"

"Hey, it's what I do," Luis said. *"Of course, you could always just fix the leak and get us our whole deck back. Then none of us would have to go back."*

"Yeah, and I could sleep in a real bed." She paused to transfer her safety line to the next runner section.

"Ah-ha," Luis responded in an accusatory tone.

"What? You didn't think I was going through all this just to save your sorry butts, did you?"

* * *

"This way," Tony said as they made their way through the woods. "It's just ahead."

"Where are we going?" Synda asked.

"There's an old barn just past these woods," Tony explained. "There are lots of them just outside of town. We keep a vehicle out here for times like this."

"For times when you need to get to a secret rendezvous in a hurry?" Synda said, her voice incredulous.

"I meant when we want to use a vehicle outside of the city but don't want to get logged as passing through a Jung checkpoint. It's easy to slip in and out of the city on foot, not

so easy in a vehicle. The Jung watch cars closely. They search every vehicle coming and going and check everyone's IDs."

"Why doesn't everyone do it?"

"A lot of people do," Tony said. "It wasn't our idea. Hell, there are four vehicles stored in this barn alone."

"And the owners don't say anything?"

"I don't know about the other places people hide their vehicles, but this place is abandoned. It has been since long before the Jung came."

Jessica glanced up at the sky as she followed Tony and Synda through the woods. The shadows were getting long. "Not much time left before sundown."

"An hour, maybe," Tony said. "We'll already be on the road by then."

"How long will it take us then?" Synda wondered.

"Two hours maybe."

The woods began to thin out, and minutes later, they were out in the open, walking through knee-deep grass toward an old, dilapidated barn.

"Looks like it would fall over if you sneezed on it," Jessica commented as they approached the barn.

"It looks like crap, but it's sturdy enough," Tony assured her. He was the first to reach the barn, and he pulled open the side door.

Jessica followed Tony and Synda into the barn. It was dark inside, with the only light coming from the many cracks between the old planks that made up the walls. There were several empty stalls for farm animals along one wall, and four vehicles along the other wall. "Let me guess," Jessica said. "The van?"

"Yup."

"Does it run?"

“Not well, but it runs,” Tony said as he climbed into the vehicle.

Jessica pulled one of the big barn doors open, letting light inside from the setting sun.

Tony pushed the control chip into the van’s control panel, then flipped on the power. He pushed the ignition button, holding it in as the van’s starter motor began to turn with a terrible grinding noise.

“Oh, my God,” Synda said, covering her ears. “Are you sure this thing is safe?”

The engine turned over and came to life with a hideous squeal of old fan belts and loose, rattling metal. Tony smiled. “I told you it runs,” he said as he pressed the accelerator and eased it out of the barn.

After closing the barn door, Jessica climbed into the van through the back cargo door and made her way forward as the old van bounced along the dirt driveway toward the road. “How old is this thing?”

“It’s not that bad,” Tony argued.

“Hell, I’ve seen pre-Ark collector’s cars that were in better shape. You couldn’t get one of the newer, electric models?”

“You don’t find many of them outside of the city these days,” Tony said. “We’d stand out too much.”

“It would almost be worth the risk,” Jessica said as they bounced down the road.

“Hey, it’s better than walking,” Tony interrupted.

Jessica looked over his shoulder at the console. “Looks like we’ll be walking any minute. Did you look at your fuel gauge?”

“It doesn’t work,” Tony said, smiling again. “It’s a decoy. Lots of people stealing fuel these days.” He reached up and flipped down his sun-visor, revealing a small switch

attached to the ceiling of the van. “Fuel bypass switch,” he announced with pride. “We even installed a second fuel tank that you fill from inside, just behind you.”

“Nice,” Jessica said. “That explains the smell in here.”

“We try to keep the tank full at all times. We considered this our final getaway vehicle—you know—in case everything went really bad, and we needed to get out of the area to lie low for a while.”

“Like today?” Synda said.

“Where do you get your fuel?” Jessica asked.

“Uh, I stole it,” Tony said.

Jessica smiled as she settled back into the jump seat in back. The van pulled onto the main road and accelerated westward toward their rendezvous point. She looked at her watch. They still had nearly three hours to reach their destination. As long as there were no surprises along the way, she would make her rendezvous with the resistance, and her mission would be nearly completed. For a moment, she thought about that beach she had jokingly told Nathan she was going to find while on Earth. She smiled again.

* * *

Devyn stood at the top of the ramp on the command deck, pulling on the rope to drag the EVA pack up the ramp behind her. The command deck was dark, just like the rest of the ship, its internal systems shut down to save power now that it was depressurized and no longer in use.

“Okay, I’ve got the EVA pack up here as well,” she announced as she bundled up the tow line and tucked it securely under the top strap on the EVA bundle. “Moving forward.”

“*You’re almost done,*” Luis said.

Devyn looked around as she made her way to the bridge, peeking into compartments through open hatches as she passed by them. Nearly every compartment she peered into was in disarray. "You guys aren't very tidy, are you?" she commented.

"We were in a hurry to grab everything we needed before you sucked all the air out of the command deck," Luis reminded her.

"Yeah, right." She stopped for a moment, leaning into Luis's quarters. "These are your quarters, right? Nice place you had," she said. "It's actually neat and tidy."

"I had a strict mother."

"So, if we're planning on moving everyone aft, why exactly am I going to try to fix the bridge's environmental systems?" she wondered as she continued forward.

"We don't have access to the sensors or long-range comm systems from your end of the ship," Luis told her. *"The lieutenant commander was hoping to keep at least one of us up here at all times, keeping an eye out for the Jung and an ear open for a message from Earth."*

"What, someone is going to make this walk every shift?"

"He figured we would work week-long shifts," Luis explained. *"It's not like it's much different than sitting around anywhere else on the ship, except you have sensors and comms."*

"And if I'm not able to fix the environmental systems?"

"With only one of us up here, it would last a few months. We might even be able to haul O2 resupply with us during shift changes. Or maybe stagger the watches: one week someone is here; one week they're not."

"You guys have been doing a lot of thinking up there, haven't you?"

"Not much else to do," Luis said.

Devyn came to a stop outside the entrance to the bridge. "I'd ring the doorbell, but there doesn't seem to be one."

"What?"

"I'm here," she told him. "Unlock the outer hatch."

"Oh, right."

"What, is the air already getting thin in there?"

The light on the hatch handle turned green.

"It's unlocked," Luis reported.

Devyn pulled the hatch open, then picked up the EVA bundle and transferred it into the airlock before stepping through herself. "I'm inside. Closing the hatch now," she announced as she pulled the hatch closed and locked it. A single, red light snapped on over her head, bathing the small compartment in its soft glow.

"Pressurizing," Luis announced.

Devyn felt exhausted as she waited impatiently for the airlock to pressurize. All she wanted to do was to remove the suit, clean up, and rest.

The light overhead turned green, and the inner hatch opened. Luis was standing in the hatchway, a huge grin on his face as he stepped into the airlock and reached for Devyn's visor.

Devyn felt a wave of fresh air waft across her face as her visor opened.

"Long time no see," Luis announced as he disconnected her helmet and raised it above her head. "Welcome to the bridge."

Devyn let out a sigh. "Got anything to drink?"

* * *

"So neither of you is from Earth?" Garrett asked as they walked along through the canyon forests of Tanna. "Have

either of you been there?"

"Nope," Loki said.

"And yet you are willing to fight for her? For her people?"

"The people of Earth fought for my people," Major Waddell said, "and without needing to do so."

"And why would they do such a thing?" Garrett wondered.

"Because it was the right thing to do," Loki said.

"And did the people of Earth fight for your people as well?" Garrett asked Loki.

"Not directly, no. But they defeated an enemy that was a threat to our entire sector of space."

"The same enemy that threatened your world?" Garrett asked Major Waddell.

"Yes."

"This Ta'Akar you spoke of?"

"Yes."

"How many ships did this enemy possess?"

"About twenty at the time, I believe," the major answered.

"And how many ships did the people of Earth use to defeat the Ta'Akar?"

"Just the one," Major Waddell answered.

"That is impressive. And this ship, it is the same one we are going to now?"

"The very same."

"I would very much like to see this ship," Garrett said, "and meet her captain. He must be an amazing tactician."

Major Waddell exchanged glances with Loki. "He is a unique individual, to be sure."

Their conversation was interrupted when one of Garrett's men who had taken point many meters ahead of them

appeared around the bend in the trail in the distance. He was moving quickly toward them and signaling to get down.

Waddell instinctively brought his weapon up to be ready as he reached out with his left hand to usher Loki behind him. "What is it?" he asked Garrett in a low voice.

Garrett and his man exchanged brief words, after which Garrett sent the first man and the one next to him off the trail in opposite directions. "Jung patrol ahead," Garrett whispered in answer to the major's inquiry. He turned to face Major Waddell and Loki. "They are headed this way."

"How many?"

"Such patrols are usually six to eight men, occasionally more," Garrett explained. "Palnot saw six men, but when they are large patrols, they usually split into two teams, half on this trail and the other half on the parallel trail a few hundred meters to the east."

"Is this one two teams?" Major Waddell asked.

"I cannot say, but it is possible. Better that it were four men. Then, we would know they were not split in two, as their numbers would be insufficient." Garrett motioned them to move off the trail. "Hide in the woods behind those rocks just up that small rise. I will go there, on the opposite side of the trail." Garrett looked them in the eyes. "Do not engage the Jung if it can be avoided. Leave that to us."

"We should hide and wait for them to pass," Major Waddell urged. "Our mission is to get you to the Aurora to speak with Captain Scott."

"I am well aware of our priorities," Garrett insisted, a determined expression on his face. "I have been at this for many years." Before the major could respond, Garrett turned and disappeared into the woods.

"Damn it," the major said under his breath. He looked around, quickly sizing up the area as he tried to decide if

Garrett's tactics were sound. "Follow me," he instructed Loki as he left the trail and set off into the surrounding forest. "Be careful not to disturb anything or leave any footprints as we leave the trail," he added. "They would reveal our presence to the Jung."

CHAPTER SIX

Tony pulled the van off the main roadway, heading down the side road that led to the small airport.

“What is this place?” Synda wondered.

“It’s an airport,” Tony said.

“Duh,” she answered. “I figured that much out.”

“Doesn’t look like it gets used much,” Jessica said.

They passed through the main entrance to the airport and turned to the right, staying along the outside edge of the tarmac. There were a dozen small airplanes as well as a few suborbital shuttles that had seen better days. Most of the tires on the airplanes were nearly flat, and their wings and fuselages were covered with dust. Several overhead lights burned along the outer perimeter of the tarmac as well as along the row of hangars on the far side.

“Someone must still use it,” Synda commented. “They’ve still got power out here.”

“The lights are solar.” Jessica pointed to panels above each light. “Panels on top, big fat bases on the bottom to hold the batteries. Pretty common out in the middle of nowhere like this.”

“They were probably installed long ago,” Tony commented. “Nobody has bothered to turn them off, I guess.”

“Odd place for a rendezvous, isn’t it?” Synda wondered.

“Not really,” Jessica said. “Wide open, you can see someone coming from all directions and from at least a

kilometer away, and it is in the middle of nowhere.”

Tony brought the van to a stop. “So, are we just supposed to sit here and wait?”

“There was one last number in the message,” Jessica said. “Eighteen.” She looked around. “How many hangars do you think there are over there?”

“At least thirty,” Tony said.

“Let’s go check out hangar eighteen,” Jessica suggested as she turned and headed toward the back of the van.

Tony turned off the engine and exited the van, joining Jessica as she came around from the back. They walked down the line of aircraft toward the hangars in the distance.

“Some of these planes are older than I am,” Synda commented.

“Way older,” Tony added.

Jessica crouched down, checking underneath the row of planes just in case.

“What are you doing?” Synda asked.

“Just checking for boots where they shouldn’t be,” Jessica answered.

“See any?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

They continued on, reaching the row of aircraft hangars a few minutes later. Jessica pulled out her flashlight and pinched it between her thumb and forefinger, shining it on the top of the hangar doors to check the numbers. “One.” She shined the light across the tarmac at the first hangar in the other row. “Twenty.” Jessica moved out toward the middle between the rows of hangars as she continued down the row. Hangar two was to her left, then hangar nineteen to her right. “There it is, eighteen,” she announced as she pointed her flashlight at the number above the hangar door.

She twisted the doorknob and found it unlocked. She pushed the door inward and stepped inside.

The hangar was dark, empty, and just as dusty as the planes outside. There were several large crates lying about, some under protective covers. Jessica continued deeper into the hangar, shining her light from side to side as she examined the empty building. Tony and Synda followed her closely.

"It looks like there is nobody here," Synda said. "Maybe we're early."

"No, we're right on time," Jessica said. "They're probably watching us from somewhere, waiting to see what we do. The whole hangar may even be bugged."

"So what do we do?" Tony asked.

"We wait," Jessica said.

"Where does that door go?" Synda asked, pointing to the door on the far wall.

"The next hangar, maybe?" Tony suggested.

"I thought they were all separate."

"A storeroom?"

"Might as well take a look," Jessica said. She walked over and tested the doorknob, finding it unlocked as well. She opened the door and stepped through. She found herself in another hangar, only this one was not empty.

Jessica pointed her light at the unusual ship. It was large, barely able to fit in the hangar. It was painted flat black and had strange markings on the side. It had four massive engines, one on each corner of its rectangular fuselage. They appeared to be gimballed and were all currently oriented with their thrust ports pointing straight down. "What the hell is this?"

Tony came in just behind Jessica, stopping dead in his tracks as he saw the ship. "Oh, fuck," he said.

Jessica spun around, shining the light at Tony's face. His complexion had gone pale and fear had filled his eyes. "What?"

"That's a Jung combat lander," Tony said, his voice almost a whisper.

Jessica spun back around, looking at the markings on the side of the ship again. They looked remarkably similar to those on the credit chips in her pocket, as well as those she had seen on the Jung gunboat over four months ago. "Fuck." She turned back around and pushed Tony toward the door behind him. "Time to go."

Synda screamed as hangar eighteen filled with the sound of scuffling boots and a display of red, laser-sighting dots dancing across the floors and walls. The dots quickly found their way to her head and chest.

Tony emerged from the doorway a moment later as several more red dots found his chest. "What the..."

"Get down!" Jessica ordered as she came from behind them, her stolen Jung weapon in her hand. The red dots found her body just as quickly. As she charged forward and brought her weapon up, she heard several soft pops, like shots of compressed air. She felt a sudden stinging sensation in her right thigh, then another in her belly, followed by one more in her right shoulder. Her right hand went limp, and her weapon fell free. She felt her legs giving up on her as she fell forward. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Tony going down in similar fashion.

Jessica hit the floor hard, smacking her face against the cold, smooth hangar floor. She blacked out for a second, then her vision returned. A myriad of black boots scuffled about in front of her face, blocking her view of Synda lying a few meters away. A moment later, someone was pulling a cloth bag over her head and binding her hands and feet.

She tried with all her might to resist, but her arms and legs were not responding. She was limp and completely helpless, paralyzed by whatever nerve agent they had shot her with from a distance.

Jessica's mind raced as several men scooped her up and carried her into the other hangar. She could hear turbines turning over. She could hear hangar doors being rolled open. What she didn't hear was anyone speaking—not in Jung, not in English, nothing.

Jessica felt herself being lifted up into what she assumed was the Jung ship they had seen in the next hangar. The engines rapidly came to life, rising in pitch in near unison. She felt another body being placed on the floor of the ship next to her. The body didn't move at first but then jiggled slightly as another body was placed next to it. The other two bodies had to be Tony and Synda. Jessica was sure of it.

She could feel the ship rolling out of the hangar. A moment later, the side door of the ship slammed shut, and the noise of the four turbines was dramatically reduced. A low rumble began to build, and she felt the ship lift upward as it took off. Then she felt another pinprick. This time it was in her left thigh. Her head began to swim. She could feel herself losing consciousness. She struggled to stay awake, trying to pick up any information she could: their direction, the amount of time in flight, changes in altitude, anything that might be useful. Her head was spinning even faster with each passing moment, and within seconds, she was unconscious.

* * *

Major Waddell and Loki crouched behind a cluster of rocks perched on a small rise along the forest bed. The trail

they had been using was only ten meters away, and the major could just make out the heads of lead members of the Jung patrol as they came around the turn in the distance.

Major Waddell could also see Garrett perched about eight meters behind a large, fallen tree on the far side of the trail. His weapon was held close to his body, and he appeared ready for action. The major hoped Garrett would be wise enough to wait and see if the patrol passed without noticing them. Major Waddell's orders were clear, and he intended to follow them.

One by one, the Jung troops came around the bend in the trail, moving closer to Garrett and Waddell with each step. The Jung were dressed in uniforms and body armor painted with colors similar to those found in the forest around them. Each of them carried an energy rifle, a sidearm, and a combat knife. They also carried small backpacks with stubby black antennas sticking out of them. The packs were connected to their helmets with small, coiled wires. Oddly enough, the Jung soldiers appeared relaxed and confident, as if they expected no danger. One of them even pulled a snack out of the side pouch hanging on his utility belt.

Major Waddell glanced over at Garrett's position, being careful to remain low and out of sight of the approaching soldiers. Garrett appeared to be tensing up as if getting ready for action. Waddell glanced at Loki, who was squatting on the ground behind the rocks next to the major and staying low and completely out of sight. Loki had no interest in watching the Jung troops as they approached—so little interest, in fact, that he was facing the opposite direction with his eyes closed.

The group of six Jung soldiers passed their position. As they did so, Garrett rose from behind the fallen tree he had

been using as cover and raised his weapon as if preparing to fire. Major Waddell watched Garrett with both astonishment and concern as he wondered if the man were really that stupid.

Garrett took aim at the departing soldiers, forcing Waddell to do the same. The major's eyes continuously darted back and forth from his weapon scope trained on the Jung soldier closest to him, to Garrett on the other side of the trail.

Garrett continued to stand motionless, his rifle trained on the departing Jung soldiers, until they disappeared around the next turn in the trail. Once they were gone, he lowered his rifle and settled back down behind his fallen tree.

Major Waddell looked at Garrett, a puzzled expression on his face, and settled back down behind his own cover.

Loki sensed the major settling back down next to him and opened his eyes. He, too, got a confused look on his face. "What's happening?" he whispered almost inaudibly. "Are they gone?"

"Yes," the major whispered back.

Loki's eyes looked left and right, his expression becoming even more confused. "Then why are we still sitting here?"

"Because Garrett has chosen to remain hidden as well."

"You think he knows something we don't?" Loki asked, continuing in the same hushed tones.

"I suspect he is waiting to make sure the patrol does not double back," the major said. "We will remain hidden for now."

"Okay by me," Loki whispered.

They continued to wait for several more minutes. Palmot and his cohort appeared on the trail from the same direction that the Jung patrol had originally come. Major Waddell

looked over at Garrett, who stood up from behind his cover and appeared much more relaxed. As he stepped out from behind the fallen tree, he waved at Major Waddell to come out from his hiding place as well.

“Come,” the major told Loki as he rose.

“They’re gone?” Loki asked.

“Apparently so.”

Loki followed Major Waddell to join Garrett and the others on the trail.

“I apologize for the delay,” Garrett told him as they approached. “I was waiting for my men to return. I sent them well behind the patrol to ensure there was not a second contingent following on the same trail. It is another tactic they sometimes use.”

“I assumed you had good reason to remain hidden,” the major said. “I also assume it is safe to continue toward the extraction point.”

“Yes, we still have some distance to travel.” Garrett spoke commands to his men in his language. Palmot headed back up the trail to take point as the other man moved behind them to assume a rear-guard position. “Shall we?” Garrett invited, gesturing for them to proceed.

Loki started down the trail again with Major Waddell stepping in behind him next to Garrett.

“Do you see many patrols this deep into the canyons?” the major asked.

“Once, maybe twice, per week the Jung patrol the loop,” Garrett explained.

“The loop?” the major asked.

“This trail goes down this side of the canyon, for several kilometers. Eventually the terrain becomes impassable, and the trail turns eastward, crosses the river over a footbridge,

then comes back along the far side of the canyon toward the valley.”

“Seems odd to patrol a wilderness area so frequently.”

“Not really,” Garrett explained. “We routinely set up fake encampments just off these trails. It leads the Jung to believe that the resistance lives in the wilderness and not in the towns. That is why we usually wear dirty clothing that appears well worn.”

“To give the impression that you live in the woods,” the major surmised.

“Precisely.”

“And this works?”

“So far,” Garrett said. “We even engage them in the woods on occasion, just to make them think they are accomplishing something.”

“That’s what I thought you were about to do with *that* patrol,” the major admitted.

“That would threaten today’s mission,” Garrett explained, “and as I said, I very much want to meet this Captain Scott, the man who defeated twenty warships with but a single ship.”

“That’s good to know. For a moment, I was sure you were going to attack them.”

“Yes, well, I very much wanted to, I must admit. It would have been an easy kill. They were quite relaxed, probably because they have not been challenged out here in many weeks.”

“How long have your people been running this deception?” the major asked.

“For over a decade now,” Garrett said. “Ever since the Jung invaded our world.”

“So you *are* from this world?”

"I am, yes, but many are not. Many were brought here from other worlds as laborers."

"How many men have you lost running this game?"

"There have been many, I admit," Garrett said, melancholy in his voice. "We take such risks, however, knowing that the ongoing deception keeps our families safer than they would otherwise be."

"How so?" the major asked.

"As long as the Jung believe that the resistance lives in the canyons, their suspicions are diverted from those living in the valley."

"But these dead men of yours, surely the Jung can identify at least some of them. Would that not lead them back to the valley?"

"We do not leave our fallen behind for the Jung to identify."

"And this actually works?" the major asked, finding it difficult to believe.

"Not completely," Garrett admitted. "The Jung still conduct random searches in the cities and villages of the valley. However, they are few and far between, and we are quite careful not to provide them with evidence to support any suspicions."

"How many are you?" the major asked. "How many cells do you operate?"

"There are four cells in this area. I have heard there are others elsewhere on Tanna, but the Jung do not allow communication between the few remaining pockets of civilization on our world."

"The few remaining pockets?"

"Most of our world was destroyed during the invasion."

"How many of your people were lost?"

“Several million. Our world was still sparsely populated. The plague that devastated our original settlements a millennium ago left only a few hundred people alive. They existed in small villages that were spread few and far between. Over the centuries, those villages grew into cities, then nations. When the Jung came, we had only just begun to reach orbit again. We were not prepared to defend our world against aggressors from space.”

“Then why did they strike with such force?” the major wondered.

“It is the way of the Jung,” Garrett said with a shrug. “I have heard similar stories from many of the men brought over from other worlds the Jung have conquered.”

“We experienced similar aggression on my world,” Major Waddell told him. “Had it not been for Captain Scott and the Aurora, my world would have suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Ta’Akar.”

“Then you and your people were fortunate indeed,” Garrett said. He laughed. “And now, I *really* want to meet this man.”

* * *

Jessica’s head throbbed in pain as she woke. She opened her eyes and looked around. Other than a small amount of light spilling out from beneath a door on the far side the room, she saw nothing but darkness.

It wasn’t only her head. It was her gut as well. She was nauseated. She figured it was from whatever they had used to knock her out in the hangar.

Jessica cursed herself for being taken so easily. She had been trained well, but these people also had training; of that she was sure. Using the hangar to store their shuttle, and

using an airport out in the middle of nowhere, where no one would notice them coming and going, was smart. They had managed to capture Jessica and the other two, and had probably even loaded them into the shuttle, all from within the hangar. Then they had just rolled out and lifted off to disappear into the night.

Shuttles don't just disappear, Jessica thought. They can be tracked, even when flying low to the ground. She doubted the shuttle could have traveled far before seeking cover. Otherwise, the Jung would have intercepted them. *Unless, of course, they are the Jung.*

It was a frightening thought, albeit an unlikely one. The Jung would have no need for a quick, covert getaway. They also would have no need to keep her and her companions from knowing where they were being taken. *Unless they are the Jung, and they are pretending to be the resistance in order to obtain information from her.*

Jessica dismissed that thought as well. There were too many indicators to the contrary. The weapons they used, the way they moved... it was all straight from the spec-ops rulebook. If these people were the Jung pretending to be the resistance, they were really good at it.

Sooner or later, whoever they were, they would interrogate her. That would be when she would learn their identity. Two months was not adequate time for the Jung to learn enough about EDF special operations techniques to be convincing. In addition, from what they had learned from the Jung-controlled news broadcasts emanating from Earth, the resistance had only been in operation for about a month, which definitely was not enough time. Without having seen their faces or spoken a word with them, she was convinced they were not Jung. The question was, *Who exactly were they? Part of an organized resistance operating*

under the control of some global command authority? A local rogue cell of spec-ops regulars? Or another bunch of civilians, but with better training and equipment?

Jessica sat up slowly. She was lying on a hard floor, probably concrete. Her head spun as she came upright, requiring her concentration to overcome the sensation. It took nearly a minute but, eventually, the feeling subsided. She looked around the darkened room. It wasn't a large room, maybe three by four meters. As best she could tell, there were no windows, and the room was completely empty.

Jessica managed to stand, though she was wobbly. She ran her hands over herself. She was still wearing the same clothes, except her belt, jacket, and shoes had all been removed. They had taken her backpack, and her pockets were empty as well.

She made her way to the door, gently testing the doorknob and finding it locked. The door felt solid with a metallic surface. She thought of rapping on it with her knuckles to see if it was, in fact, a solid door but decided it might be better not to alert her captors that she was awake. She placed her ear to the door but heard nothing from the other side.

Jessica got down on the floor and peered out under the door. The floors were smooth, definitely concrete. She could make out a hallway on the other side, but she could not determine its length or the position of her door in relation to either end of the corridor. She thought she could see another door across the hall and down a few meters, but stacked boxes in the hall blocked her view. She could not make out the feet of a guard, nor could she hear anything that would indicate that someone was out there standing watch over her. She wanted to call out to Synda and Tony to

see if they were within earshot. She wanted to know if they were all right, but more importantly, she wanted to warn them of what might come.

No, better to wait, gather more intel about the situation, she thought. She waited quietly, listening in the dark. Sooner or later, her captors would come for her. They would have questions, and from those questions, she would learn more, she would assess, and she would make further decisions.

Jessica sat on the cold cement floor next to the door, listening intently for any sound: a cough from another room, footsteps of someone pacing their own concrete floor, even a call for help. All she heard was the occasional drip of a leaky faucet somewhere in the distance. That much alone, however, told her they were at least somewhere that had indoor plumbing and a water source. The light from under the door was not from sunlight. It was electrically generated, so they were also connected to the local power grid, as a generator would be far too noisy, and most methods of portable power generation would be too easy to detect by the Jung. She heard a fan click on and felt fresh air being circulated into her room from an overhead vent. There was a small amount of suction under her door, as the air was pulled from her room out into the corridor. Wherever they were, there was an environmental control system.

Jessica thought for a moment. Most of the drugs they were taught about in special operations were fairly short-lived, so they couldn't have traveled too far. That meant they were probably still in the general area of Winnipeg. However, this time of year, the weather was fair enough that heating or cooling would not be necessary. They were someplace that not only didn't have windows, but couldn't have windows. That meant either a bunker or underground.

A bunker was too conspicuous. They would have been all but destroyed by the Jung early on. That left underground. They had to be underground. The Jung wouldn't be underground, but the resistance might.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

* * *

"This is the place," Major Waddell stated as they reached the plateau. He checked his watch. "They should be arriving shortly."

"I am curious how you knew of this spot," Garrett stated. "We are well beyond the usual trails frequented by my people."

"This is where we landed," Loki told him.

"Landed?" Garrett asked. "You mean the ship that is coming for us, it has been here before?" Garrett seemed worried.

"What is wrong?" Major Waddell asked.

"I have seen the flash your ships make when they depart. Do they make such a flash upon their arrival as well?"

"In this case, yes."

"If your ship was detected arriving at this spot before, it is possible the Jung are watching for its return." He looked around, trying to scan the surrounding mountains without being too obvious about his intent. "This could very well be a trap, Major."

"We did not arrive by ship," Major Waddell explained. "We descended to this spot by parachute."

"They call it a HALO jump," Loki added. "High altitude, low open. In our case, really high altitude."

Garrett's expression went from concern to confusion.

“Our ship jumped into low orbit over your world. We jumped from there and made most of our descent by free fall.”

“Impressive,” Garrett said. “And quite dangerous, I might add.”

“We should take cover along the side of the plateau,” Major Waddell suggested. “We do not know how closely the shuttle may jump in.”

Major Waddell and Loki moved toward the edge of the mountaintop clearing, taking cover along the rocks and shrubs just below the edge of the plateau. Garrett signaled for his men to follow, all of which took similar positions alongside them.

“This maneuver you speak of,” Garrett began as he settled in next to the major, “jumping in, how does it work?”

“I couldn’t begin to explain it,” Major Waddell admitted. “It is far beyond my level of education.”

Garrett looked at Loki.

“Don’t look at me,” Loki said. “I just know how to operate it.”

“But, how is it used? What type of range does it possess? How many ships do you have that are equipped for such operations?”

“Perhaps you should save your questions for the captain,” Major Waddell told him. “Even if I knew the answers to your questions, I would not be at liberty to discuss such details.”

“Not even with a friend?” Garrett said, offering the most sincere smile he could muster.

“Not even with a friend.”

“It was worth a try,” Garrett said, shrugging his shoulders. He lay flat on his stomach on the ground, his eyes barely able to see over the edge and across the

plateau. "I have never traveled from this world," he said, his eyes drifting upward toward the evening sky. "Have you been to many worlds, Loki?"

"I've been to a few," Loki said. "Yours is the only one I've seen in the core."

"The core?"

"That's how the people from Earth refer to this part of space," Loki explained. "Actually, I think they refer to this part of space as the 'fringe'."

"Why is that?" Garrett wondered.

"Something to do with which worlds had been fully settled at the time of the plague or something." Loki laughed. "Surprisingly, Josh is more up on ancient Earth history than anyone I know, other than the captain, of course."

"Your captain, he is a wise and educated man?"

"I guess so," Loki said. "I never really asked him. He seems to know everything about Earth history. I think I remember hearing that he studied it in school or something."

"A man who remembers history avoids repeating it," Garrett said.

"Or uses it as a tool to guide him," Major Waddell added.

"True as well..."

Garrett was interrupted by a thunderous sound and a sudden flash of light accompanied by an intense shock wave of displaced air. Garrett's eyes widened, as did those of his men, as they stared at the jump shuttle that had just appeared only ten meters above the plateau and was now descending smoothly toward the clearing in front of them.

"My God!" Garrett exclaimed.

Dust and debris flew in all directions as the shuttle's thrusters blasted the surface below them to slow their

descent. Less than a minute after it had appeared overhead, the shuttle was touching down on the plateau, its cargo ramp opening at the rear. Before the ramp was fully deployed, armed men began jumping off the ramp onto the ground. Six men, all clad in Corinari combat armor painted in camouflage patterns, hit the ground running as they spread out in all directions and took up cover positions to protect the shuttle from attack.

Major Waddell flashed a colored light at the cargo ramp in a predetermined pattern from their position alongside the plateau. The light caught the attention of the squad leader standing by the aft end of the shuttle, who immediately signaled for the major and his party to approach.

Major Waddell and Loki rose from their positions, as did Garrett. The squad leader approached them in a crouched run.

Garrett's men also rose from their cover, following their leader onto the plateau. The Corinari troops spotted them, immediately turned, and took aim at the group of armed men, unsure of their intent.

"Sir!" the squad leader called out to the major, noticing the confrontation that was forming. "Is everything all right, sir?"

Major Waddell saw the reaction of his men, taking pride in their response. Garrett's men also raised their weapons. "Everything is fine, Sergeant," he assured the squad leader. The major turned to Garrett. "Your men must lower their weapons," he instructed Garrett in no uncertain terms.

"Of course." Garrett turned toward his men and signaled them to stand down. "My men will not be coming with us?"

"I'm sorry; I cannot allow that. I only have permission to bring you. Even that is considered a serious risk, no insult intended."

“Of course,” Garrett said. “How do I know that you will return me to my world after our business is concluded?”

“I can only offer you my word,” Major Waddell said, looking Garrett in the eyes. “I will do everything within my power to make sure you are returned to your world.”

“Sir?” the sergeant asked, wondering about the delay.

Garrett looked at the Corinari troops. Their movements were purposeful and efficient and spoke of considerable training. The ship that sat before him, although average in its appearance, fascinated him. He looked at the major and smiled. “I would prefer not to HALO jump as my method of return.”

“I don’t blame you,” the major agreed.

Garrett turned and barked orders to his men, who immediately lowered their weapons and backed away, settling back into their original positions along the edge of the plateau. He turned back toward the major. “Take me to your captain.”

Major Waddell turned and gestured toward the shuttle, allowing Garrett to pass. The sergeant immediately took his cue from the major and led Garrett safely toward the shuttle and up the back ramp with Major Waddell and Loki close behind. As soon as they were on board, the shuttle’s turbines began to rise in pitch as it prepared to lift off. The six Corinari soldiers guarding the shuttle fell back toward the rear cargo ramp in pairs, keeping their weapons trained on their assigned sections of the perimeter. As soon as the last man was on the ramp, the shuttle began to rise. Once they were a few meters above the ground, the shuttle drifted forward and began to turn to its right as it continued its climb. Thirty seconds later, the shuttle was again ten meters above the level of the plateau, and was accelerating slowly away from Garrett’s men. Then, without warning, the

thunderous noise came again and the shuttle disappeared in a blinding flash of blue-white light.

* * *

“Who’s coming back with me?” the sergeant asked as he rested after the first half of his EVA.

“It’s just us three now,” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said to Luis. “You might as well go next.”

“If it’s all the same to you, sir, I’d rather stay here and help Devyn.”

“You want me to go? What happened to the captain going down with his ship?”

“We’re not going down, sir,” Luis said. “We’re already down. Besides, do you know anything about environmental systems?”

“No. Do you?”

“Well, no, but I knew a bit about electrical systems and some basic computer programming and troubleshooting. That’s gotta be more help to her than supply and logistics. No offense, sir.”

“None taken,” the lieutenant commander said. “It just seems wrong for me to leave with anyone else still here.”

“If we’re going to try to keep someone up here at all times, we’re going to need to get some basic scrubbing capacity going.”

The lieutenant commander leaned in closer to avoid being overheard. “She doesn’t even know if she can fix it, Ensign.”

“We might be stuck on Metis for a long time, sir. We need to try.”

“Sooner or later, the oxygen is going to run out up here.”

“There’s plenty of air left up here for just the two of us,” Luis said.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic smiled. “For just the two of you, huh?”

“It’s not like that,” Luis insisted. “I meant...”

“Relax, Ensign. I know what you meant,” the lieutenant commander assured him. “You want to stay up here and fiddle with environmental systems with your friend, that’s fine. Just don’t let the air run out on you when you’re not looking.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now help me suit up,” the lieutenant commander ordered, the smile creeping back onto his face. He looked at Luis and raised his eyebrows up and down several times.

“Don’t make me deck my commanding officer, sir,” Luis said under his breath in jest.

* * *

“They’re in the command briefing room, sir,” Sergeant Weatherly reported from the ready room hatch.

“Thank you, Sergeant.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to meet him in the hangar bay,” Cameron said as they rose and exited the room.

“I don’t want him to feel he has us at a disadvantage,” Nathan said as they passed through the aft end of the bridge. “If he does, he’ll be more difficult to negotiate with.”

“I didn’t realize you knew so much about the art of negotiation.”

“I grew up in a political family, remember?” Nathan said as they made their way down the corridor. “I knew about negotiations before I knew how to tie my shoes.” Nathan

looked at Cameron. "Don't undermine me in front of our guest, Cam," he warned, a stern look in his eye.

"I don't undermine you."

"The hell you don't."

"I don't," she said.

"You've gotten better. At least you don't do it in front of the crew anymore," he said, "but you still have your moments in the briefing room." Nathan stopped in the middle of the corridor, turning to look directly at her. "This man is a leader, at the very least, of his local cell. If he senses I am not firmly in command, he will see it as a sign of weakness, and he will press to take advantage of that perceived weakness. I know. My father was a master at it." Nathan turned and continued down the corridor, Cameron and Sergeant Weatherly following close behind.

"I do not undermine you," Cameron mumbled.

Nathan held up one finger to silence his friend as they entered the command briefing room. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said as he entered the compartment. "Ship's business." Nathan approached Garrett, his hand extended in friendship. "You must be Garrett."

Garrett looked confused. "You are Captain Scott?" He looked at Loki and Major Waddell for confirmation as he shook the captain's hand. "But you are so young."

"I get that a lot," Nathan answered.

Major Waddell nodded his head. "Captain Scott, meet Garrett, leader of the Tanna resistance."

"It is an honor, sir," Nathan said. "Shall we get started?"

Nathan moved around to take his usual spot at the head of the conference table.

"I am sorry, Captain. I meant no disrespect," Garrett said as he took his seat.

Nathan fought back a smile. His own youthful appearance had already put his guest off guard, which offered Nathan his first advantage. "None taken, sir. I am somewhat younger than most of my peers. Events over the last few months have accelerated me through the ranks and into command of this ship."

"Then, you are not the same man who defeated these Ta'Akar that your men spoke of?"

"No, I was in command of this ship during that campaign, but I assure you, it was a joint effort. I merely stirred the pot a bit."

Garrett smiled as he eyed Nathan sitting at the opposite end of the table. "I suspect you are being modest, Captain, which is commendable."

"I understand that you have some concerns," Nathan began, "about the Alliance in general. Perhaps I can answer your questions."

"Not concerns, really," Garrett said. "Doubts might be a better term."

"I can understand why you might doubt the strength of the Alliance."

"It is not your strength that I question, Captain," Garrett said. "I question whether or not your strength is equal to that of the Jung."

"That is what we are trying to determine," Nathan said. "Before we can form a campaign strategy, we need to know what we are facing."

"You have this ship," Garrett said, "and I have seen at least two smaller ships that can jump between the stars in the blink of one's eye. Tell me, Captain," Garrett said as he leaned forward, "can the Aurora jump between the stars as well?"

“Yes, she can,” Nathan answered plainly. “And at much greater ranges.”

“How much greater?”

“That is not germane to this negotiation,” Nathan told him.

“Ah, but I believe it is,” Garrett disagreed. “I’m sure you realize that this ability is perhaps your most formidable weapon against the Jung, as they do not possess such capability.”

“I still don’t see how our jump range is related to this discussion.”

“In order to feel comfortable sharing information about the Jung with your alliance, I must feel confident that you have a chance of succeeding at your goal. Your ‘jump range’, as you put it, is therefore quite important in that determination.”

Nathan glanced at Cameron as he considered Garrett’s words. Then, without hesitation, he answered. “Our maximum safe jump range has yet to be determined, as our scientists are constantly making improvements to the system. However, I can tell you that, currently, we limit our jumps to no more than fifteen light years at a time for safety reasons.”

Garrett smiled. “I was right. You do have a formidable weapon on your hands, Captain.”

“How do you think we defeated the Ta’Akar?” Nathan said, his own wry smile forming.

Garrett laughed. “I knew I would like you.”

“Is that why you insisted on coming to my ship?” Nathan asked. “To see if you liked me?”

“Partly, yes. On Tanna, we believe that, to trust a man, you must first both like and respect that man. Of course, I also wanted to know more about your jump drive, and

although I probably could have tricked young Loki into revealing that which I needed to know, I was not convinced he even possessed that information. I also was quite sure I would not be able to extract the information from Major Waddell, as I suspect, unlike Loki, the major has seen his fair share of pain and suffering. You see, Captain, ever since I witnessed Joshua and Loki jump away from our world, I knew that things were about to change. In fact, I have been waiting for your return.”

“Have you?” Nathan wondered.

“I have. And now, here you are, asking for my help once more.”

“Perhaps we should cut to the chase,” Nathan stated coldly, leaning forward in his seat. “What price are you asking for this help?”

“Only the liberation of Tanna from the hands of the Jung.”

“Is that all?”

“It seems a fair price, one little world,” Garrett stated with a shrug.

“It is my understanding that Tanna is well protected. There is a fighter base on one of your moons, and there are considerable facilities on the surface of your world as well, are their not?”

“There are indeed,” Garrett admitted.

“How many men do the Jung have on Tanna?” Major Waddell asked.

“Hundreds at least,” Garrett stated, “sometimes more during rotation of forces or when one of their warships passes through the system.”

“Sir,” Major Waddell began to object.

Nathan held up his hand, cutting off the major. “What makes you think we can’t get the information we seek on our own, without your help?”

"If you could, you would not be asking," Garrett answered confidently. He also leaned forward, as if to underline his next statement. "I also suspect that the reason you seek the location of Jung propellant stores is because you are in need of that propellant yourself." Garrett's smile became broader. "Perhaps even desperately so."

"An interesting hypothesis," Nathan said, showing no reaction to Garrett's assertions. "May I inquire as to how you came to such a conclusion?"

"Simple, really," Garrett answered. "The Jung forces in the Tanna system should be no match for a ship such as yours. Since you have not already taken the system for yourself, it is reasonable to assume that it is because you lack sufficient propellant to do so."

"Logical, but you're overlooking one thing," Nathan said. "If I *am* out of propellant as you suspect, how would I be able to *take* your system from the Jung? For that matter, why would I *want* to take your system from the Jung?"

"The question of 'how' is simple. Although your fighters would suffer considerable losses, they alone could disable the Jung fighter base guarding Tanna, after which you could destroy their ground forces from orbit with little risk to your ship."

"You still haven't answered the 'why'," Nathan reminded Garrett.

"The 'why' is also easy, Captain. The propellant that you seek is in my system. In fact, most of it is produced and stored on Tanna."

Nathan stared at Garrett for what seemed an eternity to everyone in the room. The leader of the Tanna resistance appeared pleased with himself and his position at the table. "I will need to discuss this with my senior officers," Nathan finally said. "Meanwhile, may I offer you something to eat?"

“Yes, thank you, that would be much appreciated,” Garrett answered.

“Sergeant, have Garrett escorted to the captain’s mess and have my cook prepare whatever he likes.”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant answered.

“Feel free to indulge yourself, Garrett.” Nathan told their guest. “We may be *discussing* your proposal for some time.”

“Of course, Captain,” Garrett said, still smiling as he rose to depart.

Nathan waited until Garrett had left the briefing room before speaking. “Well, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“Captain,” Major Waddell began, “we do not have the manpower to conduct a direct assault on the surface of Tanna, not against what could be several hundred men.”

“We may not have to,” Nathan told him.

“Sir, Garrett did say that most of the propellant is stored on the surface,” Cameron reminded him.

“Yes, he did,” Nathan agreed, “but he also said that ships occasionally pass through the system. I’m assuming they do so to refuel, among other things. They must have a refueling depot in orbit or on an asteroid or moon. They wouldn’t ferry it up in shuttles during a refuel; it would take too long.”

“So if we take out that fighter base, we might have a shot at the fuel that’s already at the refueling station, wherever that is,” Cameron said.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Nathan said. “We wouldn’t even need to take on the Jung ground forces.”

“Sir, isn’t that kind of dishonest?” Loki said with a frown.

“I wasn’t suggesting we deceive our guest,” Nathan assured Loki. “I was only thinking of a viable alternative to an all-out attack against what might be a superior force.” Nathan leaned back in his chair. “I suspect I will need to

“speak further with our guest before I can come to a decision.”

“Shall I have the sergeant bring him back?” Cameron asked.

“No, I’ll give him some time to start eating, then I’ll join him.”

“Shall I come along?” Cameron asked.

“I think it would be better if I handled this alone,” Nathan said. “I need to get him to open up, to trust us. He’s not likely to do that with a room full of officers.”

* * *

“I apologize for keeping you waiting,” Nathan said as he entered the captain’s mess.

“That is quite all right, Captain,” Garrett assured him. “Your cook was just explaining how he prepared this fine cut of meat.” Garrett turned toward the captain’s cook. “What did you call it again?”

“Dollag, sir,” the cook answered.

“Yes, dollag. It has a most interesting flavor, does it not?”

“It’s a bit strong for my taste,” Nathan said as he took his seat at the dining table, “but I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I take it you have been away from your home for some time now,” Garrett said.

“More than four months,” Nathan said.

“Will you be eating as well, sir?” the cook asked the captain.

“Yes, please.”

“You do not mind if I continue eating?” Garrett asked.

“No, of course not,” Nathan answered.

“So,” Garrett began as he cut off another piece of dollag, “have you come to a decision, Captain?”

“Not as of yet,” Nathan admitted. “I thought we might discuss the situation further.”

“What is there to discuss?” Garrett asked. “We need help removing the Jung from our world. You need the propellant the Jung have stored on our world. It seems a perfect arrangement, does it not?”

“Let us assume, for the moment, that you are correct and that we are low on propellant. Why would we want to risk our forces attacking the Jung on Tanna? There are undoubtedly other sources of propellant within the core, possibly even ones that are not as well defended.”

“True, but how long can you continue to operate without more propellant?”

“Longer than you might think,” Nathan said.

Garrett took another bite of his dollag, chewing it while he thought. “Interesting, but if that were the case, why come all the way back to Tanna? Surely there were closer systems where one might find a source of propellant.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan said.

“You came back to Tanna, because it is on the extreme edge of Jung occupied space. What did you call it? The fringe? That which happens on Tanna takes months, perhaps years, to get back to the Jung homeworld. With your jump drive, that is an enormous advantage. A distant fuel depot out of the reach of the very enemy from which it was stolen.” Garrett looked at him for a moment. “A bit ironic, is it not?” He took another bite of his dinner. “Sending young Loki and the major to Tanna was a low-risk plan that had the potential for high reward.”

“Yet you propose we take on a high-risk mission to obtain that propellant.”

“You are at war, are you not?” Garrett asked. “You cannot fight a war without taking risks, Captain.”

Nathan sat silent for the moment, contemplating Garrett's words. The leader of the Tanna resistance wanted something more than the liberation of his world. That much was obvious. Nathan's father had taught him that the art of negotiation involved trading away that which you appeared to want in order to secure that which you truly wanted. He also taught Nathan that the best way to obtain what you wanted in a negotiation was to never ask for it, but rather, to get the opposition to offer it to you. The trouble was, Nathan was having a hard time figuring out what Garrett truly wanted.

"Yes, war does involve risk," Nathan admitted. "But one must manage those risks intelligently."

Garrett pushed his plate away for the moment. "Captain, you have a big and powerful starship. Surely you are capable of defeating one small fighter base and a few hundred soldiers on the surface."

"I do not know," Nathan said. "You have offered no intelligence about the forces we might face: their numbers, their defenses, their routines. We have nothing on which to make a risk assessment. Surely you do not expect us to make a decision without such information."

"I have no problem sharing this information with you, Captain, assuming you can agree, in principle, that an alliance between us would help us both achieve our goals."

"What exactly is your goal, Garrett?" Nathan asked, leaning back.

"For us to be free of the Jung once and for all."

"And how do you expect to accomplish this goal? You have no military, no ships, limited resources..."

"By joining your Alliance, Captain."

And there it is, Nathan thought. "Other than the propellant stored on your world, what else might an alliance

with your people provide?”

“That which I suspect you most need: a world from which you can safely operate.” Garret looked at Nathan, trying to size up the captain’s response. “It is true that we can offer you little in the way of weapons or ships, or even trained warriors. But even a single ship such as yours needs more than these things to operate. You need food, consumables, medical support, logistical support. More importantly, you need an industrial infrastructure behind your efforts. Tell me, Captain, do you currently have such?”

“In this region of space, no.”

“And how far away is your support?”

“Several weeks, at least,” Nathan admitted, “which, I should point out, is still much more accessible to us than what is accessible to the Jung within their own empire.”

“And how long did it take you to reach us?”

“Two days,” Nathan said, “and that was at a leisurely pace.” Nathan sighed. “I was under the impression your population had been significantly reduced by the initial Jung invasion, yet you still have significant industrial infrastructure?”

“When the Jung conquer a world, they reduce its population just enough to allow its existing industrial base to continue to operate. They destroy enough of the population that it is not consuming the majority of what it produces. In this way, the Jung feed the growth of their own worlds and the expansion of their own empire—all off the backs of other worlds. It is how they survived the great plague so many centuries ago, by taking that which they needed.”

“It seems odd that the Jung chose your world, considering its position in relation to the rest of the core worlds.”

“The Jung seek to expand in all directions. We believe they plan to use Tanna as a stepping stone to that end.”

“Yet another reason that we should help you drive them from your system?” Nathan asked, trying to hide his suspicions. “I’m curious, Garrett. What makes you think we won’t just use the information you have already provided to take the propellant we need and be on our way?”

“Because I believe you to be an honorable man, Captain Scott. Also, I have given you just enough information for you to realize that you need our help but not enough to ensure your success should you attempt to take the propellant on your own. I have much more information about the Jung, both on Tanna and elsewhere, that will reduce your risk during your campaign in my system as well as in others.” He leveled a deep gaze at Nathan.

“I thought you believed me to be an honorable man,” Nathan said.

“I do, but I am making decisions that will affect millions of my people. I cannot afford to offer up such trust without due caution, Captain. I’m sure you understand.”

The cook placed the captain’s plate of food down on the table in front of him.

“Thank you,” Nathan told his cook. He looked at Garrett once more. “As you have correctly surmised, I have but one ship in this area of space. If we successfully liberate your world, I cannot promise we will be able to help you defend it should the Jung return.”

“But, if we are part of your alliance...”

“The other members of our alliance also know we are not able to come to their aid. Our mission is to free the Earth of Jung occupation.” Nathan paused, leaning forward and looking Garrett straight in the eye. “I am willing to commit this ship to the liberation of your world in as much as it

serves our primary mission, but until the Earth is free and capable of adequately defending herself, her safety will take priority.”

Garrett leaned back as well, considering the gravity of the captain’s last statement. “It seems history will judge me as either a hero or a villain, depending on if and when the Jung return.”

Nathan thought for a moment. The stakes were going up exponentially. He was being asked to take responsibility for not only the Earth, but Tanna as well. He thought about his father, about the many negotiations he had conducted in his political career. He had hated listening to his father talk about them with his mother. It all had seemed like such a game to him back then. Now, he was beginning to understand the pressures his father must have faced during his many decades as a public servant. He was also beginning to realize how much he had learned from his father about such negotiations, all without even trying. He wondered if his father would be surprised to see him now, carrying on in his father’s footsteps—albeit in a slightly different way.

He also couldn’t help but wonder if his father was still alive.

“It is a big gamble you are choosing to take,” Nathan finally said. “I hope you truly know the minds of your people.”

“At this point, Captain, that is the only thing of which I am sure.”

* * *

Jessica sat, her hands bound behind her back and her feet bound to the chair. Through the hood over her head,

she could barely make out bodies as they moved about the room. She had been sitting there, bound, hooded, and gagged, for more than an hour since being taken from her cell by four men. She had considered trying to overpower them at the time but decided against it, still convinced that her captors were somehow connected to the Earth Defense Force—or whatever had replaced it after their surrender to the Jung. If she was correct, she was where she needed to be.

The hood was ripped from her head. There was a light shining down on her from directly overhead, but the rest of the room was in shadow. She could make out four men, two by the door, one in the corner, and the man that had just ripped the hood from her head directly in front of her. He was in his mid-thirties and well built, with short, ragged hair. He had not shaved in days. He wore jeans and a plain brown T-shirt without markings as well as heavy boots. He did not appear to be the friendly type.

The man reached out and ripped the tape from her mouth. Jessica immediately spit the saliva soaked rag from her mouth. “Asshole,” she instinctively blurted out.

“Hardly the way to begin your interrogation,” the man said in a gravelly voice.

Jessica stared long and hard at him, telegraphing her desire to cause him severe pain. All it did was elicit a smile from him.

“Who are you?”

“You know who I am,” she said, her voice full of disdain. “I identified myself in the message.”

“Sorry, they don’t tell me much,” the man said, still smiling.

“Then you’re not the man I want to speak with.”

“Well, sweetheart, I’m all you’ve got, so I suggest you start talking.”

“You first,” Jessica told him.

The man bent over, putting his face mere centimeters from hers. His breath was foul, his eyes bloodshot. He moved around to one side, putting his mouth next to her ear. “When we’re done with the questions, how about you and I have a little fun, huh?”

“Seriously?” Jessica asked, trying not to laugh. “That’s what you’re going with? Threats of rape? You really think *your* dick scares me?” Jessica looked at the man standing in the corner of the room. Even in the shadows, she could tell he was bigger than the guy doing the talking. “I’m pretty sure that guy’s got a bigger dick than you.” She smiled. “Maybe you should have him threaten me.”

“You think you’re pretty tough, don’t you, bitch?” the man said. “What you don’t realize, however, is that eventually, my CO is going to get tired of following the rules, and he’s going to want some real intel. At that point, he’s going to look the other way, maybe even leave the room altogether. Then the leash comes off, and I get to wipe the smile off your smug little face, permanently.”

“Man, you really did flunk interrogation training, didn’t you?” Jessica felt a sharp pain in her forehead as the man butted his head hard against hers. “What the fuck?!” she swore.

“Don’t push me, bitch!” the man swore back.

“Why not?” Jessica asked angrily. “It seems easy enough.”

The man turned away, putting his hands on his head as he tried to calm down. “You’re not leaving me any pleasant options. You know that, don’t you?”

Jessica decided to try a different tactic on the man. If nothing else, she would confuse him, make him question his own tactics. If she mentally danced around him long enough, they would send in someone else. The next person would probably try the sympathetic approach. If she was correct, and these people were part of a resistance organized by the EDF or some other command authority on Earth, they were only trying to get her to slip up and contradict what she had already said in her message.

“Look, I’ll throw you a bone,” Jessica said. “Just so you won’t look completely incompetent in front of your CO. My name is Nash, Jessica D., Ensign, SO-4, at least according to whatever EDF records you people still have. Actually, I’ve been impersonating a lieutenant commander for some time now, but that’s a long story.” She looked at him. “I’m betting you’re a sergeant at best, so watch your ass, mister.”

The interrogator looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face for a brief moment.

“And what is this message you claim to be carrying?” the man asked.

“Sorry,” Jessica told him, “EDF Command Authority’s ears only.”

“Didn’t anyone tell you? There is no more EDF.”

“Then whoever took their place.”

“How do you know that ain’t me?”

“Because you used the word ‘ain’t.’” She smiled again, pleased with herself.

The man turned around slowly and moved closer to Jessica. “Who is the message from?”

“I already told you.”

“Tell me again,” he asked as he continued slowly toward her.

“Aurora Actual.”

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?”

“Beats the shit out of me,” she said.

The man moved in close, putting his hand around her throat and beginning to squeeze gently but with steadily increasing pressure. She knew he was only trying to intimidate her.

“What’s your captain’s name?”

“Scott.”

“Bullshit. The Aurora’s CO is Captain William Roberts.”

“Sorry, pal. Your info is out of date,” Jessica said, struggling to speak as the man continued to increase pressure on her throat.

“You’re lying,” the man whispered in a sinister tone, “and I’m going to choke the truth out of you.”

“Captain Roberts died from wounds sustained in action,” Jessica struggled to say as he continued to choke her with his left hand. “He passed command to Lieutenant Nathan Scott before he died.”

There was an urgent knocking at the darkened window along the side of the room.

“I think someone’s pulling on your leash, asshole,” Jessica managed to squeak out.

One of the men by the door stepped forward into the light. He was wearing standard EDF body armor, and the standard issue, close-quarters automatic weapon was attached to his breast plate. He was listening to his comm-set as he approached the man who still held a tight grip around Jessica’s throat. He whispered something in the interrogator’s ear, and the man released his hold on her.

Jessica gasped as the man stepped back away from her, disappearing with the other man into the shadows. “Guess he pulled pretty hard, huh?”

The door opened, and light spilled into the room from the hallway. A man appeared in the doorway, tall and slender. The man was in silhouette, and she was unable to see any facial features.

“You said your captain’s name is Nathan Scott,” the man said from the doorway, “Lieutenant Nathan Scott.” His voice sounded older, more mature, and his diction seemed perfect.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

The man paused for a moment. His head seemed to cock to one side, as if he were studying her. “I remember you,” the man said, still lit from behind. “You were at the party. You were with him.”

“What?” Now Jessica was confused.

“Then Nathan is alive?” The man stepped forward into the light.

Jessica’s eyes went wide as she saw his face. “Senator Scott?”

“That’s President Scott, now,” the interrogator’s voice corrected from the shadows.

“Fuck,” Jessica mumbled. “I didn’t see that one coming either.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nathan glanced at Cameron on the bridge as he passed through on his way to his ready room. A simple tilt of his head signaled her to join him.

Cameron followed him into the ready room a moment later. "How did it go?"

"Better than I thought it would," Nathan said.

Cameron's eyebrow went up. "You don't sound very happy, so it couldn't have gone that well. What is it that he wants in return for the information?"

Nathan sat down behind his desk, leaning back as he looked at Cameron to answer. "He wants to join our alliance."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope."

"You're not going to agree to that, are you?"

"I already did."

"Now I know you're kidding."

"What choice did I have? We need propellant. They have it. It's on their world, and they can help us access it."

"So, we're going to sneak in, steal some fuel, and sneak out?" Cameron asked, the sarcasm obvious in her voice.

"We both know what we're going to have to do to get that propellant."

"And what happens later when the Jung come back to retake Tanna?"

“I made it quite clear to Garrett that I could not promise to protect his world and that the interests of Earth had to take priority at this time.”

“Nathan, you know as well as I do that, when the Jung come, you’ll order us in to defend Tanna. I would do the same thing.”

“You would?”

“Of course I would. I’ve picked up a few bad habits from you.”

“Like being idealistic and foolhardy?”

“That would be two of them, yes,” Cameron said as she sat down across the desk from him.

“You know, there’s more to it than just the propellant,” Nathan said.

“I figured there had to be.”

“Tanna can offer us an industrial base to support our efforts against the Jung. That could turn out to be *exactly* what we need right now.”

“Yeah, I considered that possibility while you were dining with Garrett.” Cameron looked concerned. “What are we facing, anyway? What kind of forces do the Jung have in the 72 Herculis system?”

“Well, we got lucky in that they have no warships in the system to speak of. There are a couple of gunboats that run patrols, but they are out of the system most of the time.”

“Didn’t Josh and Loki run into a warship during their escape?”

“According to Loki’s report, it was on its way out of the system. Garrett said larger ships only come through once or twice per year.”

“So, we only have to deal with the fighters,” Cameron remarked.

“The asteroid base is small, only about fifty fighters and a dozen shuttles. According to Garrett, they also have several cargo shuttles and a couple of tankers that ferry propellant from the processing plants on Tanna to the fighter base. Apparently, because that asteroid is so small, it makes the perfect refueling station for visiting ships. They just slide right up to it, taking station about twenty meters away, and a boom swings out to them to connect and refuel. If we can capture that base, we should be able to get a pretty good load of propellant into our tanks.”

“Enough to fill them?”

“He wasn’t sure about the actual volume. From his description of the tank field, it might be. It depends on how full they are when we capture them.”

“Any chance the Jung would blow the stores rather than allow them to be captured?”

“Garrett doesn’t think so. Apparently, the Jung do not believe the people of Tanna capable of any significant resistance, just general nuisance stuff.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Cameron said. She furrowed her brow. “But why do we need to attack the planet?”

“There may only be fifty fighters on that asteroid base, but there are at least a thousand of them on the surface of Tanna.”

“How well defended are the surface bases?”

“Well enough. Anti-aircraft emplacements, surface-to-air missile batteries, and a sufficient number of ground troops—several hundred at each base, and there are two such airbases on Tanna.”

“Short of nuking the sites, I don’t see how we’re going to manage.”

“Nuking is out,” Nathan said, shaking his head. “Both bases are in the middle of heavily populated areas. The

collateral damage would be unacceptable.”

“We don’t have enough fighters to put precision ordnance on both targets and attack the asteroid base,” Cameron said.

“I was thinking we’d use ground forces on the surface fighter bases, maybe with a little close-air support from the combat shuttles that Major Waddell and Marcus put together.”

“Nathan, we only have fifty Corinari ground troops on board.”

“Garrett can add twice that number to their ranks.”

“That still leaves us outnumbered by, what, three to one?”

Nathan’s expression changed, the corner of his mouth twisting upward slightly as if he were afraid to say what he was thinking. “Not if we open our little present from Tug.”

Cameron fell silent, staring at Nathan. She wanted to say something but wasn’t sure what. She rubbed her hand across her face, then sighed. “We could be opening a very large can of worms, Nathan,” she finally said in a calm tone. “Are we sure we want to do that?”

“No,” Nathan admitted. A small smile formed on his face. “But it is nice to hear you say ‘we’ instead of ‘you.’”

* * *

“I’m finding this all a little hard to believe,” President Scott admitted. He sat opposite from Jessica at a small table that had been moved into the interrogation room. She had long since been untied and made more comfortable. “I mean, surviving for four months in an unfinished ship and managing to find your way back home over a thousand light years. It boggles the mind.”

“Nathan is a resourceful guy,” Jessica said, “an arrogant, reckless pain-in-the-ass much of the time, but overall, he’s turned out to be a pretty good leader.” Jessica picked up her glass of water and washed down the last of her food. “Just don’t tell him I said that.”

“I’m not surprised,” the president said. “I’ve always known Nathan was a natural leader. Since his first words, he has continually impressed me with his intelligence. His downfall has always been his general lack of effort, always taking the easy way out.”

“That trait seems to have reversed itself, sir,” Jessica said. She finished the last of her water and set the empty glass aside. “My companions? They’ve been released as well?”

“They’re in the adjoining interrogation rooms. They have also been unbound and are being fed and made comfortable. My security chief insists they remain isolated for the moment.”

“He’s probably right,” Jessica said.

“So the Aurora is completed and fully crewed,” the president said. “You don’t know how good it is to hear that.”

“Not only is she complete and crewed, but she has a few upgrades as well. We’ve got a full fighter wing on board, a platoon of Corinari ground forces, and a few energy weapons, but we’ve also got a couple of short-range jump ships—a shuttle and an interceptor, to be precise. In fact, a medium-range jump shuttle is probably done by now. The captain plans to send it back to the Pentaurus cluster to ask for help from our allies.”

“How long will that take?” the president wondered.

“I’m not sure, Mister President. A week or so just to get the message back. I have no idea how long it might take for help to actually arrive. It could be months.”

“We may not have months,” the president said. “Our operatives tell us the Jung are expecting reinforcements in the near future.”

“Where are they coming from, sir?”

“We suspect from the Centauri system,” President Scott told her. “That system is due to receive a battle platform.”

“Battle platform?” Jessica wondered, unfamiliar with the classification.

“An enormous ship, slow and not very maneuverable, but it is heavily armed and armored. Think of it like a fortress in space, but one that can be moved between systems, even if slowly. Apparently, once the Jung have successfully taken control of a system, they move in one of these platforms to hold it. Eventually, one will be stationed here as well.”

“Any idea how many ships are coming this way?”

“We don’t even know when they are due to arrive. Presumably, once the battle platform arrives in the Centauri system, the ships there will be sent here as reinforcements. Needless to say, every ship that is added to those already here, the more difficult it will be to regain control of our world. There are already four heavy cruisers in the system. When reinforcements do arrive, we suspect that number will double, if not triple.”

“We did a recon of the Centauri system on our way home,” Jessica told him, her tone serious, “about three weeks back now. A very large, unknown class ship was already there.”

“That was probably the battle platform,” the president said, “which means we only have about six months until reinforcements arrive.”

“The Aurora can probably handle four ships, but eight or twelve might be pushing our luck.”

“If the Aurora can handle four heavy cruisers, why has she not done so already?” the president asked.

“We had a run-in with a black hole on the way back from the Pentaurus cluster. Sucked up most of our propellant.”

“Then how did you make it home?”

“The jump drive doesn’t use any propellant,” Jessica explained. “All you need is forward momentum and electrical energy. We just kept our course changes to a minimum. Right now, we’re using gravity assist maneuvers to change course whenever possible. Battle requires a lot of maneuvering. Until we get some propellant, we can’t do much more than coast in a straight line. If the Aurora tried to engage those ships now, she’d run dry in minutes.”

“What is Nathan planning to do? Where will he get propellant?”

“Right now, they’re making contact with a local resistance cell one of our recon teams met in the 72 Herculis system.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s on the outer edges of the core, about forty-seven light years from Earth. The Jung have a small base there. We’re not sure why. The captain is betting that the locals know of a Jung fuel depot somewhere—preferably one not too heavily defended.”

He frowned. “That seems a long shot at best.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, well, your son is big on long shots. Plus, I think he doesn’t want to risk making a bad decision about his next move until he gets more intel about the current situation.”

“That doesn’t sound like Nathan,” the president said.

“He’s matured a bit over the last five months,” Jessica said. “That’s why I’m here, to get intel from you.”

“You’re here because we lured you here,” President Scott said, a smile forming.

“The *Celestia*, right? Why she’s so important to you?”

“Precisely.”

“Why *is* that ship so important?” Jessica wondered. “She can’t be battle-ready yet.”

“You’re correct; she is not,” the president confirmed, “but she is carrying all of the data storage cores from the Data Ark. Those must be recovered and protected. If they were to fall into the hands of the Jung...”

“Yeah, I get it,” Jessica interrupted. She looked at the president. “You know, Nathan has his mind set on finding her and making her battle-ready.”

“Is that even possible?”

“We’ve got some pretty advanced fabricators on board, a gift from the Takarans. So it’s not as far-fetched as you might think. Mostly, we just lack raw materials and trained manpower. If she is already space worthy and has all her reactors, at the very least, we could make her into an armed staging platform. It mostly just depends on where she is right now.”

“She’s on Metis,” the president explained. “At least, if everything went according to Galiardi’s plan, she should be by now.”

“Metis? Where the hell is that?”

“It’s one of Jupiter’s moons. Apparently it is very small and very close to Jupiter.”

“And you say it’s *on* Metis? As in, *on the surface*?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t know the Explorer class ships could land.”

“Technically, they can’t—at least, that’s what I’m told. Apparently, there is so little gravity on that moon that a ship even as large as the *Celestia* can easily settle onto the

surface safely. The way my advisors explained it, it would be almost impossible for the Jung to detect her.”

“That presents a few new wrinkles,” Jessica admitted.

“Nevertheless, it is imperative that those cores are secured. If you must scuttle the Celestia, so be it. Those data cores, however, must be recovered. The future of our people may depend on the information contained on those cores.”

“I have a scheduled comm window coming up in a few days,” Jessica told him. “We could transmit the Celestia’s position to them then.”

“Too risky,” the president objected. “If the Jung were to intercept the message...”

“We’re using a whole new type of encryption now,” Jessica said. “The Takarans came up with it. I seriously doubt that the Jung would be able to crack it.”

He shook his head. “If there is any possibility at all, it is too risky,” the president insisted. “No, the message should be delivered in person... by you.”

“That means a jump shuttle is going to have to jump in just above the surface to land and pick me up,” Jessica explained. “How quickly would the Jung’s air defenses respond?”

“Too quickly, I’m afraid, especially since the Aurora keeps popping in and attacking. The attack a few days ago still has them on edge.”

“Then we will need some kind of diversion.”

“We will think of something,” President Scott promised. “We must return you to your ship.” He leaned forward, putting his arms on the table. “Now, tell me more about your adventures in the Pentaurus cluster.”

* * *

Nathan entered Major Waddell's office, pausing just inside the hatch. "Major?"

"Captain." The major stood, surprised to see his commanding officer in his makeshift office down in the lower decks of the ship. "What are you doing down here?"

"I thought I might speak with you a moment."

"Of course, sir, but shouldn't I have come to you?"

"I spend too much time on the command deck," Nathan said. "I like to get out and stretch my legs once in a while."

"Of course."

"I have to admit, I've never been below the main cargo deck before. There's more room down here than I thought there would be."

"It's become a little less cramped over time," the major explained. "As they use up raw materials in the fabricators, we are able to shift what remains around, giving us a bit more elbow room. Soon, we will have enough room to conduct our daily PT down here instead of on the main hangar deck."

"I see," Nathan said as he took a seat.

"How may I help you, sir?" the major asked as he also sat down.

"Garrett wishes to ally his forces with our own."

"In exchange for whatever intelligence he might possess?"

"That and more," Nathan said. "It would be advantageous to have the resources of an industrialized world and its population supporting us at the moment."

"That may be true, Captain, but I don't believe we have the forces necessary to accomplish our goals on Tanna, let alone Garrett's."

"That's why I've come to you," Nathan said.

"I'm not sure I understand, sir."

“We have at our disposal resources you are not aware of,” Nathan began. “Unfortunately, they are also resources you may not feel comfortable utilizing.” Nathan leaned back in his chair. “In a special stasis container currently stored within our cargo hold, we have one hundred Ghatazhak warriors.”

The major just watched Nathan, his face impassive.

Nathan looked at the major, surprised he offered no reaction.

“These Ghatazhak, I assume they are programmed to follow your orders?” the major asked.

“According to Prince Casimir’s message, yes.”

“Have you revived them?”

“Not as of yet.”

“And you are telling me this because...?”

“Because you faced them in battle. From your reports, it was quite a horrific battle.”

“Yes, it was,” the major stated in a disturbingly matter-of-fact tone.

“Then you would understand their capabilities as well as anyone,” Nathan assumed.

“Better than most, I would expect.”

“Yes, I imagine so.”

“Do you have a question for me, sir?”

“Two, actually,” Nathan said. “The first is, Do you think one hundred Ghatazhak warriors would successfully tip the scales in our favor?”

“Likely, yes, depending on how they were utilized. However, the mere use of the Ghatazhak does not guarantee success.”

“Of course.”

“And your second question?”

"I apologize in advance if my next question is inappropriate, but I must ask... Will you be able to fight alongside the Ghatazhak?" Nathan asked. "Given your history with them, that is."

"I'm not sure I can answer that question at this moment, Captain."

"Care to elaborate on that, Major?"

"The Ghatazhak are not the soulless, programmed killing machines that people envision. They are, in fact, men just like you and me. What sets them apart, much like the Corinari, is their training. That and their single-minded dedication to purpose, duty, and honor. That dedication is what makes them able to commit acts that, to the average person, appear brutal and senseless."

"And you believe they are not."

"I believe that when the Ghatazhak are ordered to commit a violent act, the man giving the order does so for the purpose of accomplishing an objective. To that man, the actions of the Ghatazhak make perfect sense."

"An interesting insight," Nathan said. "Quite frankly, I am surprised to hear it from you."

"Because of my experiences with the Ghatazhak?"

"Honestly, yes."

"I do not hate the Ghatazhak, Captain. I respect them as warriors. I do not fear them. I fear the acts they are capable of committing, if so ordered. Can I fight alongside them? Well, that will depend on their platoon leader as much as it will on myself. I can tell you this much, however. For me to work with the Ghatazhak, they must be placed under my command. I would not feel comfortable any other way."

"I'm sure that can be arranged, Major," Nathan said.

"May I make a suggestion, Captain?"

"Please."

“When you wake them, do so with great caution. The science used to program them is imperfect at best. If they do not accept your authority over them, there is no telling what they may decide to do. You could very well find yourself and your entire ship at their mercy.”

“When the time comes, I will rely on you and your Corinari to protect this ship should something untoward occur.”

“That would be acceptable.” Major Waddell leaned forward, looking the captain in the eyes. “Before you wake them, Captain, ask yourself this question: Are you prepared to kill them in cold blood should they suddenly turn on you? If the answer is no, then do not wake them.”

“Thank you, Major,” Nathan said. “I appreciate your honesty in this matter.” Nathan stood and prepared to exit. “Meanwhile, I would like you to speak at length with Garrett. Formulate a plan for a ground assault that will accomplish our goals using the Tanna resistance, the Corinari, and the Ghatazhak. I would like to see it by morning.”

“Yes, sir,” the major responded.

Nathan turned and headed for the hatch.

“Captain,” Major Waddell called after him.

“Yes, Major?” the captain said, pausing and turning back.

“Thank you for coming to speak to me in person about the Ghatazhak. I appreciate it.”

“You’re quite welcome, Major.”

* * *

Nathan stood at the entrance to the massive shipping container stored on the Aurora’s cargo deck. Inside the container were the one hundred Ghatazhak warriors and their equipment, all of which had been covertly passed to

the captain as a gift of appreciation from Prince Casimir of Takara. The bay had been emptied of its contents, leaving only the specialized container that had been positioned at the center of the bay.

Nathan looked at Major Waddell and Cameron. "Are you ready?"

"The bay will be closed, and the entire deck has been sealed off," the major reported. "All of my men are armed and ready. None of the Ghatazhak will leave this deck without your expressed permission."

"Worst-case scenario, we open the loading doors and suck everyone out into space," Cameron explained, pointing to the large loading doors along the outboard side of the cargo bay.

"Why am I here, again?" Lieutenant Montgomery wondered.

"Because you're a Takaran, same as them," Nathan said.

"Hardly," the lieutenant said.

"So I can show them that we are no longer at war, that we are allies," Nathan explained.

"They are not dogs, Captain," the lieutenant pointed out. "They are highly intelligent, highly disciplined, and highly trained soldiers. They have been programmed to accept you as their commanding officer. They will not question your orders. That is what it means to be Ghatazhak."

"Humor me, Lieutenant," Nathan said.

"Of course, sir," Lieutenant Montgomery responded.

"Are you sure you want to do this, sir?" Cameron asked, as if offering him a chance to change his mind.

"Not really." Nathan took a deep breath. "Here we go." He placed his hand on the scanner pad. The display turned green, and a message indicating acceptance of the scan appeared in Takaran. A moment later, the six bolts that

secured the large hatch slid to one side, and the door cracked open slightly. Nathan pulled the hatch open enough to step inside and pull it closed again.

An overhead light came on, bathing the inner airlock in a soft, red glow. A moment later, a fine mist filled the room. Nathan held his breath, trying not to inhale the vapors as they swirled around his body. Several seconds later, ventilation fans clicked on, and the mist was quickly sucked from the chamber. After which, the light turned green.

Nathan activated the inner door, pulling it open and stepping through. As his boot touched the deck inside, pale blue lights throughout the inside of the container began to flicker to life, starting at his end of the container.

Nathan closed the hatch behind him and turned around to face the inside of the container. Just as before, the cylinders along the sides of the container were filled with a swirling gray fog that masked the presence of the men within. He paused for a moment, half expecting the hologram of Prince Casimir to appear again. "Guess it was a single-play file," he mumbled.

Nathan moved forward to the center support pillars on either side of the narrow aisle. He turned to his left to face the control panel built into one of the pillars and placed his hand on the scanning pad. The pad turned green, and a phrase was displayed in Angla. Nathan studied the phrase, recognizing enough of it to understand that the system was confirming that he indeed wanted to revive the Ghatazhak platoon.

"Okay, I'm ready to start the process," he announced over his comm-set.

"We're ready out here," Major Waddell answered over the comms.

“Here goes nothing.” Nathan pressed the button to initiate the revival process. The lighting within the container instantly changed from blue to red as a countdown began ticking away from sixty to zero on the control panel. “The revival process has been initiated,” Nathan reported. “The countdown shows fifty-nine minutes and forty-five seconds until the process is complete.”

* * *

“Finally!” Synda said as Jessica entered the room.

“We were starting to wonder about you,” Tony added.

“I was being debriefed,” Jessica told them as she took a seat across the table from them. “How long have they had you two in the same room?”

“About an hour, maybe,” Tony said. “I guess they finally decided we weren’t spies or something.”

“Actually, they probably put you together to see if you would reveal anything during conversation between the two of you,” Jessica explained. “I’m sure they’re listening to us now,” she added, pointing over her shoulder toward the large mirror on the wall.

“We couldn’t get them to tell us anything,” Synda said.

“Yeah, are they the resistance?” Tony wondered.

“Yup.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked.

“Let’s just say I met with their leader, and he would be pretty hard to fake,” Jessica said, “especially well enough to fool me.”

“So, what happens now?” Synda asked. “What happens to us?”

“It’ll be a few days before the Aurora returns and makes comm-contact with me. I suspect they’ll keep us all tucked

away down here until then.”

“Down here?” Tony asked.

“We’re in an underground facility,” Jessica explained. “Exactly where, I have no idea. Probably better that way. Once I make contact with my ship, I’ll probably be leaving shortly thereafter.”

“And then what happens?” Tony asked. “Are they going to just let us go?”

“Doubtful,” Jessica said. “It’s too risky.”

“But we don’t even know where this place is located,” Synda said. “How are we a risk?”

“You are. Trust me. Maybe not a big risk, but still a potential risk.”

“So they’re just going to keep us locked up down here forever?” Synda asked. “Can they do that? I mean, don’t we have rights or something?”

“Are you kidding me?” Jessica said, dumbfounded. “This isn’t the NAU, child. There is no longer a union charter or national constitution in effect. This is a war, and these people are soldiers.”

Tony frowned. “Aren’t the soldiers supposed to protect us?”

“These aren’t NAU ground pounders,” Jessica said. “These are EDF spec-ops like me. These are the guys and gals that do the dirty work and like it. They’re not fighting over a line on a map. They’re trying to free an entire planet. If that means walking all over the civil rights of a couple of civilians, that’s exactly what they’ll do.”

“That’s the thanks we get for helping you out?” Tony asked.

Jessica understood their frustrations, but she also understood the stakes. “Look, I think I can work something out with the CO here. He and I have a bit of a connection

going. Just be patient.” Jessica leaned back in her chair. “Meanwhile, we’ll all just sit back and relax. They have food, water, inside plumbing. It’s actually a pretty nice facility, once you get beyond the detention block.”

* * *

Nathan closed the inner hatch once more as he returned to the Ghatazhak container. The lighting was now a pale green, having slowly faded through the spectrum over from red. He moved to the control console once more. The countdown timer was at forty-two seconds and still counting down to zero.

The clear tubes along either wall were now completely void of the swirling, gray fog that had previously filled them. The Ghatazhak stood motionless inside the tubes, completely naked. With the fog gone, Nathan could see intravenous lines attached to the inner thigh of each man.

Amazingly, each of them looked extremely similar. They were all of the same general proportions in height, weight, and build, with the biggest differences being in facial features, hair and eye color, and skin tones. They were neither overly muscled nor slim but were all extremely fit.

The timer reached zero, and the clear tubes began to rotate, the outward faces retracting into the chamber walls. One by one, and in no certain order, their eyes began to open. They looked about, moving their heads as little as possible.

From the tube nearest the entrance to the container, one man, still naked, stepped down and turned toward Nathan. He raised his hand in salute according to Takaran military protocols. “Captain Scott,” the man said in a firm tone but

with a scratchy voice. "I am Lieutenant Telles of the Ghatazhak. My platoon and I await your orders."

Nathan returned the lieutenant's salute, also in Takaran fashion. "You speak Angla?" Nathan asked, trying to hide his surprise.

"The Ghatazhak speak many languages, sir."

"I see."

"Our orders, sir?" the lieutenant repeated.

"Make your platoon ready for action, Lieutenant."

"Of course, sir," the lieutenant responded. "May I inquire as to our present situation, sir?"

"You are on board the UES Aurora, currently located in the region of space known as the core, approximately nine hundred light years from Takara."

"Then we are near Earth, relatively speaking," the lieutenant surmised.

Nathan was unable to hide his surprise at the Ghatazhak lieutenant's knowledge. "You know of Earth?"

"We know all that our programmers felt we needed to know," the lieutenant responded. "That includes knowledge of the Aurora, the Earth, and the Jung, sir."

"And what of Takara?" Nathan asked. "What do you know about the status of your own world?"

"The illegal regime of Caius was defeated by forces of the Alliance, forces led by yourself and Prince Casimir, the rightful heir to the throne of Takara."

"And what are your orders?"

"To prepare my men for action, sir."

"No, I meant what orders were you programmed with?"

"To obey the orders of Captain Nathan Scott as well as the orders of those he has designated as having command authority over us."

“Very well,” Nathan said. “Your facility is currently housed inside one of our cargo bays. You may utilize all available space within the bay for the purpose of preparing your men for action. Do not leave the bay without my permission.”

“Understood, sir,” the lieutenant responded smartly.

“As soon as you are ready, ask the guard to be taken to my ready room.”

“Sir,” the lieutenant asked politely, “are we prisoners?”

“No, lieutenant, you are not.” Nathan stepped forward, aware that the eyes and ears of all one hundred of the Ghatazhak warriors were following him. He stood one meter from the naked lieutenant, looking him in the eye. “Lieutenant Telles, you should be aware that the majority of the Aurora’s crew are Corinairan. Many may find your presence objectionable. At the very least, it will come as a shock, as only myself and a few senior officers are aware of your presence aboard this ship. For now, I wish to keep your presence as clandestine as possible.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Do you require anything from us in order to prepare?”

“Space, which you have already provided, access to our equipment, and sustenance,” the lieutenant stated, “lots of sustenance.”

“I shall assign one of my officers, Lieutenant Montgomery of Takara, to see to your needs.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nathan turned and looked at the other men standing awake and naked in their tubes. “Welcome aboard the Aurora, gentlemen.”

* * *

“This is going to be a lot harder than I thought,” Devyn said.

“Why?” Luis asked.

Devyn looked at the maze of conduit and cabling along the wall of the bridge’s environmental systems compartment. “Most of the basic control cabling and gas lines are here, but the major components are all missing. It’s like they were getting ready to fit out the entire system but never got a chance to finish it.”

“Can you fix it?”

She sighed. “Well, the missing control unit isn’t really a problem, as I can connect the sensor trunk with the control systems aft and run it from there. The problem is the lack of a CO2 scrubber or any oxygen-producing systems. I might be able to rig a CO2 scrubber, but I’d probably have to pull parts from aft and bring them up here.”

“But that will only work for so long, right?”

“Yeah, but we do have a few thousand oxygen candles stored aft. I could rig a unit to burn them up here to supplement the system.”

“How long will that give us?”

“I’d have to run the numbers, but off hand, I’d say three months for one person. But that’s *if* I can rig all this stuff up.” Devyn looked at Luis.

Luis sighed. “Keep working. I’ll tell Kovacic.”

* * *

Lieutenant Telles stepped out of the elevator onto the command deck, his platoon sergeant at his side. They were dressed in standard Takaran military uniforms with the unit patch for the Ghatzhak on their shoulders.

Sergeant Weatherly met them at the door. He snapped to attention and offered a salute to the lieutenant as he emerged. "Sir, I'm Sergeant Weatherly. I am to escort you to the command briefing room."

"Lead the way, Sergeant," the lieutenant replied in a tone devoid of any emotion.

Sergeant Weatherly was slightly taken aback by the lieutenant's deadpan response. Without further words, he turned and headed down the corridor, leading them around the corner before he stopped at the entrance to the command briefing room. He gestured to the open hatchway. "The captain is expecting you, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant," the lieutenant replied. He stepped through the hatch without so much as a glance at the sergeant, as did his subordinate.

The lieutenant entered the briefing room, finding the captain and the rest of the Aurora's command staff sitting at the conference table. "Lieutenant Telles reporting as ordered, sir," the lieutenant announced as he offered a salute.

Nathan stood and returned the lieutenant's salute. "As you were, Lieutenant."

"May I present my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Ochsley."

"Sergeant," Nathan began, "Lieutenant, I'd like you to meet my command staff." Nathan raised his hand to begin pointing out each of his officers.

"That won't be necessary, Captain," the lieutenant interrupted. "I am familiar with your command staff. I have studied each of your service records. You are all worthy of commendation. To have accomplished so much with so little training or experience is truly remarkable."

Nathan was speechless for the moment, unsure of whether or not they had just been insulted, but it had been

in the most polite way imaginable. "Of course," he finally said as he returned to his seat. "Be seated, gentlemen."

Lieutenant Telles and Sergeant Ochsley took the last remaining seats at the conference table.

Nathan settled into his seat at the head of the conference table, exchanging glances with both Cameron and Vladimir on either side of him.

Lieutenant Telles looked at all the faces at the table as he sat. "Your chief of security, Lieutenant Commander Nash, is not present."

"She's currently on assignment."

"Then she will not be joining us for the assault?"

"Doubtful," Nathan answered.

"A shame," the lieutenant said. "I should have liked to have met the one who put an end to the life of Caius."

"Perhaps later," Nathan said. "The purpose of this meeting is to discuss possible strategies for the assault on Tanna."

"Excuse me, Captain," the lieutenant interrupted. "I am confused."

Nathan's eyebrows went up. "How so, Lieutenant?"

"You have awakened the Ghatazhak for this mission, have you not?"

"Yes, we have..."

"Am I correct in my understanding of your tactical goals?"

"And they are?" Nathan asked, wondering if the lieutenant did know.

"To neutralize the fighter base on the fifth moon, to neutralize the two auxiliary fighter support bases on the surface of Tanna, and to capture all available propellant stores, the purpose being to transfer the stores to the

Aurora for use in her main propulsion and maneuvering systems.”

“And to drive the Jung from our world,” Garrett added from his place at the table.

Lieutenant Telles looked at Garrett. His gaze was cold and calculating, as if he were measuring the potential threat that the unknown man presented. The look on the lieutenant’s face indicated that he perceived none. “Who are you, sir?” he asked in a curt but professional manner.

“This is Garrett Munras,” Nathan said. “He is one of the leaders of the Tanna resistance.”

“And what role does he play in this mission?”

“He has provided us with intelligence about the Jung forces in the 72 Herculis system.”

“In exchange for...?” the lieutenant asked.

“Freeing my people,” Garrett told him. Garrett looked at the captain, unsure of what was going on.

“A single Ghatazhak platoon cannot free an entire world, Captain.”

“Of course not,” Nathan agreed.

“You will not be asked to do so,” Garrett insisted. He turned to face Nathan. “Captain, all we ask is that you remove the Jung from our skies. Once that has been done, our people shall rise up and retake our world on our own.” He looked at the lieutenant again. “We do not require the assistance of your Ghatazhak.”

Lieutenant Telles ignored Garrett’s remarks, his gaze fixed on Nathan. “Have I properly summarized the mission objectives?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, you have.”

“It is my understanding that the Aurora currently does not have the support of an industrialized world. May I assume the targets are to be neutralized with minimal

damage to any potential assets that might be utilized by the Alliance?"

"That would be correct," Nathan agreed.

Lieutenant Telles stared straight ahead as he considered the information presented. Nathan again exchanged glances with his two friends as he waited for the lieutenant to continue.

"I have studied the performance parameters of your fighters and your jump shuttles. While it is unfortunate that the Falcon is not yet ready to return to service, I believe we can accomplish all tactical objectives without unacceptable losses."

"Really?" Nathan wondered.

"Shall I?" the lieutenant asked.

"Please, lieutenant," Nathan said, gesturing for him to continue with a wave of his hand, "the floor is all yours."

* * *

"I have been properly trained on the use of your portable laser communications unit," Garrett assured Major Waddell as they walked across the Aurora's main hangar bay. "I will notify you as soon as my people are ready."

"Remember the comm-schedule," the major reminded him.

"I shall, Major," Garrett assured him as they approached the jump shuttle. He stopped at the bottom of the shuttle's cargo ramp and turned to face the major. "I must confess. I have my doubts about these Ghatazhak of yours. Your people see them as exceptional warriors, God-like in their very presence. I look at them, and I see only men, nothing more, and arrogant ones at that."

“Perhaps,” Major Waddell said, “but there is a reason for their arrogance. They know what they are capable of, and more importantly, what *we* are not.”

“Still, only one hundred men to retake an entire planet? I do not see how it is possible.”

“You must trust me on this, Garrett,” the major said. “I have faced them in battle.”

Garrett looked at the scars on the side of the major’s face and neck. “And you survived to bear witness? Then you were victorious?”

“I would not call that battle a victory, no,” the major admitted.

Garrett took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he looked about the massive hangar bay. “It is a fine ship you have, a fine ship indeed.” He looked at the major. “And she has a fine crew,” he added as he extended his hand to the major. “I regret not having seen Joshua while I was here. Tell him I wish him a speedy recovery.”

“I’ll convey your words to him.”

Garrett cocked his head to one side, eyeing the major one last time. “I shall see you again, I think.”

“I hope so, Garrett,” Major Waddell said as he shook Garrett’s hand.

Garrett turned and headed up the ramp of the jump shuttle. Major Waddell took several steps backward as the shuttle’s rear cargo ramp lifted up off the deck, swinging upward and closing over the aft end of the shuttle. The ship rotated slowly, then pulled into the center transfer airlock, disappearing behind the airlock’s massive door.

Major Waddell stared at the massive door for several seconds before departing. “I hope so.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Lieutenant?” the jump shuttle’s crew chief called over the comms.

Lieutenant Telles immediately opened his eyes, his pupils wide in the dimly lit interior of the shuttle’s cargo bay. His gaze was already fixed in the direction of the crew chief’s position.

The crew chief swallowed hard, slightly unnerved by seeing the lieutenant wake so quickly after sitting motionless in the shuttle’s cargo bay for nearly eighteen hours. “It’s time, sir.”

The lieutenant gave a single nod to the crew chief, acknowledging the message as he spoke to the rest of his team. “*Squad, wake,*” he ordered in a calm, relaxed tone.

The crew chief made his way aft as the other nine Ghatazhak sitting along either side of the bay also opened their eyes as if they had been closed for moments instead of the hours they had spent cold-coasting from the jump shuttle’s entry point at the edge of the 72 Herculis system. Each man casually rose from his seat, reached down, and disconnected his life support line from the shuttle, switching to his own internal suit environmental systems. Each Ghatazhak checked the next man’s suit and attached gear, then checked their own weapons. Their pressurized combat suits were painted flat black with no markings. They were bulky and heavily armored, and they had small life-support systems built into the back and chest of the suit. Below the

small life-support bulge on their upper back was a larger, detachable, cold-jet maneuvering unit.

"Thirty seconds," the copilot's voice called over the comms.

"Stand ready and report," The lieutenant ordered.

All the Ghatazhak turned to face the aft end of the shuttle as the first one reported in. *"Two ready..."*

"Three ready..."

"Four ready..."

"Opening rear hatch," the crew chief reported as the Ghatazhak finished counting off.

"Nine ready," the last Ghatazhak reported.

"Flight deck, One. Ready to deploy," the lieutenant reported to the copilot.

"Copy, One," the copilot responded. *"Ten seconds. Good luck, gentlemen."*

The rear cargo hatch settled into its platform position, extending outward from the aft of the shuttle along its fore-and-aft line and exposing the entire aft end of the shuttle's cargo bay to space. The crew chief could feel his pulse quicken and his respiratory rate increase at the sight of the vast, open space beyond the end of their tiny ship. He turned toward the front of the shuttle from his position beside the cargo hatch and stared at the faces of the men who were about to depart on what seemed an impossibly dangerous mission to him. Through their visors, not one of the Ghatazhak warriors showed the slightest hint of emotion over what they were about to do.

"Three.....two.....one.....deploy, deploy, deploy," the copilot ordered.

In pairs, the ten Ghatazhak warriors, decked out in their black combat pressure suits, ran out of the shuttle, stepping off the end of the cargo ramp and drifting off into space. As

each pair left the ramp, they fired tiny bursts of their cold jets to rotate themselves around to face the back of the shuttle so they were facing toward their direction of flight.

The crew chief watched from the cargo hatch as the ten Ghatazhak warriors drifted away from the aft end of the jump shuttle. As they drifted farther and farther, he could see the lieutenant close his eyes again as he put himself back into the same meditative state he had been in for the last eighteen hours. *How the hell do they do that?* the crew chief thought.

Eventually, the crew chief could no longer make out the Ghatazhak drifting aft of them, and he slapped the button with his gloved hand to close the rear cargo hatch. "How long are they gonna coast out there?" he asked the copilot as he turned and headed forward.

"Something like thirty hours, I think," the copilot answered over the comms.

"That's insane."

"How are we doing back there?" the pilot interrupted. *"That fifth moon is going to come out from behind the planet in a few minutes, and I don't want to have to coast another eighteen hours before we jump out of here."*

The crew chief faced aft, seeing the cargo hatch's status light turn green as he took his seat. "We're all closed up and ready to jump."

"You're sure they're far enough away that our jump flash won't bother them?" the copilot asked.

"Does anything bother them?" the crew chief said.

"You know what I mean," the copilot responded.

"Lieutenant Telles said as soon as they were no longer visible, we could jump. They're no longer visible."

"Very well. Stand by to jump."

* * *

“Of course it is an aggressive plan,” Vladimir agreed from across the dining table in the captain’s mess. “Who are we kidding? It is a crazy plan. Cold-coasting in spacesuits for thirty hours? In suits that are only rated for twenty hours?”

“Lieutenant Telles seemed unconcerned with the risks,” Cameron stated. “He called it ‘an interesting exercise.’”

“These Ghatazhak, there is something wrong with them,” Vladimir argued as he pointed to his head. “I think their programming needs to be debugged.”

“Major Waddell didn’t seem to have any objections to the lieutenant’s plan,” Nathan said, “and he *has* seen them in action.”

“Yeah, and you don’t find it odd that Waddell accepts the presence of the Ghatazhak so easily?” Cameron asked. “Considering what they did to his platoon at Answari, you’d expect him to want to rip their heads off.”

“Maybe that’s why he didn’t object to their plan,” Vladimir said in between bites of his dinner. “He’d rather see them fail miserably.”

“I don’t think so,” Nathan insisted. “The Corinari have the task of backing up the Ghatazhak if needed, and if they need backup, it’s bound to be ugly. If anything, I take Major Waddell’s lack of objection as an encouraging sign... for the chances of a successful mission, *and* as an impressively professional attitude by the major.”

“Phfft,” Vladimir responded. Nathan looked at him sideways. “I still say the Ghatazhak are crazy,” Vladimir insisted.

“I’m not arguing that,” Nathan said. “They may very well be.”

“Personally, I’m more worried about Garrett’s role in this than the Ghatazhak,” Cameron said.

“Why am I not surprised?” Nathan wondered.

“What? You’re not?”

“No, I’m not. He’s got the proper motivation, and frankly, his role is not that difficult,” Nathan insisted, “at least, not during the most critical aspects of the attack.”

“There’s just something about him I don’t trust.”

“You say that about everyone,” Vladimir said.

“Oh, please, like who?” Cameron challenged.

“Marak, Jalea, Tobin, Tug...”

“I was right about the first three!” Cameron argued.

“You didn’t trust the master chief at first!” Nathan reminded her.

“He is correct. You did not,” Vladimir said.

“Okay, I was wrong about the master chief...”

“And Tug,” Nathan said.

“All right, I get your point!” Cameron said. “But Jessica didn’t trust them at first, either... not one of them.”

“It’s her job not to trust anyone,” Vladimir said.

“That’s right,” Nathan agreed. “Face it, Cam. Trust does not come easily for you.”

Cameron didn’t respond verbally. Instead she just made a face at Nathan as she took a bite of her salad.

“Better to harbor unwarranted suspicions than to suffer the consequences of trust improperly placed,” Vladimir said. He took another bite of his food. “Old Russian proverb,” he added, raising his fork to emphasize the point.

“Thank you,” Cameron said.

“Did the jump shuttle make it back?” Nathan asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, about an hour ago,” Cameron answered. “The pilot reported that there were no indications they were detected,

and the Ghatazhak deployed exactly as planned.”

Nathan looked at his watch. “So we’ve got another twenty-eight hours and change before we take the ship back into harm’s way again?”

“About that, yes,” Cameron answered.

“Well, I, for one, am happy to be facing battle with a ship that is in perfect condition for once.” Vladimir looked at Nathan. “Just try not to damage her too much this time.”

“For once, I might be able to do so,” Nathan said. “From what Garrett said, there aren’t any planetary defenses on Tanna, just the fighter base on the fifth moon and the two bases on the surface. As long as no Jung warships drop in unexpectedly, we should be okay. I just wish we were going in with a little more propellant than we currently have.”

“All we are doing is a small course correction and deceleration burn,” Vladimir pointed out. “Then we just hang out in orbit while everyone else takes the fight to the Jung.”

“It really just hinges on whether or not the Ghatazhak are as good as everyone says they are,” Cameron said.

“I know one thing,” Nathan said, “Jessica’s going to be sorry she missed this one.”

“Yeah,” Cameron said. There was a moment of silence as they each picked at their dinner. “Do you guys think about her?” Cameron added, breaking the silence.

“I know I do,” Nathan said.

“So do I,” Vladimir agreed solemnly. A small grin appeared on the corner of his mouth. “Although, perhaps not in the same way,” he added in a lecherous tone.

“I knew it,” Cameron said.

“What?” Vladimir responded.

She rolled her eyes. “I knew that without Jessica here to balance things out, the hormone levels in this room would

go all testosterone on me.”

“Vladimir,” Nathan scolded in a mocking way, “you’re a command officer talking about another command officer.”

“It was a joke,” Vladimir said, holding up his hands. “Besides, I am not a command officer. I am an engineer pretending to be a command officer, which is something I did not want to be.”

Another moment of silence followed as they dined. Finally, Cameron spoke. “Do you think she’s okay?”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Nathan said. “By now, she has probably completed her assignment and is working on her tan.”

“I hope you’re right,” Cameron said.

“Me, too,” Vladimir agreed, “about the tan part.”

“Vlad?” Nathan mumbled.

“What?” Vladimir objected, “I was just...”

“Hey!” Cameron warned. “I’m the XO, remember? Don’t make me write you up.”

* * *

Jessica sat quietly, studying her data pad on the patio outside the cover house used by the resistance to hide the entrance to their underground facility.

President Scott came out of the house. “Jessica, they said I’d find you out here.”

Jessica started to rise. “Mister President,” she said as she set down her data pad. Despite the fact that the North American Union no longer existed, in the presence of its former elected leader, she always felt the need to be more formal.

“Don’t get up,” he insisted, moving to take a seat next to her. “I take it you found a suitable hiding place for the

comm-unit we provided?”

Jessica pointed at a box sitting upside down on the ground next to the patio.

“Not bad,” the president said. “Any luck?”

“Not yet,” she answered, “but I’ve only been here for five days. The first scheduled contact isn’t until the seventh day.”

“Then why are you out here?” President Scott asked.

“I figured I’d give it a try in case they came back early. Besides, it’s not like I have anything else to do.” Jessica flipped up her collar against the evening chill. “I’m actually impressed that you guys even had a portable laser comm-unit. After all, it’s not exactly standard issue for ground warfare.”

“The EDF was planning for this eventuality for some time,” President Scott said.

“Buckeye?”

“Precisely. After losing two Defender-class ships without so much as a single engagement, we knew we were trying to move too quickly. Admiral Galiardi had always said that no matter how many ships we built, they would be meaningless if the Jung came in force. A well dug in and pre-supplied underground resistance seemed the only viable option.”

“If you didn’t think you could defend the Earth using ships, why did you think a resistance would do the trick?”

“We expected it to take years, perhaps decades. I admit, the plan bet heavily on unforeseeable opportunities: a poorly guarded ordnance depot, the stealing of a ship or two, the local forces relaxing and letting their guard down.”

“How are you going to get them to relax if you keep attacking them?”

“The attacks are part of a much larger subterfuge—at least, that’s what they tell me,” the president said.

“I certainly hope so, because running around blowing up guard posts and attacking comm stations isn’t going to do anything but piss them off.”

“Like I said, the EDF had been working on this plan for many years, long before I became president and probably before you even enlisted. Admiral Galiardi started the project the moment he took command away from Admiral Williams.”

“What ever happened to Admiral Galiardi?” Jessica wondered.

“He went underground just before EDF command in Port-Gentil self-destructed,” the president explained. “That was part of the plan, for the admiral to survive and lead the resistance.”

“And is he?”

“He was,” the president said, “but we lost contact with him more than a week ago. He just went dark. None of the cells have reported any contact with him either. We assumed he had gone into hiding to avoid capture. That’s actually what I came to talk to you about.”

“About what, the admiral?”

“Yes.” President Scott sighed. “One of our deep-cover operatives reported seeing the admiral at a medical facility in Geneva. He was under heavy guard, and he looked to be in bad shape.”

“Bad shape, how?”

“Our operative is still trying to gain access to his medical records, but he suspects that his condition may be the result of interrogation by the Jung.”

“How much can he give up?” Jessica asked.

“More than you can imagine,” the president admitted, “the Aurora’s jump drive, the location of the Celestia, and the fact that she’s carrying the data cores. He may even know the location of many of our underground supply depots.”

“How the hell was that allowed to happen?” Jessica wondered. “No one person should have that much intelligence floating around in their head. Rule number one: compartmentalize all intelligence.”

“Galiardi was the architect of the Earth’s entire defensive strategy,” President Scott said. “He was the only one who knew the entire plan and one of only three people who knew about the jump drive project.”

“Who were the other two?”

“Admiral Yamori and myself.”

“The admiral in charge of special projects? That I can understand, but why you, sir? Weren’t you just a senator back then?”

“I played a key part in the plan. I was to become president of the NAU, which would lead to me becoming the next leader of the United Earth Republic. They wanted the Jung to believe that the EDF lacked the public support they needed to build a strong defense.”

“Why?”

“We hoped that if the Jung felt our defensive position might soften, they would delay their invasion a few years in order to allow us to weaken while they moved more ships into position.”

“But the jump drive...”

“Was being developed in secret,” the president said. “Our hope was to complete the STS drive, or ‘jump’ drive as you call it, and get it installed in both the Aurora *and* the Celestia. We figured two such ships would give us an

overwhelming advantage over nearly anything the Jung could send our way.”

“Again, why you?”

“Galiardi felt I was the most electable candidate at the time. Since the population was pretty evenly split over the issue, if I ran on a platform supporting peaceful negotiations with the Jung, it would appear more convincing, thus buying us the time we needed to develop the drive.”

“Is that how Nathan ended up on the Aurora at the last minute? Did you have him transferred there?”

“I had my son Eli contact someone at EDF command to request that Nathan be reassigned to a safer posting, but I never asked for him to be transferred to the Aurora.”

“I didn’t even know Nathan had a brother,” Jessica admitted. “I thought he only had sisters.”

“Eli is my oldest child. Nathan is my youngest. They are fifteen years apart in age, and they never really got along.”

“Where is Eli now?” Jessica asked, realizing the president had referred to him in the present tense.

The president hung his head for a moment, staring at the concrete floor. His eyes rose to meet Jessica’s. “The Jung have appointed him ‘Governor of Earth.’”

“You’re kidding?” Jessica said.

“I wish I were.”

“You think he might have been...”

“Working for the Jung all along?” the president finished for her. “As a father, I find it difficult to accept, but I have to admit, it would answer a lot of questions.”

Jessica sighed, leaning back in her chair. “I always suspected that someone sold us out.” She shook her head in disgust. “This is going to mess with Nathan’s head, sir.”

“More so than you might imagine. Eli always wanted to follow in my footsteps, to serve in public office. Trouble was,

he didn't have the personality that gets one elected. Nathan did. I believe this is the main reason they never got along."

"Does Eli even know about the jump drive project?"

"I never told him about the STS project, but I suppose it is possible. Eli served as my personal assistant for more than a decade. When I was elected president, he became my chief of staff."

Jessica shook her head. "What about the rest of your family?"

"My wife's shuttle went down in the forests outside Winnipeg during the invasion. She did not survive. My daughters were all picked up by NAU security and taken to secure locations, but I have not heard from any of them since the invasion."

"Why not?"

"I'm sure they think I'm dead. An attempt was made on my life on the day of the invasion... by a member of my protective detail. We allowed reports of my death to be leaked to the Jung early on."

"Do you think the assassin was part of Buckeye?"

"I don't believe so," the president said, pulling a small, flat container from his shirt pocket. "I was issued this suicide capsule years ago, as were Galiardi and Yamori."

"Yeah, but I'm sure the admiral would have a backup plan in case you failed to use it."

"That occurred to me as well; however, my chief of security, who is spec-ops trained as well, felt that spec-ops would use a team, not a lone gunman, especially on a high-priority target."

"He's right about that," Jessica agreed. "So you think the shooter was a Jung plant?"

"Most likely, yes."

Jessica looked at the president for a moment. "Pardon me, sir, but why are you telling me all this?"

"I believe it is important that someone besides me understands the situation, the 'big picture' so to speak—someone on your side of the situation."

"Then you want me to share all of this with Nathan?"

"Yes and no. I think it would be best if he did not know about Eli or that I am still alive."

"Why?"

"Despite our differences, I know Nathan to be a fiercely loyal individual. I do not want him risking himself or what few resources he may have in an attempt to rescue me or any other member of our family."

"You're right about Nathan. He is loyal, but he's not stupid. He knows what's at stake, and I've seen him make the hard call more than once since he assumed command."

The president smiled. "I am not surprised. Nevertheless, no purpose is served by giving him the extra emotional burden that information creates."

"So I get to be the one that doesn't tell him? Thanks... sir."

"The day may come when someone needs to fill in the missing pieces," the president explained. "I am trusting you to be that person." The president sighed. "I'm afraid I have strayed from my original topic, which is that the Celestia is now at greater risk of discovery. We must somehow get word to the Aurora."

"My first contact window isn't for another two days," Jessica said. "Is there any way for us to get a message to the Celestia?"

"No. She was ordered to go cold after touchdown. I was told that the only way to make contact with her was directly."

“Directly?”

“Someone has to go *to* the Celestia to make contact. More importantly, someone needs to retrieve the data cores and get them to a more secure location.”

“I think I know a safe place to store those cores,” Jessica answered, a mischievous look on her face.

* * *

Two alternating tones sounded in Lieutenant Telles’s helmet comms. His eyes snapped open in response and darted back and forth as he sized up his situation. He reached up to his visor and tapped the corner, activating the display system on the visor’s inner surface. The inside of his visor immediately became opaque, blocking out the external view completely. A moment later, it was replaced with images generated by the combat suit’s low-light imaging systems. He could now see the fifth moon in the distance ahead of them. He checked his approach data along the left side of the visor. His closure rate and approach angle were perfect. He had less than a minute to touchdown. He had no way of knowing the status of the rest of his team, as they were all operating under strict emission control protocols.

The lieutenant fired tiny bursts of his cold-jet maneuvering system, pitching his body back ninety degrees so he would be approaching the surface of Tanna’s fifth moon feet first. He looked at his display again. He had thirty seconds to impact.

The lieutenant began firing small bursts of his deceleration thrusters, gradually decreasing his closure rate on the tiny moon. His instinct was to burn the thruster at full power until his closure rate became almost nothing, but

even cold jets could be detected at full power, especially at close range. He only needed to slow his closure rate enough so that his combat suit's exoskeleton could withstand the force of impact without becoming incapacitated in the process.

He continued firing tiny bursts, bringing his blinking red closure rate lower and lower until, finally, the readout began to blink yellow. He now had fifteen seconds to touchdown. He fired three more short bursts, finally bringing his closure rate readout down enough that it turned an unblinking green.

Five seconds were left until touchdown. The lieutenant bent his knees slightly and fired one last burst as the countdown passed two seconds. His feet touched the surface, and his remaining forward momentum caused him to take several steps forward before he managed to come to a complete stop. Now on the surface, his suit began to automatically fire even more minuscule bursts of cold propellant in order to hold him against the surface of the tiny moon that had almost no gravity of its own. Without the jets, a single jump would propel him to the moon's escape velocity, sending him floating off into space.

He tapped his visor once more, deactivating the suit's optical low-light imaging systems. There was enough light on the surface for him to see clearly. He turned three hundred and sixty degrees, counting his men around him. All ten of them had arrived safely.

A wave of pride and relief swept over him as he raised his arm over his head and placed his palm on top of his helmet. Again, he rotated around, checking that each man returned his 'okay' signal in the same fashion. Satisfied that his team was ready for action, he motioned for them to proceed forward and began a careful approach along the

surface of the tiny moon toward the launch tube openings from the fighter base within the moon.

* * *

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported from the Aurora’s navigation console.

“Position confirmed,” Mister Navashee added. “We are in orbit over Tanna. Daylight terminator in seventeen minutes, twenty-eight seconds.”

“Deploy jumpers,” Nathan ordered.

Ten Ghatazhak warriors, dressed in combat pressure suits and specialized space-jump gear, jumped in pairs out of the Aurora’s starboard cargo airlock and began drifting toward the planet below. They drifted for nearly a minute before using their maneuvering jets to adjust their attitude in relation to the planet below. Finally, they fired the deceleration thrusters mounted on their lower backs. After a minute-long burn, they once again rotated and pitched over so they were diving headfirst toward the dark planet. Only moments later, the tops of their heads began to heat up as they entered the steadily thickening atmosphere of Tanna.

“Jumpers have breached the upper atmosphere,” Mister Navashee reported from the sensor station on the bridge. “They’re starting to heat up.”

“How long until the jump shuttles arrive?”

“Ten seconds,” Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station directly behind Nathan’s command chair.

“Green deck,” Nathan announced. “Stand by to launch all fighters.”

* * *

The Jung guard sat in his watch tower overlooking the airfield outside. Two hundred Jung fighters were arranged in perfect rows along all four sides of the open tarmac, leaving a large open area in the center of the airfield for launches and touchdowns. From his position in the small, glass-enclosed booth, he could see along the back sides of the support buildings around the outside edge of the tarmac, as well as the other three guard towers on the other corners of the base.

His gaze alternated between the view outside, the many camera views displayed on his console, and the book he was reading on his data pad. It was only an hour before dawn, and soon, his relief would arrive and another long watch would end. It was a boring job for a soldier but a safe one at least.

A bright flash of blue-white light lit up the entire base for an instant, followed by a shock wave of suddenly displaced air that blew out the windows of the guard tower. The soldier was knocked backward onto the floor of the small room that was now open to the cold, morning air. He shook his head, sending drops of his own blood flinging about as he tried to regain his senses. He climbed to his feet again, feeling blood streaming down his face from multiple facial lacerations. He could hear the sounds of jet turbines coming from the middle of the airfield and warning sirens as they began to alert the base of danger.

The guard managed to stand, wiping the blood from his eyes. He looked out onto the airfield and saw a shuttle of

some sort hovering seven meters above the tarmac. There were large, robotic-looking bodies jumping out of the rear cargo hatch of the shuttle as it hovered. One by one, they each landed with a thud, apparently not bothered by their hard landings. As they hit the ground, small mechanized cannons deployed from their backs, peered over their shoulders, and began firing bolts of red plasma energy into the nearby fighters, tearing them to pieces. As the robotic-looking bodies advanced, they pulled bulky, handheld weapons from attachment points on their thighs and started firing with them as well, sending orange streaks of energy toward any target they could find.

The guard struggled to reboot his weapons control console, which had been knocked offline by the shock wave, to fire the tower's main guns. As he worked, he glanced back toward the tarmac and saw bolts of energy spewing out of the back of the shuttle as the ship rotated slowly. The bolts of energy struck one of the guard towers on the opposite side of the field first, then began tearing through the buildings along the edge of the base. The shuttle continued to rotate, its weapons fire finding the next guard tower as it turned.

Jung soldiers began pouring out of the back sides of buildings, pulling on body armor as they ran around to move into position to attack the intruders.

The guard watched in frustration as his console failed to restart and automatically started the process over again. He looked out at the shuttle as it continued to rotate, now rising slowly while it continued tearing apart buildings and guard towers.

The guard screamed something in Jung at his malfunctioning weapons console as soldiers on the ground opened fire on the rising shuttle. The guard glanced to his

left and saw the path of destruction being dealt by the weapon in the rear of the shuttle move toward him. He looked to his right and saw that his access ladder—his only means of escape—had also been damaged by the shock wave and hung precariously off the side of the tower. He grabbed his rifle from the floor next to him and took aim, sending his own bolts of energy at the attacking ship.

It was too late. The energy bolts from the shuttle's weapon struck his guard tower, blowing it apart. The guard felt himself being picked up and thrown backward into the air, tumbling as he flew. First the sky, then the ground, then his burning tower, then the sky again. Then he felt intense pain as he hit something and blacked out.

* * *

The inside of the Aurora's newest jump shuttle—the one they referred to as the 'super-jump shuttle'—momentarily filled with the blue-white light of their jump flash. The shuttle shook violently, and the thunderous clap of sudden air displacement sounded. The shuttle bounced for a moment as the pilot struggled to regain control after suddenly finding himself in atmospheric flight instead of coasting through the vacuum of space.

"Fuck!" the copilot screamed over the comm-set.

"Scares the shit out of you, doesn't it?" the pilot said.

"I think I bit my lip," the crew chief announced.

"Are we there? Did we hit the mark?" the pilot asked.

"We're there! We're there! Slide her forward!" the copilot instructed.

The leader of the ten-man Ghatazhak squad in the shuttle's cargo bay smiled at the comm-chatter.

"Jump! Jump! Jump!" the crew chief called with a slight lisp as he nursed his injured lip.

The Ghatazhak ran out the back of the shuttle, jumping off its cargo ramp in pairs as the shuttle slid forward slightly to keep them from landing on top of one another.

The leader was the first off the cargo ramp of the shuttle. He leapt off the end of the ramp, his arms outward for balance as he fell the eight meters to the ground. His exoskeleton whined as it took the force of the impact for him when his boots hit the tarmac below. He immediately began barking instructions in Takaran to his combat suit's weapons systems, causing his small mechanized cannons to deploy from either side of the top of his backpack. The cannons tipped over to face forward, pivoting in accordance with the suit's targeting computer's commands. As the shoulder cannons began firing, he reached down with both hands, grabbing the handheld energy weapons from each of his thighs and raising them to open fire.

More Takaran instructions directed his cannons to concentrate on nearby fighters. He continued walking casually forward as his cannons fired away, destroying everything their balls of plasma energy impacted. He could see the guard towers at the corners of the base, each of them with their windows blown out.

"Jumpers away!" the crew chief's voice declared over the comms.

"Let them have it, Chief!" the copilot called out.

"Rotating," the pilot announced.

The Ghatazhak leader could hear the sound of the energy cannon that had been temporarily liberated from the Falcon and installed in the super-jump shuttle. He looked up as the energy bolts from the shuttle's weapon streaked overhead. The first bolt of energy struck the nearest tower.

It continued to fire in rapid succession, plowing through the distant buildings as the shuttle slowly rotated in its hover directly over them.

The leader continued his advance, his shoulder cannons blazing as he fired his handheld weapon at anything that looked like it needed to be destroyed. He could see men running out of the buildings in the distance. He barked out more instructions, this time to his men, causing the lead teams to advance more quickly through the lines of undamaged fighters, while the rear teams continued destroying the small spacecraft with their shoulder cannons.

"Let's start climbing," the pilot ordered.

"Increasing power," the copilot answered.

"Damn! This is better than target practice back on Corinair!" the crew chief declared with glee as he continued firing the energy cannon out the cargo hatch at the rear of the super-jump shuttle.

The Ghatazhak leader and his forward teams advanced toward the buildings, opening fire once again as they passed the outermost line of fighters. The soldiers rushing toward them dropped to the ground and returned fire, only to find that their energy weapons bounced off the Ghatazhak's external shielding.

The whine of the hovering super-jump shuttle's turbine increased as she climbed. The Ghatazhak leader sprayed the buildings with his shoulder cannons. He expertly placed single shots into the heads of every Jung soldier for which he had line of sight.

"Three-sixty complete." the pilot announced over the comms. *"Thrusting forward and pitching up."*

"Ten seconds to jump," the copilot announced. *"Close her up, Chief."*

"Copy that," the chief answered as he stopped firing his energy cannon. He swung the weapon inward to get it clear of the hatchway and hit the button to cycle the ramp up against the aft end of the shuttle and seal the bay closed.

"Five seconds," the copilot announced as the shuttle began to climb out at an increasing rate.

"Good luck, gentlemen," the pilot called over the comms.

The Ghatazhak squad leader smiled. The base again lit up with the blue-white flash as the super-jump shuttle jumped away. To him, luck was not a factor.

* * *

Major Prechitt's fighter lifted a few centimeters off the deck as the artificial gravity in the launch airlock dialed down to zero. The launch rail shuttles pulled tightly on the wingtips of his fighter, lifting his spacecraft just high enough for him to retract his gear.

"Gear up. Doors closed," the major reported over his helmet comms. "Mains and maneuvering hot. Talon One, ready for launch."

"Copy, Talon One," the launch controller replied. *"Bay depressed. Rails hot. Launching in three....."*

The launch bay's outer door directly in front of the major's fighter split in half where they met the launch rails on either side.

"Two....."

The two halves of the door quickly parted, sliding up into the ceiling and down into the deck in only two seconds. With his finger on the abort button, the major looked down the dimly lit launch tube, seeing that it was open to space at the far end.

“One.....”

The major removed his finger from the abort button, grabbing the handrails on either side of the cockpit in preparation for launch.

“Launch.”

The launch rails on either side of the launch tube became charged, pulling the rail shuttles clamped onto Talon One’s wingtips down the rail, and pulling the fighter along with them. Blue energy glowed and sparked from the rails as the rail shuttles accelerated the fighter down the tube. Major Prechitt felt himself being pushed back hard into his flight seat as his fighter accelerated down the tunnel. Four seconds later, his fighter shot out the end of the launch tunnel and beyond the Aurora’s bow. His speed indicator jumped drastically as it switched from measuring his speed in relation to the Aurora’s launch tube and added the Aurora’s speed to that of its own.

The force of acceleration gone, the major released his hold on the handrails and took hold of his flight controls. His attention quickly danced over his displays as he checked all his systems. Satisfied that everything was in order, he keyed his comms. “Talon One away.”

“Talon Two away,” his wingman announced as he cleared his launch tube. *“Forming on leader.”*

“Talon Three away. Forming on leader.”

“Talon Four away. Forming on leader.”

“Talon One has the lead. Activating tactical uplink with combat control.”

Major Prechitt monitored the tactical data streaming from his uplink with the Aurora’s combat information center. He listened to each of his Talon fighters report in as they launched. It would take six minutes for all forty-eight fighters to launch, which meant he would be about to reach

line of sight with Tanna's fifth moon by the time his attack group was fully formed. Under normal circumstances, he would have gone to full power once he had a full eight-ship element launched in order to deny the enemy time to launch their fighters. This time was different. The entire purpose of his flight was to get them to launch in the first place. He doubted many of them would get clear of the fighter base before it was too late.

"Fighters are away," Mister Randeem reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"How long until they get line of sight on the fifth moon?"

"One minute," Mister Randeem answered.

"Contacts!" Mister Navashee reported. "Jump shuttles One and Two just jumped in behind us."

"Flight ops reports jump shuttles are on fast approach," Naralena reported from the comm station. "The last Ghatazhak team is standing by to load."

"Very well," Nathan said. "Any word on the strike teams?"

"No contact yet," Naralena answered.

"I don't have line of sight on the second base yet," Mister Navashee said, "but the first base is getting blown to hell."

"Any fighters get off the ground there?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir," Mister Navashee answered with confidence.

"Fifteen seconds until our fighters have line of sight with the fighter base," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station.

* * *

Lieutenant Telles finished climbing down the side of the crater on the surface of Tanna's fifth moon. He looked out across the crater floor. It was smooth and clean with four raised portions in a line down the center.

He checked the time on his visor display. The Aurora's fighters would be picked up by the Jung fighter base below them at any moment, which left his team less than a minute to get where they were going. He raised his right hand and signaled for his men to move into position.

All ten Ghatazhak moved swiftly across the smooth crater floor, being careful not to bounce as they walked for fear of launching themselves into space. This close to the base, they couldn't risk using their cold jets to hold them down for fear of detection.

The men spread out, taking positions along the edge of the four raised sections. Two groups of two Ghatazhak positioned themselves at the two outermost sections, while the other two groups of three positioned themselves near the two innermost sections.

As he reached his position, the massive doors in the middle of each raised section slid open, revealing the launch tunnels underneath them. Lieutenant Telles peered down into the tunnel. It was at least fifty meters deep and about twelve meters in diameter. As he peered over the edge into the tunnel, the inner doors at the bottom of the tunnel began to slide open quickly. He leaned back, ducking down. The rest of his team saw the lieutenant's actions and followed suit. Moments after they got into position, four fighters shot out of the tubes, their main engines firing a split second after they cleared the exits.

As the departing fighter's thrust-wash blasted the lieutenant, he checked the time readout on his visor display. He waited patiently, not moving from his position. As he

waited, he dipped his chin and drank some cold water from a small tube sticking out from the base of his helmet. He continued to wait. He glanced at the man facing him who had a smile on his face. His men were happy. They were doing what they had trained their entire adult lives to do.

Another fighter shot out of the tube, its thrust-wash again pounding against his back. He glanced at his time display. Forty seconds had passed. He waited five seconds to allow the thrust-wash to lessen. Then he stood upright, climbed onto the side of the raised section, stepped off the edge, and began to fall slowly down the tube in the slight gravity of Tanna's fifth moon. With only twenty-five seconds remaining until the next fighter would pass through the launch tube, the lieutenant and his men fired their thrusters, the risk of detection aside, in order to accelerate their descent.

The lieutenant looked at his time readout. He had fifteen seconds before the next fighter launch, and his display said he was only halfway down the tube. A quick calculation in his head told him he would not get clear of the next fighter's launch in time. He fired his thrusters once more, burning them even longer than before.

He now had five seconds to touchdown... ten seconds until the next fighter launch. He looked down as the inner doors rushed up toward him. He bent his knees in preparation for the impact, which came two seconds later. He hit hard and immediately ran toward the sides of the massive doors, knowing full well that the airlock on the other side of the door was nearly depressurized by now and would open at any moment. Just as he reached the edge of the massive door and stepped out beyond the door's thick collar, it began to quickly slide open.

The lieutenant pulled himself as close to the irregular rock wall as possible as the next fighter rushed past him, up and out of the launch tunnel. He held on tightly as the thrust-wash found its way down the tunnel to beat down on him again, albeit far less forcefully than when he was on the surface. He looked at his time readout once more. Five seconds after the fighter had launched, the inner doors started to close. It was going to be close.

* * *

“Flight, Talon One. All ships on station. Eight hostiles departing from fifth moon, inbound on us. Going to full burn.”

“*Flight copies,*” the flight controller on the Aurora answered over the major’s helmet comms. “*Good hunting, sir.*”

“Talon Flight, leader. Tracking eight hostiles. One through Eight, full burn with me. Target respective hostiles. Nine through Sixteen, hold back and power up as needed to pick up anything that gets through. All other Talons, weapons cold, power nominal.”

Major Prechitt watched his instruments as his squad leaders acknowledged their orders. A minute ago, his scope had showed only four fighters on their way toward him from the fifth moon. Now there were four more, for a total of eight. He hoped no more fighters would be able to launch, as he hoped to save as much fuel and ordnance as possible to support ground operations on Tanna.

* * *

Lieutenant Telles and his men held onto the launch tunnel walls tightly as the next fighter rushed past them. A

split second later, the lieutenant pushed away from the wall as hard as he could, fighting against the departing fighter's thrust-wash even as it dissipated. He swung himself outward and around the massive door collar, flinging himself into the massive launch airlock on the other side as the doors began to slide closed again. He quickly looked to see which surface was the deck. Judging by the markings, he saw that it was the surface above him. He fired his cold maneuvering jets to spin himself around and get his feet against the deck above him, activating his mag-boots as they contacted the deck.

The lieutenant looked over at his other two men, each of whom had also managed to get themselves into a secure, standing position. They all had a handheld weapon in each hand, and their shoulder cannons were deployed and ready to fire.

Five seconds later, the inside airlock door slid open, rising upward into the ceiling. As the door opened, light spilled in from the hangar deck on the other side of the door. The lieutenant could see the feet and lower legs of deck hands and flight support technicians as they scurried about, tending to the task of launching fighters in rapid succession. He watched the edge of the door as it rose, revealing the nose gear of the fighter just on the other side of the door that was waiting for its turn to enter the airlock and prepare for launch. Then the nose of the fighter, then the cockpit, then the eyes of its pilot as they went wide at the sight of three heavily armed, robotic-looking men with deadly weapons aimed at him.

The lieutenant's first shot from the energy weapon in his right hand blew through the front windshield of the fighter's canopy, then through the pilot's helmet visor, where it dug into his forehead and instantly burnt the pilot's brain. His

face glowed orange for a moment, then his body slumped to the side.

The lieutenant's next shot was at the fighter's right main gear, causing it to collapse and dropping the fighter's left wing to the deck. Its engine automatically shut down. His fellow Ghatazhak warriors emerged from the other three launch airlocks as he and his two teammates advanced, firing at anything that moved. There was virtually no resistance offered by the Jung technicians, as none of them would ever expect an incursion from the launch bays.

The Ghatazhak shoulder cannons fired only at larger targets as their targeting systems identified potential threats. The Ghatazhak used their handheld weapons like surgeons, placing single kill shots in the heads or chests of their scrambling enemies.

Eventually, security personnel began to arrive armed with their own energy weapons. Fortunately for the Ghatazhak, their external shields deflected the incoming bolts of energy, sending them ricocheting off in any number of directions, which caused further damage and added to the overall chaos of the situation.

The chaos was one-sided, however, as every shot, every deflection, every movement was quickly calculated by the advancing Ghatazhak warriors. The Jung internal defenses were so weak that the lieutenant soon powered down his shoulder cannons, finding they were not needed and were likely to cause more damage than necessary. Although his primary mission was to neutralize the Jung fighter base on Tanna's fifth moon, allowing as few fighters to launch as possible, the lieutenant knew that every piece of equipment left undamaged was a potential resource for the Aurora in her struggle against the Jung.

* * *

"Three is down! Three is down! Jesus! He blew apart!"

"I got him!" Major Prechitt's wingman announced as the Jung fighter in front of him blew apart. *"I got the bastard!"*

"Break left," the major ordered, "or his fragments are going to get you!"

"I've got it, sir!"

Major Prechitt checked his aft fish-eye camera and saw his wingman slide in behind him again. "Four? You still with us?"

"I'm here, Major. I'm okay. My starboard engine is gone, but I can still maneuver."

"Four, head back to the ship," the major ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"How many got through?" another pilot asked.

Major Prechitt checked his displays. "Two got by. Bravo flight?"

"We've got them, sir."

"Alpha flight, press forward. We've got another flight of four inbound from that moon."

"I thought the Ghatazhak were supposed to take that base out."

"There hasn't been a launch from there in over two minutes," the pilot of Talon Four stated. *"Maybe they did."*

"Don't worry about the Ghatazhak," the major said. "Just concentrate on those last four fighters. Max range in ten seconds. I've got the leftmost fighter. Two, take the shot to my right. Five and Six, take the next two from left to right."

"Two copies."

"Five copies."

"Six copies."

“Missile lock, Talon One! Firing one!” the major announced as he pressed the launch button on his flight stick. He could feel his missile bay doors pop open as his missile dropped out of the bay. As he felt the bay doors close again a second later, he peered forward over his console at the missile streaking away from him on its way to its target.

“Talon Two, firing one!”

“Talon Five, firing one!”

“Talon Six, firing one!”

Major Prechitt watched as all four missiles moved toward their targets on his display. Seconds later, the missiles found their targets, causing three of them to blink out of existence.

“Damn it! I missed!” the pilot of Talon Five said over the comms.

“Cut the chatter! He’s coming right at you,” Major Prechitt warned. “High split-Y!”

“You copy that, Reed?” Talon Five asked his wingman.

“I copy!”

“Split in three.....two.....one.....SPLIT!”

Major Prechitt adjusted the range on his tracking display to better see the engagement. He watched as the symbol for Talon Five slid wide left, and Talon Six slid wide right, both of them climbing relative to their target as the Jung fighter passed between and slightly beneath them. They both yawed their spacecraft toward the Jung fighter and pitched down slightly to bring their plasma cannons onto the passing target. The Jung fighter also reacted, swinging his nose to fire on Talon Five, but he was too late. The plasma shots from both fighters tore through the Jung fighter, causing it to explode in a ball of fire that was extinguished a moment later by the vacuum of space.

"Nice work!" Major Prechitt said. "Bravo flight, report!"

"Talon leader, Bravo leader. We got them, sir."

"Anyone see any other contacts?" the major asked.

"I've got nothing," his wingman answered.

"Flight, Talon leader. Near space is clear. Proceeding to clear the orbital space around the fifth moon. Have Bravo stand off as backup."

"Talon leader, Flight. Understood."

"Any of their fighters get off the ground down there?"

"Combat reports four launches from the second base, none from the first."

"Damn," the major mumbled. "Charlie and Delta flights, take up stations around the Aurora. All other Talons, head to the surface of Tanna. We need to own those skies."

"Flight ops reports Jumper One is departing now, sir," Naralena stated from the comms station. "They should be in position to jump in three minutes."

"Any word on the insertion team?" Nathan wondered. "Have they managed to disable the base defenses yet?"

"Unknown, sir," Naralena answered. "They're still operating under comm silence."

Nathan looked worried. "If they don't, that jump shuttle is going to have a rough time of it."

"We know they're in and probably making headway," Mister Navashee said. "There hasn't been a launch from that base in five minutes now."

"Let's hope you're right, Mister Navashee," Nathan said. "We need time to get that second unit into position if we're going to capture that propellant." He turned toward the helm. "Mister Riley, how much time until we reach our jump or no-jump point?"

“Ten minutes, sir.”

* * *

“Jump complete,” the copilot reported. *“Open her up.”*

“Opening cargo hatch,” the crew chief reported.

The cargo hatch folded open, its top edge swinging away and downward across the back end of the jump shuttle’s cargo bay. Ten Ghatazhak warriors outfitted in full combat pressure suits stood patiently in the cargo bay, watching the ramp descend.

“Ramp deployed,” the crew chief announced as he held tightly to the handrail and leaned out slightly to see the fifth moon’s fuel depot structures. “I see the target below.”

“Ten seconds to jump,” the copilot announced.

The crew chief continued looking at the fuel depot below. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move. Leaning out farther, he spotted a gun turret in the distance. “Oh, fuck! Gun turret! Eight o’clock! Swinging toward us!”

“Five seconds!” the copilot announced, a noticeable increase in tension in his voice.

The Ghatazhak began charging out the cargo hatch, jumping off the ramp in pairs.

“They’re jumping!”

“What? Not yet!”

“The turret’s firing!” the crew chief yelled as the last Ghatazhak left the ramp. He swung inward as rail gun rounds tore through the shuttle’s hull just forward of the cargo door. The impact ripped the handrail away along with a small section of hull and smashed through the other side of the cargo bay’s ceiling.

The shuttle banked hard, dropping its port side downward as it pitched up and applied full power. The crew

chief fell toward the still open cargo door but was caught by his safety line.

"Close the hatch! We've gotta go!"

"I can't!" the crew chief answered as he pulled on his safety line to regain his footing. "That hit fucked up the control box!"

"Move forward, Chief!" the copilot ordered. *"We jump in five!"*

The crew chief scrambled to move forward as the shuttle rolled back in the opposite direction.

"Four....."

Another series of rail gun slugs smashed through the deck of the cargo bay, blowing a one-meter hole in the deck and a smaller hole in the ceiling.

"Three....."

The impacts tossed the chief about again, causing him to fall forward into his seat.

"Two....."

He grabbed his restraint harness and pulled it over his shoulders toward the buckles on either side of him.

"One....."

The chief closed his eyes as another salvo of rail gun slugs tore through the shuttle's hull less than a meter aft of him.

"Jumping!"

The shuttle's cargo bay filled with the blue-white flash.

The ten Ghatazhak warriors drifted slowly toward the surface, firing their cold maneuvering jets to maintain attitude as well as to increase their rate of descent. As they fell, rail gun slugs flew past them at incredible speeds. Two slugs slammed into one of the warriors, obliterating him and

sending bloody fragments of his combat pressure suit spraying across the remaining warriors.

They fired the cold thrusters at full power to push themselves down more quickly in order to get out of the rail gun turret's firing line. Seconds later, another warrior was torn apart by the rail gun fire. His body disintegrated as the kinetic energy from the slugs mutilated his torso, sending his limbs spinning off in all directions.

One by one, the Ghatazhak warriors slammed down onto the surface, the exoskeletons on their combat suits absorbing the force of the impact for them. Leaving their thrusters firing, they ran across the surface of the tiny moon, ducking between the fuel depot's various structures and holding tanks.

The team split into two elements of four men each and headed in opposite directions. The first team continued between the row of tanks protruding from below surface level, turning to their left toward an access building. The second team moved in the opposite direction, eventually finding another access building on the far side of the depot.

The first team placed charges on the access building's hatch, then immediately moved around to the side of the building. Moments later, the charges blew, and two of the Ghatazhak warriors charged through the smoke and into the building. Five seconds later, they came out again, quickly moving to either side of the blown open outer hatch. Another explosion came from inside the building, followed by a gush of air that blew the smoke outward and into open space. The first two Ghatazhak immediately charged back into the building with the remaining two following close behind.

* * *

“We’ve got line of sight on the fifth moon, Captain,” Mister Navashee reported.

“Sir,” Naralena called out, “combat reports they are now getting helmet camera feeds from the Ghatazhak.”

“Can you put those up?” Nathan asked his tactical officer.

“Yes, sir,” Mister Randeem answered. “Which ones?”

“Put up everything from that moon,” Nathan ordered. Nathan watched as separate windows started appearing on the main view screen, each revealing the view from a Ghatazhak helmet camera.

“I’ve got the team attacking the fighter base on the left and the team at the fuel depot on the right,” Mister Randeem reported.

Nathan watched in horror as the Ghatazhak annihilated their enemy at every turn. On the left, the warriors attacking the fighter base were merciless, killing everyone in sight, both armed and unarmed. Their aim was amazingly accurate, striking their targets in the head, face, and chest and killing them instantly. They moved with amazing speed and agility, charging into incoming fire without hesitation.

“My God,” he exclaimed as he viewed the carnage. He was beginning to see why most of Takaran society viewed the Ghatazhak as brutal, soulless killing machines. They were extremely efficient at just that. However, there was a beauty to their single-minded purpose, achieving a military objective at any cost and with maximum aggression. Maximum aggression was exactly what Nathan was seeing at the moment. He shuddered to think of the things Caius had probably done with such warriors before his demise.

The camera views on the right, those of the warriors attacking the fuel depot, were far less gruesome. There was very little shooting going on. Most of the internal facilities of

the depot had been depressurized by the Ghatazhak's strategic placement of hatch charges as they made their way through the facility. When they finally did reach a sealed airlock, Nathan was almost surprised to see them step inside and cycle through the airlock in normal fashion instead of simply blowing it like all the others.

When they stepped through the airlock into the next section, they continued their rampage, firing even more rounds as internal security forces swarmed onto both Ghatazhak insertion teams.

One of the Ghatazhak cameras went to an odd angle, pointing at one wall and not moving. "Is he down?" Nathan asked.

"I believe so," Mister Randeem said. "That makes three that have been lost on the second team."

Nathan quickly counted the camera views, embarrassed that he hadn't already realized there were only eight cameras active in the group storming the fuel depot. He quickly counted the group attacking the fighter base. There were only eight still moving. One camera sat motionless, pointing at the ceiling, while another was completely dark with only occasional flashes of light coming in from the sides.

"That's five," Nathan mumbled. He turned to Mister Randeem at the tactical station behind him. "How many losses have the Ghatazhak suffered on the surface?"

"One moment."

"Seven minutes to jump or no-jump, sir," Mister Riley reported from the navigation console.

"Combat is getting feeds from both surface teams," Mister Randeem reported. "Shall I put those up as well?"

Nathan hesitated, unsure whether he wanted to witness the carnage the Ghatazhak were probably doling out on the

surface. After a brief moment, he sighed. "Put them up."

Two more groups of windows opened up on the sides of the Aurora's massive, spherical view screen. The views from the surface were more brightly lit, as the sun had already begun to rise on both bases. The Ghatazhak were already beyond the flight lines and were attacking the buildings and the occupants inside. Occasionally, one of the Ghatazhak would spin around, revealing the burning rows of destroyed fighters. The warriors continuously pummeled the buildings with their shoulder cannons, forcing the occupants out into the open where they slaughtered them with pinpoint fire from their handheld energy weapons. There were two more cameras that were either offline or not moving from the first base, and another one blinked off from the second base.

"It's a slaughter," Mister Randeem said.

"Perhaps," Nathan said, "but let's not forget, Mister Randeem, that there are eight men down, and it's not over yet."

"Yes, sir," Mister Randeem said apologetically.

"What about the fifth team?" Nathan asked.

"They are still comm silent. They should be touching down shortly. Their helmet cameras should go active once they engage the enemy."

"Five minutes to jump, no-jump," Mister Riley reported.

Nathan turned back to face the main view screen once more, his head shifting from side to side as he tried to keep up with the constantly changing events in each location. As he watched the carnage, he almost felt guilty for unleashing the Ghatazhak on the unsuspecting Jung forces. Many of the men that were dying were not combatants. They were technicians, operators, mechanics, and other technical personnel. He understood why the Ghatazhak were being so

aggressive, but he couldn't help thinking his tactical officer was correct: it was a slaughter.

* * *

Alert sirens blared as the light of dawn began to glow behind the distant mountains. Spotlights in the guard towers swept the grounds beyond the fence line surrounding the Jung propellant processing plant on the surface of Tanna. More powerful searchlights on the ground followed preprogrammed patterns as they traversed the sky above.

One of the tower guards followed the circle of light cast by his tower-mounted spotlight as he tracked it back and forth, watching intently for any sign of intruders. No one had told him what was going on as of yet, only that the plant was on alert. The guard's head suddenly exploded, spraying blood in all directions as his body crumpled and fell to the floor, his spotlight coming to a stop.

The guard in the next tower noticed that the other tower's spotlight had stopped moving. He swung his light over and added it to the other tower's light, assuming the guard in the other tower had spotted something on the ground. When he saw nothing, he moved his spotlight up the tower and saw no guard. He grabbed his portable radio and was about to report it when his head jerked to the right and exploded, sending a spray of blood, bone, and cerebral matter across the counter next to him.

As the second guard's body fell over the railing and down to the ground, a Ghatazhak warrior descended gracefully to the ground, his sniper rifle in hand. Just before he landed, he fired two more rounds with his silent weapon, placing small, explosive pellets into the heads of guards rushing toward him.

More guards rushed out of the buildings, each also dropping to the ground as their heads exploded in showery, red mists. In less than a minute, the ten descending Ghatazhak warriors had killed over forty men. They had only fired forty shots.

Fully inflated, black parachutes inverted and fell to the ground as their payloads touched the ground and automatically released the connections to their canopies. The early morning breeze swept the black fabric across the compound, leaving them to snag on various poles and structures along the way or to finally rest against the far fence line.

As each man hit the ground, he ran forward, finding the nearest entrance to carry their assault inward. Around them were thousands of gallons of various gases, each of them highly combustible and highly valued by the Alliance.

The Ghatazhak were sure and swift, running through the complex and terminating every living being they encountered: men in control rooms, maintenance spaces, production spaces, even in the bathroom. They were all executed in the same manner: one shot, one kill.

Four minutes after they had fired their first shot, the leader of Ghatazhak Team Five received his last report of 'secure.' He switched frequencies and placed his call. "Aurora Combat, Five leader. Target secured."

* * *

"I've never seen anything like this," Cameron admitted. She watched the feeds from the fifth Ghatazhak team as they secured the propellant plant.

"Neither have I," Master Chief Montrose admitted.

"I have," Major Waddell said.

Cameron looked at Waddell. He looked unsettled, his face pale and his hands trembling slightly. She wondered what was going through his mind at the moment. Was he reliving his own combat experiences against the Ghatazhak?

“Major?” she asked.

The major turned his head toward her, his eyes wide with fear. She looked at him, noticing that he seemed unfocused, as if he were not seeing what was in front of him. “Are you all right?” she said under her breath so the others in the compartment would not hear.

Major Waddell looked directly at Cameron, his eyes finally focusing on hers. “Yes... yes,” he answered, regaining his composure. “I’ll be fine.”

Cameron nodded sympathetically at the major, then turned to one of the communications technicians along the side of the combat information center. “Notify the bridge.”

“Sir,” Naralena called. “Combat reports all five teams have reported in. All primary targets are secured.”

“Time to jump, no-jump?”

Mister Riley looked at his console, then rotated slightly to his right to look over his shoulder at the captain. “One minute,” he reported, a smile on his face.

“What about the Jung fighters that got airborne?” Nathan asked his tactical officer.

“Flight ops reports the last two are being chased down now. We own the skies of Tanna, sir.”

“Her moons, too,” Mister Riley added.

“We still have to deal with their ground forces,” Nathan reminded them.

“Contacts!” Mister Navashee reported. “Inbound missiles coming up from the surface. Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Kill the helmet cameras for now,” Nathan ordered. “What have we got, Mister Randeem?”

“Twelve contacts, sir. They appear to be surface to orbit missiles—relatively slow-moving, conventional warheads. We shouldn’t have any problem shooting them down, sir. Flight is already vectoring fighters to intercept. The rest I’ll handle with point defenses.”

Nathan looked confused. “Are they Jung weapons?”

“Doubtful, sir,” Mister Randeem said. “They don’t match any of the technology we’ve seen in any of our engagements with the Jung thus far.”

“They may be Tannan weapons,” Mister Navashee suggested. “I’m scanning them now. There are a lot of similarities in their electronics with the stuff I’ve been detecting on the surface.”

“Such as?” Nathan asked.

“Cars, small, general aviation aircraft, communications gear. These missiles look like they use many of the same components.”

“Maybe they’re leftovers,” Mister Randeem added. “Maybe they were seized by the Jung when they conquered this world. They are conventional warheads, sir. Nearly all of the Jung weapons we have seen thus far have carried nuclear warheads, even the ship-busters carried by the Jung fighters.”

“Maybe they’re getting desperate,” Nathan hoped.

* * *

Garrett looked out the window at the distant Jung command center located in the heart of one of Tanna’s largest cities. The command center had been a flurry of

activity ever since the Aurora had first jumped into high orbit over the planet.

To the south, he could see twelve missile trails reaching up toward the sky. At the top of each trail were bright yellow tails of thrust coming from the missiles. He could also see several of the Aurora's fighters as they swooped around and began to climb in pursuit of the weapons. Four more fighters swept across the buildings directly in front of him before they, too, joined in the chase.

"Sir!" one of Garrett's subordinates called as he approached.

"What is it?"

"All teams have reported in. The evacuation has been completed. The perimeter is clear up to one kilometer from the Jung command center."

"Good work," Garrett congratulated. "Have our teams painted the targets?"

"Yes, sir. Each target has at least two laser designators trained on it."

"Then we are ready." Garrett smiled.

"I did not think it possible," the man exclaimed, excited by the morning's events.

"Neither did I," Garrett admitted. "It just shows you that one must never stop believing." He turned to another of his men, one carrying a large device over his shoulder. "Contact the Aurora. Tell them we are ready."

* * *

"We've got the laser designators!" one of the weapons technicians reported.

Cameron turned from the plotting table in the middle of the Aurora's combat information center. "Deploy the quads,

underside positions, and lock onto those laser designators as soon as the guns are ready.”

“Combat reports quads are deployed and locked on targets, sir.”

“All four of them?”

“Command center, main deep-space comm-array, and both missile bases, all painted with multiple designators.”

“I guess Garrett’s not taking any chances,” Nathan mumbled. He turned to Naralena at the comm station at the rear of the bridge. “Hail the Jung command center. Send the following message: ‘The 72 Herculis system and all worlds within it are now under the control of the Alliance. Surrender all forces and you will be treated fairly and with respect. Refuse and hostilities shall continue.’ End message.”

“Sending message,” Naralena answered. She typed in the message, then looked up at Nathan. “Message sent.” She smiled at him. “Felt good, huh?”

“It did, actually,” he said, smiling back.

“Receiving reply,” Naralena announced, looking back down at her console. “Message reads, ‘The Jung do not surrender.’” She looked back up at the captain. “End of message.”

Nathan sighed. “Comms, tell flight ops to launch the tactical shuttles and deploy the remaining Ghatazhak to the surface targets as planned.”

“Aye, sir,” Naralena answered.

“Mister Randeem, fire all quads,” Nathan ordered.

“Firing quads, aye.”

The four massive, quad-barreled rail guns hanging off the underside of the Aurora adjusted slightly, tracking the tiny dots of laser light with their optical targeting sensors to

account for the movement of the ship as it orbited the planet below. After a series of tiny adjustments, they began to fire. Flashes of blue, electrical energy lit up the rails of each weapon, as each barrel sent fifty rounds per second of carefully aimed, meter-wide slugs streaming toward the targets below at incredible velocities. The slugs heated up as they plowed through the atmosphere, leaving trails of super-heated plasma behind them as they streaked toward the surface.

* * *

Garret stood at the window, which had already been blown out by the shock wave of the attack. His hands covered his ears against the deafening roar as the rail gun barrage continued. His eyes squinted against the waves of wind generated by the onslaught. Others about him cowered against the walls, fearing for their safety despite the fact that they were more than a kilometer away from the nearest target.

The rain of fire from the sky suddenly stopped, and the thunderous roar began to subside. Garrett slowly lowered his hands from his ears, sensing that the attack was over. He watched in awe as the dust cloud began to settle, most of it being swept southward by the morning winds of Tanna. The faint morning light began to cut through the dust, revealing... nothing: no buildings, no light posts, no fences, not even piles of broken buildings. Just a massive pile of rubble, most of which was no bigger than a man's head.

Never in his life had Garrett seen such a thing. The Jung had leveled entire cities when they had come decades ago, but that had been with massive nuclear weapons. No one had survived to bear witness to those attacks. He surveyed

the surrounding buildings. Many were damaged by flying debris, but most were still standing and in relatively good condition. Never had he seen such precisely placed weapons fire.

He turned and looked at his subordinate, whose eyes were as wide as his own. "I am now quite certain that we have chosen the right ally."

* * *

"Contact," Mister Riley reported.

"Thrusting inward," Mister Chiles answered from the helm.

"We have hard dock, Captain," Mister Riley confirmed.

"Refueling boom is being extended," Mister Navashee announced.

"How the hell did they figure out how to work everything over there?" Nathan said. "I mean, everything must be labeled in Jung, right? I know they're supposed to be geniuses and all, but they couldn't have figured out how to read Jung in less than an hour, right?"

"It is my understanding that the Ghatazhak chose to take a few prisoners," Cameron said. "Apparently, they are being quite cooperative."

"We have a good seal," Vladimir announced from one of the auxiliary consoles. "We're ready to begin refueling," he added with a smile.

"What are you waiting for?" Nathan wondered.

"Starting the refueling process," Vladimir said.

"So, we can use Jung propellants then?" Nathan asked. "You checked this stuff, right?"

"Of course," Vladimir answered. "It is not as good as what we normally use, but the designers of our propulsion

systems were smart enough to allow some flexibility in propellants. The engine performance might not be as good as with our standard propellant formulas, but considering the alternative..."

"I get your point," Nathan said, turning to Cameron. "Any word from Major Waddell?"

"His troops are on the surface and are assisting the Ghatazhak and the Tanna resistance as they subdue the remaining Jung ground forces. They have already assembled and launched two of their four Kalibri airships. He expects they will have captured enough Jung assets to completely turn the tide in favor of the resistance by the end of the planetary day."

"Excellent." Nathan turned back to Vladimir. "How long will the refueling take us?"

"Nearly eighteen hours," Vladimir answered. "Then I will need to conduct a few test burns with the new propellant in order to retune the acceleration tunnels on the main engines and the maneuvering systems as well."

"So how long until we can get under way again?"

"Twenty-four hours at least."

"Commander, let the major know he has twenty-four hours before we start recalling our people from the surface. I want everyone on board and ready to depart by the time Vlad has our engines humming."

"Yes, sir," Cameron answered, stepping to one side as Nathan left the bridge for his ready room. She looked at Vladimir, a smile on her face for the first time in days.

"He knows nothing about our engines," Vladimir said with disdain. "They do not hum."

CHAPTER NINE

Nathan nodded at the guard as he pressed the buzzer on the wall outside Mister Dubnyk's quarters. Shortly after, the door opened.

"Captain," Mister Dubnyk said. "What a pleasant surprise." He stepped aside to clear the way. "Please, come in."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Mister Dubnyk."

"Not at all, Captain. Not at all. I don't get many visitors, as you might imagine. Actually, I don't get any visitors."

"How have you been?" Nathan asked, being polite.

"Well enough, I suppose."

"Have you been keeping yourself busy?"

"Between the ship's video entertainment database and your personal history books, I've managed to keep my mind occupied. Thank you for those books, by the way."

"You're quite welcome."

"So, Captain, surely you didn't come here just to see how I am. A busy man such as yourself, what with a war to fight and all..."

"You're right. I did not."

"Then what can I do for you, sir?" Dubnyk asked, trying to be gracious.

"As you might already know, we have recently liberated a world from Jung rule. It's called Tanna, and it's in the 72 Herculis system."

“I was aware that some sort of combat action had taken place,” Mister Dubnyk said. “However, I was not aware of the outcome, other than the fact that we obviously survived. Were there many losses?”

“Twelve men were lost,” Nathan stated.

“I am sorry to hear that. This world, Tanna, I have heard of it. In my day it was a new colony—somewhat industrialized, yet still dependent on support from the core worlds to survive. I expect they had a hard time of it after the plague struck.”

“I do not know of their history. In fact, I have only met one person from their world.”

“How is this world doing now?” Mister Dubnyk asked.

“It’s fully industrialized,” Nathan said. “Its population was significantly reduced when the Jung conquered their world a few decades ago.”

“If memory serves, 72 Herculis is pretty far out on the fringe. It seems an odd target, does it not?”

“We suspect that the Jung were planning on using it as a stepping stone for expansion beyond the fringe. There were significant fuel-processing and storage facilities on the surface.”

“Are you not concerned that the Jung will return?”

“It has crossed my mind. From what the people of Tanna tell us, Jung ships come through only once or twice per Tannan year.”

“How do they plan on protecting themselves should one of those ships dislike their rebellious acts?”

“At this point, they have no defense,” Nathan admitted. “Whether or not they will need it depends on the captain of the ship that discovers that the Jung no longer hold Tanna. We know little about the Jung, however, the people of Tanna believe that the Jung would be likely to administer some sort

of punishment. At the very least, I would imagine they would take possession of Tanna again.”

“At the very least, indeed.” Mister Dubnyk leaned back in his chair, a pensive look on his face. “Why are you telling me all this, Captain?”

“We are about to depart, and I intend to leave you on Tanna.”

“Really?” Mister Dubnyk did not seem pleased with the idea.

“As you said, Mister Dubnyk, we are fighting a war. Our return to the Sol system will undoubtedly put us in harm’s way, and our chances of survival are uncertain at best.”

“And you think I would be safe on Tanna?”

“I suspect so, yes.”

“And the people of this world, they are willing to let me stay there?”

“I have explained your situation to them and all we know of you. Many of them seem curious to meet you. I think they wish to learn more about the core from before the plague.”

“I assumed you were keeping me here for the same reason.”

“I admit that I have my curiosities,” Nathan said, “but I don’t have time for such pursuits at the moment.”

“Am I to be a prisoner on Tanna as well?”

“That is up to them; however, I do not expect that to be the case. They have more pressing concerns.”

“And how am I to survive? Where will I live? What will I eat? I am an old man, Captain...”

“They have agreed to provide you with a small place on the edge of one of the villages. You will have a small amount of land, plenty of water, and access to the local shops and services. You might even be able to charge a fee for stories of the pre-plague core. Who knows? You may do quite well.”

“So I am to be a farmer and a storyteller,” Mister Dubnyk said.

“It is better than being a prisoner on a ship going to war,” Nathan reminded him. “The food might be better, as well.”

“I will miss your video entertainment database,” Mister Dubnyk said. “There are still so many to watch.”

“I can have a large number of them transferred onto a data pad if you like.”

“That is most kind of you, Captain.”

“It is decided, then?” Nathan asked as he stood.

“Do I have any say in the matter?”

Nathan shook his head. “Not really.”

“No matter,” Mister Dubnyk said as he also rose from his seat. “It does present new opportunities and challenges.”

“Yes, it does,” Nathan agreed. He extended his hand to the old man. “Your shuttle awaits, Mister Dubnyk.”

“I suppose thanks are in order, Captain,” Mister Dubnyk said as he took the captain’s hand and gave it a shake. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“It was my pleasure, sir. I only wish we could have saved more of your people as well.”

“Yes. We all have our fates.”

“Good luck, sir,” Nathan said as he turned to depart.

“To you as well, Captain. To you as well.” Mister Dubnyk watched as Nathan left. “Opportunities indeed,” he mumbled, a mischievous look in his eyes.

* * *

“Captain?” Commander Taylor called from the hatchway to the ready room.

“Yes?”

“We’ve cleared the system and completed our first jump on our way back to Sol.”

“Nice not to have to do another gravity assist just to turn around.”

“Indeed it is. However, I still think it would be a good idea to continue the practice whenever it is feasible.”

“We can make it a standing order if you like.”

“Let me think about it some more.”

“How long will it take us to get back to Sol?” Nathan asked.

“With recharge layovers, about forty-five hours. Thirty hours will put us two and a half light years out.”

“I’d like to launch the jump shuttle as soon as possible. We need to try to establish contact with Jessica and the resistance on Earth.”

“The jump shuttle is going to be out of service for a few days. She took a beating delivering Team Four to the fuel depot.”

“That’s right,” Nathan said. “I almost forgot.”

“Lieutenant Montgomery has suggested we use the super-jump shuttle to make contact. With its range, it would only take half as many jumps for it to get back to Earth.”

“We need that shuttle to make the trip back to the Pegasus cluster to ask for help,” Nathan reminded her. “Do you think it’s wise to risk it any more than we already have?”

“It performed perfectly over Tanna,” Cameron said. “I can’t think of a more rigorous proving ground.”

“Still, with the Falcon down and now Jump Shuttle One down as well, that would leave us without any jump ships other than the Aurora.”

“Jumper One can still fly,” Cameron said. “It just can’t close the back ramp or be pressurized. The flight crew can

wear pressure suits just like they did during their combat jumps.”

“A bit risky, isn’t it?”

“A bit, yes.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair. “We really need to make contact with Jessica, find out what she’s learned. How many jumps would it be for Jumper Two if they departed from this location?”

“About seventeen jumps,” Cameron answered. “It would be a good test for Jumper Two’s new multi-jump computer.”

Nathan sighed. “Very well. Send them as soon they are ready. Have them make contact with Jess and report back as soon as possible.”

“Understood,” she answered. “One more thing, Captain. Sergeant Weatherly is detaining Lieutenant Telles just outside the bridge.”

“Why?”

“The lieutenant wishes to speak with you. I’m not sure the sergeant thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Tell Sergeant Weatherly to allow the lieutenant to pass.”

“Yes, sir,” Cameron said, smiling as she turned to exit.

Nathan called up the after action reports on his view screen and began reading. A moment later, Lieutenant Telles stepped into the room accompanied by the dutiful Sergeant Weatherly.

“Captain,” the sergeant called, “Lieutenant Telles wishes to speak with you, sir.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. That will be all.”

Sergeant Weatherly looked at the lieutenant with a suspicious eye. The sergeant was nearly twenty centimeters taller than the Ghatazhak lieutenant and several kilograms heavier.

The lieutenant looked up at the sergeant. "Is there something you wish to say to me, Sergeant?"

"No, sir." The sergeant looked at Nathan. "I'll be just outside, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Nathan said. He waited for the sergeant to leave the room before continuing. "My apologies, Lieutenant. The sergeant takes his responsibilities as my bodyguard quite seriously, I'm afraid."

"I have no quarrel with the man," the lieutenant answered. "I respect his sense of duty."

"Please, have a seat," Nathan insisted, pointing to the chair across the desk from him.

The lieutenant looked at the chair out of the corner of his eye. "No thank you, sir. The Ghatzhak do not sit in the presence of a superior officer."

"Superior?" Nathan laughed. "Hardly. Higher ranked? Only by circumstances, Lieutenant."

"It is not the person to which we show respect, sir. It is the rank. No offense intended."

"Of course. Your team was quite impressive," Nathan said. "I don't know that our own special operations troops could have done the same."

"While the mission was successful, it was hardly challenging, sir."

"Really?" Nathan leaned back in his chair. "Cold-coasting across a system for thirty hours in a meditative state, then landing on a small moon? You don't find *that* challenging?"

"*That* was simply mathematics."

"What about the meditation part?"

"Meditation is not unique to the Ghatzhak."

"I'm confused, Lieutenant," Nathan said, "and rather than run down the list of impressive acts on the part of you

and your platoon, I'm going to let you say what you came here to say."

"I wanted to be sure you did not take this victory as an example of things to come."

"What do you mean by that?"

"These Jung, the ones that hold your world, they are likely of a different caliber than those that we faced on Tanna."

"What brought you to this conclusion?"

"I have spoken with all of my squad leaders as well as some of the regulars. They all spoke of disorganized defenses, poor weapons skills, and lack of leadership during combat. These and many others speak of conscripts, of poorly trained men with low morale and little honor."

"And what makes you think that all Jung are not the same way?"

"You do not conquer such a vast area of space with such men, Captain. You certainly do not hold one, either. I have seen little of your people, and I know even less of your world, but I suspect that your training and your sense of honor and duty are far greater than those that defended Tanna and her fifth moon. If that is the case, and the Jung defeated the forces of your world, then it is likely they are, in fact, better trained and more capable than the pitiful group of men we slaughtered on Tanna."

Nathan looked at the lieutenant for a moment. The man stood there, steely-eyed, rigid, and as confident as could be. That which he lacked in stature he made up for in his very presence. The lieutenant was straightforward as well, which was refreshing. Nathan wondered if the man was even capable of telling a lie. "Then you also felt it was a slaughter?"

"A most distasteful one at that," the lieutenant replied.

“Then you did not enjoy it?”

The lieutenant looked at the captain, his eyes squinting slightly. “Enjoy it?” He turned his head to face the captain squarely. “The Ghatazhak do not enjoy killing, Captain. Contrary to what the aristocracy of Takara might tell you, we are not bloodthirsty animals. That is simply how Caius used the Ghatazhak: as a tool to strike fear into the hearts of those he conquered and as a way to ensure the safety of his precious nobles.” The lieutenant paused for a moment, regaining his composure. “The men we killed in the Herculis system we killed out of necessity and for the sake of the mission given to us.”

“Including the technicians and noncombatants on the fighter base?”

The lieutenant looked at Nathan once more, although with a calmer demeanor than before. “Those men represented a direct threat to the mission and to the safety of the people of Tanna to whom you have promised allegiance.”

“Really? How so?”

“On our approach to the fifth moon, as we descended, we spotted a deep-space comm-array. It was on the back side of the moon. The moon is tidally locked. Therefore that array is always pointed away from the planet and is never visible by those on the planet. Garrett was unaware of its existence. Any of those men, combatants and noncombatants alike, could have gotten a message off before we were able to neutralize the array. Doing so does not require a weapon.”

“How do you know they did not get a message off?”

“I do not,” the lieutenant admitted. “I do know, however, that none of the men we killed managed to do so.” The lieutenant’s gaze returned forward. “We do not enjoy killing

unarmed men, as there is no honor in doing so. We do recognize, however, that it is sometimes necessary. That is what makes us Ghatazhak. We do what must be done.”

“And if on a future mission I were to order you *not* to engage the noncombatants?”

“If your orders were contrary to the mission objectives or were in direct conflict with our sworn duties, we would ignore them, sir.”

Nathan could feel his pulse rate rising. “And what exactly are your sworn duties?”

“To protect the Aurora, her crew, and more importantly, her captain.”

Nathan was intrigued. “And who issued those orders?”

“Our directives were ordered by Prince Casimir of Takara.”

“If you were sworn to protect my ship, my crew, and myself, why did you agree to attack Tanna? After all, had you refused, we might not have agreed to help the Tannans.”

“The Aurora needed propellant,” the lieutenant explained. “She also needed a safe haven, a world from which to operate... preferably an industrialized one. Achieving these goals gives the Aurora, her crew, and her captain a better chance at survival.”

“Logical,” Nathan agreed with a nod.

“Also, had we refused to participate, I believe, based on your past history, that you would have attempted the attack on your own.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Nathan said, leaning forward once more.

“Many more people would have died, perhaps even yourself. We could not permit that to happen.”

“You might be right about that as well.”

“Captain,” the lieutenant said, his tone becoming more personable for the first time since he had been revived, “I did not come here to debate the morality of how the Ghatazhak achieve their objectives. That is the purview of philosophers and historians.”

“Funny you should say that...”

“I am aware of your educational background,” the lieutenant interrupted. “I came here to warn you that the next time you send the Ghatazhak into battle, it may not go as well as it did in the Herculis system. That is all.”

“Duly noted, Lieutenant,” Nathan said. “Thank you.”

The lieutenant returned to a more formal stance, his gaze again fixed straight ahead.

“Will there be anything else, Lieutenant?” Nathan asked.

“No, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lieutenant Telles said as he turned around and headed out of the compartment.

Nathan watched as the lieutenant exited. A moment later, Sergeant Weatherly stuck his head in through the hatch to make sure everything was okay. He looked at the captain. Nathan rolled his eyes.

“Reminds me of a few Marines I used to know,” the sergeant joked as he stepped out of the hatchway.

“I wasn’t going to say it,” Nathan said.

* * *

“What are you doing out here?” Synda asked as she stepped out onto the patio.

“Attempting to make contact,” Jessica answered.

“That’s what I thought. I brought you some tea.”

“I’m more of a coffee drinker myself,” Jessica said.

“So was I,” Synda said as she sat down on the steps next to Jessica. “Ever since the Jung came, coffee has become difficult to find, and when you do find it, it’s way too expensive.” Synda handed a steaming mug to Jessica. “Tea, however, can be made from just about anything.”

Jessica accepted the mug, mostly because it was warm. She sipped carefully at the hot beverage. “Not bad. A little weak, isn’t it?”

“Sugar is also hard to come by these days, even for these guys,” Synda said, pointing over her shoulder at the house behind them. “I don’t even want to ask if they have any lemons.”

“It’s fine, thanks.”

“How often do you have to do this?”

“Every few hours.”

“For how long?”

“Until someone answers.”

“That’s a lot of time out here,” Synda said as she pulled her collar closed against the chilly evening breeze. “Aren’t you afraid someone will see you?”

“The laser comm is under that box over there,” Jessica said, pointing at the cardboard box on the ground next to the patio. “The trick to not getting caught is to not look like you’re doing anything wrong. If anyone is looking, or if a satellite is looking down from overhead, I just look like some gal sitting on the patio reading her data pad.”

“Clever,” Synda said, sitting down next to her on the steps.

Jessica pushed the send button on her data pad screen.

“You’re not worried someone will pick up that signal?”

“It’s unlikely. The laser beam widens so minutely that, even after a few million kilometers, the signal field is only about one hundred meters across.”

“Even so, wouldn’t it be easier to just wait for them to signal you?”

“How would they know where I am?”

“How do you know where they are?”

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?” Jessica said, turning to look at Synda.

“How else am I supposed to learn?”

Jessica rolled her eyes and nodded. “I’m following a predetermined comm-schedule. I know exactly where to aim the signal beam during each comm window. If they are out there, they will pick up my hailing signal, lock onto my beam’s point of origin, and aim their beam directly back at me. Easy as that.”

Synda looked up at the night sky. “Still seems like something out there might pick up your signal by mistake.”

“It’s possible, but again, highly unlikely. I’m pulsing the signal. It’s only on for a second, and it randomly pulses at intervals between five and ten seconds. Someone or something would have to be at the right spot, at the right moment, and even then they would have to remain there for several pulses to get a fix. Things in space don’t stay still.”

“Then how will your friends find the right spot?”

“They’ll be approaching along the same line as the outbound signal beam.” Jessica looked at Synda. “For someone who wanted to join the EDF, you sure don’t know much.”

“I never got in, remember?” Synda said. “How am I supposed to know anything?”

“Usually, people who apply already have some sort of skill or degree to help get them in the door. What were you planning to do?”

“Anything they would have let me,” Synda said. “It doesn’t matter now anyway.” She looked out at the distant

mountains. "All I want to do is get some gear and disappear into those mountains."

"Yeah, that does sound nice," Jessica said. "Although I'm more of a beach girl myself."

"I've never even seen the ocean. What's it like?"

"Big, powerful, full of life, and very dangerous if you aren't careful." Jessica smiled. "Now that I think about it, space is pretty much the same way."

"I can't even imagine what it must be like to go into space."

"It isn't at all what people think it is," Jessica said. "Sure, the flight up is great. You get to look out the window, experience weightlessness, see the Earth below. Then you get on board the ship, and you're locked up inside."

"No windows?"

"Nope. Just view screens and cameras, which I guess in some ways are better than windows."

"So you were stuck inside the ship the entire time?"

"Me, no. I was the last spec-ops on board. It seems like I got to leave the ship more than anyone."

"Doesn't sound too bad, if you ask me."

Jessica's data pad beeped. She set her mug of tea down on the patio next to her and picked up the data pad.

"What is it?" Synda asked. "Is it them?"

"Hell, yes," Jessica exclaimed, as she quickly sent her message.

"Did you send them a message?"

"Damn right I did."

"So quickly?"

"Are you kidding? I already had it typed in and ready to send."

"Did they answer?" Synda asked. "What did they say?"

"Hold on," Jessica told her.

“So is it the Aurora?”

“No, it’s just one of her shuttles,” Jessica said as she stared at the data pad, waiting for a reply.

“How would a shuttle get all the way...”

“They’re answering,” Jessica said. “They’ll be back in four hours to pick me up.” Jessica jumped up and ran back inside.

“Wait, how are they going to pick you up?” She turned back toward the house, rising from her seat to follow Jessica. “How is that even possible?”

* * *

“Major!” Nathan hollered across the Aurora’s main hangar bay. “A word!”

Major Waddell stopped in mid-stride as the rest of his squad continued toward Jumper Two, which had only finished refueling a few minutes ago. He turned back toward the captain.

“We have no idea where she’s going to ask you to set down.”

“I am aware of this, Captain,” the major answered.

“It’s critical you get her back here alive. If she’s calling for immediate extraction, she’s got a damned good reason. I suspect she knows where the Celestia is located.”

“I know, sir.”

“Remember, that’s Earth you’re going to. There may be civilians around...”

“Captain,” Major Waddell interrupted, “she knows what she is doing, as do I. No offense, sir, but you’re just wasting what could be valuable time here.”

“Of course,” Nathan said, looking slightly embarrassed. He patted the major on the shoulder. “Good luck, Major. Get

her back safely. Get everyone back safely.”

“That is the plan, sir,” the major stated as he turned away and continued on toward the waiting super-jump shuttle.

Jumper Two’s engines began to increase in pitch slightly as the major ran up the rear cargo ramp, jumping onto the end of it as it began to swing upward. He made his way forward as the shuttle began to turn around and head for the main transfer airlock that led onto the flight apron. He looked at his men as he walked down the center of the shuttle’s cargo bay. Each of the eight men had trained with him on Corinair and had fought with him as they helped the Tanna resistance rid their world of the last of the Jung ground forces. He trusted these men with his life, and they trusted him with theirs.

Major Waddell bent down as he stepped through the small hatch from the cargo bay to the shuttle’s flight deck. He had yet to ride on the Aurora’s newest jump shuttle, the one loosely referred to as the ‘super-jumper.’

The cockpit was small and cramped with only one small fold-down jump seat located directly behind the pilot’s seat. He scanned the flight consoles as he took his seat. It looked like any other shuttle’s flight console, except that there was an extra control pad sticking out just above the center pedestal. It was under the center view screen, yet just high enough that the pilot could get his hands on the throttles underneath. The control pad did not look like it belonged. “That your new toy?”

“Yes, sir,” the copilot replied.

“I’m assuming it works fine.”

“Damn fine, sir. We’ll be in the Sol system in ten minutes, maximum.”

“Good to hear,” the major said as he settled back in his seat. He watched over the copilot’s shoulder, looking out the forward windows of the shuttle as it rolled to a stop inside the transfer airlock. As he waited for the airlock to depressurize, he glanced back through the hatch to the cargo bay. His men were calm and relaxed, just as Corinari troopers should be.

The shuttle began to roll forward once more. The major turned his head to look out the forward windows again as the shuttle rolled out onto the open flight deck on the back side of the Aurora’s forward section. He could see the forward slope of the ship’s massive, main propulsion section towering before them like the side of a cliff.

The flight crew spoke constantly with each other as well as the flight controller on the Aurora. As they rolled out into the open, he could feel the artificial gravity becoming lighter. As soon as their nose passed the red lines on the flight apron, the pilot fired his thrusters and lifted the shuttle up off the deck. As they rose, more thrusters fired, causing them to slide sharply to port. Once they reached one meter in relative altitude, the major felt the artificial gravity fade away altogether, leaving them weightless.

The shuttle continued sliding to port as the pilot spun the ship around one hundred eighty degrees so they were facing the same direction as the Aurora. The major continued looking out the forward windows as the shuttle now was sliding to starboard. Within a few seconds, they drifted out far enough that he could see alongside the Aurora, all the way forward.

The pilot fired his main drive, pushing the major back against the bulkhead behind him and driving his right shoulder into the padding. The side of the Aurora began

rushing past them to port as the small, super-jump shuttle continued to accelerate.

The copilot was already typing in a string of commands on the extra control pad as he set up the parameters for the rapid series of jumps they were about to execute.

A minute after the major could no longer see the Aurora to port, he heard the copilot acknowledge the flight controller's permission to initiate their multi-jump sequence.

"You may want to drop your visor and set it to full opaque, sir," the copilot warned. "The jump flashes seem to get brighter with each jump when we do them back to back."

Major Waddell followed the copilot's advice, dropping the visor on his combat helmet and touching a small button on the side of his helmet that caused the visor to become completely opaque. The first jump flash filled the inside of his visor with blue-white that spilled in from under his chin, as he was not wearing an enclosed pressure helmet. The flash was bright but not bothersome. The major closed his eyes as the next flash came. Even with his eyes closed, he could see the flashes of light, turning the inside of his eyelids a bright pinkish-white. The flashes came only a few seconds apart, giving the super-jump shuttle's automated multi-jump system just enough time to verify their coordinates and make minute adjustments to the parameters of the next jump.

Major Waddell counted as each jump illuminated his eyelids. He thought about Josh and Loki and how they had experienced the same ride but without the protection afforded by the Falcon's canopy against the radiation of the jump fields that enveloped the ship with each jump. He concentrated on his own body, try to determine if he, too, would feel any of the side effects that Josh and Loki had felt,

but there was nothing. He just saw the inside of his eyelids with each jump flash.

Seventeen jumps later, the series of flashes came to an end. The major opened his eyes and looked forward once again. "That's it?"

"Welcome to the Sol system, Major," the copilot said, smiling.

Major Waddell looked around, unable to tell any difference in the stars than when they had left the Aurora's deck, thirty-two and a half light years away. "It doesn't look any different," the major said.

"We're looking at the same exact stars we were when we left, sir. We're just a little closer to them now."

"Very little, in cosmic terms," the pilot said.

"The only thing that has changed really is that star right there," the copilot said. "That one's a lot closer now."

"That's Sol?"

"Yes, sir."

The major looked at the control pad that had been added to the flight console again. "That really is an amazing device."

"Yes, it is, sir."

"When do we try to make contact?"

"The next window is in seven minutes," the copilot reported.

* * *

"Every bit of intelligence we have on the Jung's current positions and resources on Earth are on this chip," one of the resistance technicians said as he handed the chip over to Jessica.

"Got it," Jessica answered.

“I cannot stress enough how important it is that you rescue those data cores and keep them safe,” President Scott said. “There is still so much technology stored on those cores that we have not yet been able to develop. If the Jung ever got their hands on them...”

“I got it,” Jessica insisted.

“How much time do you have?”

Jessica looked at her watch. “The next contact window starts in two minutes.”

“How long after you make contact will it take for them to pick you up?” the president asked.

“They can be here in minutes. I just need to tell them where.”

“Of course.” The president signaled the technician, who immediately produced a data pad. “Any ideas?”

“Usually a valley or canyon is best. It prevents the enemy from having direct line of sight on the jump flash.”

“Jump flash?” the president wondered.

“Really bright light,” Jessica explained. “It only lasts a second, but it’s a dead giveaway.” Jessica looked at the map on the data pad. “There are plenty of mountains north of us. Surely there are some good spots up there.”

“Yes, but it will take some time to get there,” President Scott said.

“Can’t we use your Jung shuttle?”

“We do not store it nearby for security reasons. It would take nearly an hour just to reach it.”

“It’s too risky,” the president’s chief of security added. “Around this area, we can get away with it. There are always ships flying around, and there are a few Jung black-ops birds in operation, so we can fly around the flat lands without anyone taking notice. But if we took it up into the mountains... that they would notice.”

“Then it’s got to be someplace we can get to by car or truck,” Jessica said.

“And it needs to be close by,” the president added. “Our source in Geneva has confirmed that the admiral was tortured, so it is reasonable to assume the Jung know of the Celestia’s location.”

“You don’t think the *admiral* can keep a secret?” Jessica asked, a bit surprised they would automatically assume he could not.

“The Jung have some... interesting techniques for information extraction,” the security chief said. “It’s safer to assume he told them everything he knew.”

“We have already started evacuating the facilities we are sure the admiral knew about,” the president added. “So you see, the faster we can get you back to the Aurora, the better.”

“Then why not just transmit the message?” Jessica suggested. “The new encryption the Takarans came up with is supposed to be unbreakable.”

“Nothing is unbreakable, Nash,” the security chief said. “You know that.”

“You don’t know the Takarans,” she insisted.

“They’re humans, aren’t they?” the security chief said. “Humans make mistakes...”

“If we have to transmit the information, we will,” the president interrupted. “However, if possible, I prefer not to take the risk. For now, let’s concentrate on getting you back to your ship.” The president looked at the data pad. “We need something nearby, a clearing or something. How big is this jump shuttle?”

“About the size of a large shipping container,” Jessica said.

“Maybe in the woods, outside the city,” the security chief said.

Jessica smiled. “I know just the place. Do you have satellite overheads on your data pad?”

* * *

Jessica sat in the front passenger seat of the crew van as it bounced along the dark, dirt roads that weaved through the woods. Synda and Tony sat behind her, and in the back of the van were two members of the resistance.

“You’ll see to it that they get north to the mountains, right?”

“As soon as we get you on your way, we have orders to take them to the train yard a couple hours north of here,” the driver explained. “They can hop a northbound freight train there.”

“How long will that carry them?”

“A couple days, maybe three. The northbound trains are usually pretty empty. The Jung are mining resources up there and hauling it south for processing. Nobody checks the northbound trains, so they should be all right.”

“You’re sure about that?” Jessica asked.

“Look, you heard the chief; it’s the best we can do right now. We’re already packing up to move to another facility. We can’t afford to tie up another vehicle running them even farther north. That’s why they assigned us to run them north.”

Jessica wasn’t happy, and her expression showed it.

“They’ll be fine,” the driver assured her, noticing the look on Jessica’s face.

“Don’t worry, Jessica,” Synda said. “We’ll be fine. We’ve got everything we need, thanks to you.”

“They’re actually lucky,” the driver told Jessica. “If we weren’t already bugging out, there’s no way the chief would have let them go.”

The van pulled to a stop at the edge of the clearing. The driver stared out the front window. The van’s headlights reached less than halfway across the small meadow in front of them, leaving most of the tree line around the clearing in darkness.

“This is it,” Jessica said.

“How did you find this place?” the driver asked.

“A rather dirty, old man tried to collect payment for a ride from me here,” Jessica told him.

The driver smiled. “I have a feeling that didn’t work out too well for him.”

“You’re right,” Jessica said as she opened her door. “It didn’t.”

The driver shut off the lights and turned the vehicle off as the rest of the occupants climbed out.

Synda started to climb out as well.

“Maybe we should stay in here,” Tony said, grabbing her arm.

“No way,” Synda answered. “I want to see this.” She climbed out of the van to join the others. Tony sighed, rolling his eyes as he climbed out of the van as well.

“Do you have the beacon?” Jessica asked the driver.

The driver pulled out a small device the size of his palm from his pants pocket and handed it to her.

Jessica walked into the middle of the small meadow. She paused a moment, looking at the tree line in all directions in order to determine the center of the clearing. Satisfied with her position, she turned the device on. As the tiny strobe light on the device began flashing, she placed it on the ground and walked back toward the van. She looked at her

watch as she walked. She still had several minutes until the jump shuttle was due to arrive.

“What’s that?” Synda asked Jessica as she returned.

“It marks the LZ for the shuttle pilot,” Jessica explained.

Synda took several steps out, trying to get a better view of the device. “But it’s so faint. How can the pilot even see it?”

“He can’t, but the low-light optical systems in the shuttle can.”

“And nobody else can see it?” Synda wondered.

“Not unless they’re using low-light gear.” Jessica looked at her watch again. “One minute. I’d suggest everyone take cover.”

Jessica moved behind the van with everyone else. She looked up at the night sky. With no moon out, the forest was pitch black, making the hologram easier to spot than usual. Something caught her eye, and she looked quickly to the northern portion of the sky. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” the driver asked.

“I thought I saw...”

Jessica was interrupted by a brilliant flash of bright blue-white light from the middle of the meadow just above the surrounding tree line. The flash was followed immediately by a thunderous clap and a shock wave of air that blew dust and debris outward in all directions. The trees around the edge of the meadow thrashed about wildly from the wave of air displaced by the sudden arrival of the super-jump shuttle. The thunder rapidly subsided to the scream of the shuttle’s four turbines as it descended quickly and touched down directly on top of the holographic beacon, blocking out its emitter.

As the shuttle touched down, bright floodlights located along its sides snapped on, illuminating the entire meadow

as well as the surrounding tree line. As the turbines began to wind down to idle, the rear cargo door began to swing outward and lower to the ground.

“Jesus!” the driver exclaimed.

“That’s amazing!” Synda declared.

Tony and the other two members of the resistance just stood there in awe, their mouths agape.

“Not bad, huh?” Jessica said with a broad smile.

Corinari troops jumped out of the back of the shuttle, landing on either side of the ramp as it finished lowering. Eight men spread out in all directions, taking up positions to secure the perimeter. One by one, they dropped to one knee, their weapons held ready as they visually scanned the tree line.

One more man jumped down from the cargo ramp and began walking calmly toward them. His stride was composed and confident, and even in silhouette, Jessica recognized him.

“Lieutenant Commander,” Major Waddell greeted as he approached.

Jessica smiled. “Major Waddell.”

“Are you ready to go?”

“You bet...”

The air was suddenly filled with the screech of Jung energy weapons as bolts of red streaked inward from deep inside the surrounding tree line. The Corinari troops immediately returned fire, sending their own bolts of energy toward every flash they spotted in the woods.

Major Waddell instantly crouched, bending at the knees to get low to the ground. He pulled his own weapon off his shoulder and prepared to return fire. “I think we need to leave!” he shouted.

The members of the resistance did not hesitate and quickly opened up with their automatic, close-quarters, projectile weapons.

“Get to the front of the van!” he ordered Tony and Synda, both of whom were unarmed.

Neither of them moved at first. A bolt of energy from a Jung rifle struck the van beside them, burning a hole in the side. Synda screamed as Tony pushed her forward.

The two members of the resistance near the rear of the van found themselves without adequate cover and were quickly taken down with well-placed shots of Jung energy weapons coming from just beyond the tree line.

“We’re fucking surrounded!” Jessica declared.

“No kidding!” Major Waddell retorted. As he continued firing with his rifle, he pulled his sidearm and tossed it to Jessica. “We need to move!”

“What about them?!” Jessica cried out.

“They’re not my concern!” Major Waddell responded as he continued firing into the tree line. He looked to his right as one of his men fell to Jung fire.

“They’ll be interrogated if they’re captured!” Jessica declared.

Major Waddell looked back at Tony and Synda as they huddled together at the front of the van.

“Don’t even think about it, Waddell!” Jessica barked.

Another energy blast streaked past Jessica, striking the driver in the chest and sending him flying backward against the van. He bounced off the front of the vehicle, ending up a smoldering pile of human remains in the dirt.

Major Waddell touched his comm-set, listening to traffic. “We’ve got fast movers inbound!” he announced. “Two out!” The major keyed his comm-set. “Fall back to the shuttle!” he

ordered his men. "Grab the wounded! No one gets left behind!" He turned back to Jessica. "Get in that shuttle!"

Jessica glanced at Tony and Synda huddled together and squatting on the ground as blasts from Jung energy weapons struck the dirt nearby. The energy bolts sent chunks of earth and grass spraying over them. "What about them?" Jessica demanded again as she fired at the gun flashes in the woods.

"Captain ordered me to get you out alive, Nash! Now get your ass in that shuttle!"

Another Corinari trooper took a blast in the thigh and fell over, screaming in pain as his pants melted in with his skin.

Jessica reached over and grabbed Synda by the jacket and pulled on her. "Get your butts in that shuttle! NOW!"

"Nash!" the major began to object.

"Shut up and move, Major!" Jessica ordered.

More bolts of energy struck the ground around them as they moved quickly toward the shuttle. They fired their weapons continuously as they shuffled sideways. Jessica spun around, firing in all directions as she tried desperately to keep the Jung at bay. They were completely surrounded, and there had to be at least twenty Jung soldiers firing from behind cover within the woods.

Major Waddell ran behind the shuttle, grabbing one of his wounded men and helping him up the ramp.

Jessica continued spinning around as she ran and fired. As soon as she got next to the shuttle, she kept her back to the ship and fired out in front of her. She heard a scream, causing her to look to her right. Synda was on the ground, and Tony was falling over her. He landed unceremoniously, face first in the grass. He rolled over, pulling his feet and legs off of his friend, who lay unmoving on the grass behind him. "Oh, my God! Synda!" Tony crawled over to her,

shaking her briefly as he tried to determine if she was still alive.

Jessica dropped to her knees next to Synda. "Take this," she ordered, handing her weapon to Tony. "Shoot that way!"

Tony pointed the weapon at the tree line and began firing, red bolts of energy flying out of his barrel and smashing into the trees. With each flash from the Jung weapons, the woods around them were briefly illuminated. He quickly started firing at the brief glimpses of Jung soldiers in the darkness as Jessica picked up Synda and started carrying her toward the back of the shuttle.

After several steps, Major Waddell met her halfway and took Synda's limp body from her. "I've got her! Let's go!"

Tony fired at another briefly illuminated pair of Jung soldiers in the woods. The very next flash of light revealed only one soldier where two had once been. Tony's face lit up. "Fuck! I got one!"

"Good shootin'!" Jessica exclaimed as she grabbed his jacket and pulled him toward the back of the shuttle. "Let's move!"

Major Waddell handed Synda's body off to the shuttle's crew chief just inside the cargo hatch, then turned and took a position at the top of the ramp. He brought his weapon up and opened fire once more, expertly spreading his shots evenly across the tree line in an effort to keep the Jung soldiers from coming up from behind their cover. As Jessica and Tony ran up the ramp, he hollered at the last two of his men to fall back to the shuttle. As he continued firing to cover their retreat, one more of his men went down to enemy fire. As the shuttle's engines began spinning up to full thrust, the major went to the end of the ramp and helped his last man pull his wounded comrade onto the ramp as it began to swing upward off the grassy meadow.

The shuttle began to rise slowly off the ground as Jung energy weapons slammed into its sides. Fortunately, the dissipative coating on the shuttle's hull was designed to defend against Takaran energy weapons, which were far more powerful than those carried by Jung ground troops.

The ramp continued to swing upward, sending Major Waddell and his two men tumbling toward the back of the shuttle. As the hatch continued to close, the crew chief and one of the Corinari troops fired a few more shots downward toward the Jung soldiers on the ground, pulling their weapons in just before the ramp slammed shut and sealed off the back of the shuttle.

"We're closed up back here!" the crew chief announced over his comm-set.

Major Waddell quickly counted his men. Four were unharmed, two were dead, and two were injured, but he had all eight bodies on board. He also had Lieutenant Commander Nash and two Terran civilians.

The Jung troops ran out into the clearing, firing madly at the underside of the shuttle as it continued to rise.

The Jung interceptor pilot looked ahead at the shuttle as it began to accelerate away from the clearing in the woods below. He could see the red energy bolts coming from the Jung troops below as they harmlessly struck the bottom of the fleeing shuttle. It quickly accelerated beyond the reach of the ground troops' weapons and began climbing more rapidly as it tried to make its escape. As he skimmed the top of the forest below, the Jung pilot locked his missiles on the shuttle and gently pulled his nose up to stay with the climbing target. He waited for a lock signal, then pressed the release button on his flight control stick. As his missile

left its launch rails, the target disappeared in a brilliant flash of blue-white light.

* * *

Jumper Two rolled into the Aurora's main hangar bay, her engines spinning down as she came to a stop. Three medical rescue teams, along with Doctor Chen and Doctor Galloway, ran to the shuttle from the equipment elevator corridor on the side of the bay.

The cargo ramp came folding down from the back of the shuttle, already more than halfway down by the time the shuttle stopped. Two Corinari troops came down the ramp carrying one of the wounded comrades, followed by two more carrying the second injured man.

Nathan came through the forward hatch of the hangar bay, Sergeant Weatherly following behind him. Nathan was slightly winded after having run down from the bridge at the shuttle's call for a medical response. He ran out across the massive hangar bay toward the shuttle at the aft end as the Corinari troops placed their wounded brothers on the first two medical gurneys. His pace slowed as he spotted Jessica and Major Waddell carrying a wounded young woman that he did not recognize. They were followed by a young man who was dressed as the young woman was, in civilian Earth attire. He could tell that both Jessica and the young man were upset, as was the major. Something had obviously gone wrong.

Jessica and Major Waddell placed the young woman on the third medical gurney. The medics pushed the civilian man aside as they went to work, calling for one of the doctors to help them tend the seriously injured young woman.

Doctor Galloway turned away from the Corinari trooper with the leg wound. Seeing the condition of the young woman, she turned to the medics and issued instructions before moving to her side.

“She is from Earth?” Doctor Galloway asked Jessica as she assisted the medics in cutting away the young woman’s clothing.

“Yes, yes, she’s from Earth,” Jessica exclaimed, uncharacteristically rattled by the extent of Synda’s injuries.

“The nanites,” the doctor said as she held out her empty hand to one of the medics. “They will cause her great discomfort.” Her statement was intended to be one of warning to Jessica. The medic slapped a preloaded pneumo-ject into the doctor’s open hand.

“Will they save her?” Jessica asked.

“I do not know,” the doctor admitted. “There is some hope, however.” The doctor placed the pneumo-ject against the inside of Synda’s exposed thigh and pressed the button, injecting millions of Corinairan nanites into Synda’s femoral artery. “Without them, she will die. This I know.”

“Fuck!” Jessica exclaimed, her right hand going up to her forehead.

“Is she going to be all right?” Tony demanded as he tried to stay as close as possible to Synda without getting in the way of the medics and the Corinairan doctor. He looked at Jessica. “These nanites, they’re going to save her, right?” He looked around in despair, hoping someone would reassure him. His eyes darted back and forth, up and down, taking in the details of the foreign environment of the Aurora’s main hangar bay. The enormity of where he was and what was happening to him and his friend was beginning to overwhelm him. “Please! Tell me she’s gonna be okay!”

Jessica turned away, unable to face the young man.

Tony watched in anguish as the medical staff intubated his friend and started intravenous lines in order to replace the patient's lost blood volume with synthetic substitutes. He looked toward the shuttle as the Corinari troops carried their two dead comrades down its cargo ramp, setting them on the additional gurneys that had been rolled in.

Nathan could see that Jessica was in no condition to comfort the young man. Neither was Major Waddell, who seemed rightfully more concerned with his deceased men.

"They'll do everything they can for her," Nathan told the young man as he pulled him aside to prevent him from interfering with the rescue teams. "What's your name?"

The young man looked at him, tears in his eyes. "Tony."

"Tony, I'm Captain Scott, commander of this ship. What's your last name?"

"Ship? What ship?" he wondered, confusion on his face.

"You're on board the UES Aurora."

"What? The Aurora?" He looked even more surprised. "You mean, she wasn't making that stuff up?" he asked in disbelief.

"I expect not," Nathan assured him.

"Where are we? Are we near Earth?" He looked at Synda. "Maybe we should get her back to a hospital."

"No, we're not anywhere near Earth at the moment, but our doctors are far more advanced; believe me," Nathan promised.

"We were only on that thing for a few minutes," Tony insisted. "How far could we be?"

"Quite a ways, actually." Nathan smiled. "It's a long story," he told Tony, pulling him farther aside as the medics began rolling Synda's gurney toward the hatch at the forward end of the hangar bay. "I'll explain it to you later," Nathan promised, noticing an argument starting between

Jessica and the major. Nathan signaled one of the security personnel standing nearby. "Escort Tony here to medical, and see to it that someone takes care of him."

"Yes, sir," the security guard answered.

Nathan leaned in closer to the guard. "And keep him isolated from everyone for now."

"Of course, sir."

Nathan turned back to Tony. "Tony, I'd like you to go with this gentleman. He'll take you to medical so you can be near your friend. I'll check on you later, all right?"

"Sure, I guess," Tony answered, looking as if he had given up and was resigning himself to the situation.

Nathan turned toward the shuttle and headed off Jessica and the major at the bottom of the cargo ramp.

"You were gonna shoot them!" Jessica said to the major as Nathan approached.

"I should have," Major Waddell insisted. "If I had, those two men might still be alive..."

"Oh, that's bullshit, and you know it!" Jessica exclaimed.

"What's going on here?" Nathan asked as he came up to them.

"You let an emotional attachment to those two noncombatants cloud your judgment at a critical moment..."

"More bullshit! If they had been captured..."

"Which is precisely why we should have killed them," the major reiterated.

"Nobody is killing anybody!" Nathan yelled over them.

"I think you're forgetting who's in charge around here, Major!" Jessica insisted.

"I'm pretty sure I am!" Nathan said. "And I'm ordering you both to take it down a notch!"

"*Captain, XO,*" Cameron's voice called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Go ahead, Commander," Nathan answered.

"Jump drive is fully recharged, sir, and flight ops reports ready for red deck. Are we clear to make our next jump?"

"Yes, Commander," Nathan answered. "Set the deck red and execute the next jump."

"Aye, sir," Cameron answered over the comm-set. After a brief pause, she asked, *"Is everyone okay?"*

Nathan looked at Major Waddell. "Casualties?"

"Two dead, two injured," the major said, his tone somewhat more restrained.

"And one wounded civilian," Jessica added.

"Two KIA, two wounded, and one wounded civilian," Nathan reported over the comm-set. "Nash and Waddell are fine," he added.

"Very well, sir. Second jump is complete. Seven hours until the next jump."

Nathan looked at Jessica. "What the hell happened?"

"We were ambushed at the extraction point," Jessica told him. "We were completely surrounded."

"How the hell did they know where the extraction point was?" Nathan asked.

"I'd like to know that myself," Major Waddell added.

"I don't know." Jessica sighed. The adrenaline coursing through her body was taking its toll on her nerves. "They must have followed us. The Jung probably already knew about the resistance base. Galiardi must've cracked. They could have been watching us for the last week, for all I know."

"How did they get so many troops into position so quickly?" the major sneered.

"We were there for about ten minutes before you showed up," Jessica explained, ignoring the major's tone. "If they did follow us from the hideout, they would have had to

deploy pretty quickly. To do that without being noticed, they had to be well trained.” She looked at Waddell, an accusatory look on her face. “What I want to know is how those interceptors found us so quickly.”

“Interceptors?” Nathan asked.

“One of them was trying to put a missile up our ass. We barely jumped away in time.”

“They probably detected us on our first jump,” Major Waddell said. “We had to jump in over the north pole, then jump again down to the extraction point. Our approach angle was unfortunate. Your planet’s moon was in the way of a single, direct jump. To get around it, we had to jump first to high orbit, then to the surface. We had hoped the interaction between the charged particles in the solar wind and the planet’s electromagnetic field would mask our jump flash.”

“What?” Jessica said.

“I believe he’s talking about the Aurora Borealis,” Nathan said, smiling.

“You’re kidding.”

“It apparently did not work,” the major admitted. “The interceptors must have been nearby for them to arrive so quickly.”

“That was a risky call, Major,” Nathan said.

“Perhaps. At the time, I felt that haste was called for. In retrospect, it appears that I was correct.”

“For all we know, they weren’t even expecting the extraction. Maybe they were just hoping to capture us, to interrogate us and learn what our cell was up to.”

“In which case, my decision not to wait for a single jump entry angle saved you,” Major Waddell said with one eyebrow indignantly raised. Jessica glared at him in return.

Nathan recognized Jessica's body language and decided to end the confrontation. "Major, see to your men. I'll expect an after action report from you as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," the major answered, snapping a salute before departing.

Nathan turned to Jessica. "Now, what were you saying about Admiral Galiardi?"

"Apparently, he was captured a week or so ago. They don't really know for sure. One of their operatives saw him at a hospital in Geneva all beat up or something. I guess he's on death's door."

"If Galiardi is captured, who's in charge?"

"I don't know," Jessica said, lying through her teeth. "That's not important, though. I know where the Celestia went."

"Where?"

"Metis."

CHAPTER TEN

“We’ve been working on this thing for days now,” Luis said as he handed Devyn the data pad. “Are we even close to making it work?”

“What’s the matter? Are you getting tired of me already?” Devyn quipped.

“No, of course not. It’s been great having you here, especially after just talking on the comms for months. I’m just starting to wonder if we’re not wasting more oxygen trying to fix this thing than if there was just one of us on duty at a time up here. I mean, we’ve got to be burning up O2 working our asses off all day long in this cramped little corridor.”

“We’ve got plenty of oxygen, Luis,” Devyn said. “It will take weeks, if not months, before we need to haul the oxygen candles up from the aft section. We’re just lucky I was able to find parts down in the cargo bay. You know, Kovacic should feel pretty stupid right about now, being a supply officer and not knowing there was a cargo bay full of parts and equipment still waiting to be installed.”

“Yeah. If we ever get back to Earth, I’m planning on giving him a lot of ribbing about that.”

“As well you should...” Devyn stopped mid-sentence and froze. “Did you hear that?”

Luis also froze, listening intently. “I don’t hear...” He listened again, hearing a faint beeping sound coming from the bridge. “Oh, crap!” He dropped his tool and wiggled his

way around the various pipes and conduit in the narrow utility space alongside the Celestia's bridge, making his way toward the hatch at the far end. He reached the end and exited, turning to his right and entering the bridge. He paused, listening again to determine which console the beeping was coming from. After two more beeps, he headed for the sensor station.

"What is it?" Devyn asked as she came out of the utility corridor.

"Sensors have picked up a contact," he said as he frantically worked the console. "It's small, a scout ship or maybe a shuttle of some kind."

"Is it one of ours?" Devyn asked hopefully.

"I don't think so," Luis admitted. "The configuration is all wrong, and the energy readings I'm getting are way... Well, they're just weird."

"Weird how?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it."

"Where did it come from?"

"That part's even weirder. There's no track. It's like it just appeared out of nowhere."

"That's impossible. There must be a malfunction."

"Doesn't matter now," Luis insisted as he transferred the track to the tactical station. He moved quickly from the sensor station to the tactical console behind the command chair. "Whatever it is, it's already here." Luis activated his displays and patched one of the Celestia's many external cameras into the display on his console. "What the hell is that?" He strained his eyes, trying to see more detail on the tiny screen. "Screw this," he mumbled as he activated the main view screen.

"Wait," Devyn objected. "Aren't you afraid they'll pick up the emissions from the view screen?"

“They already know we’re here,” Luis said as he picked up his comm-set. He thought for a moment, setting it back down. “They might pick that up.” He activated the ship’s internal intercom system instead. “Engineering! Bridge! I need Kovacic, now!” The main view screen came to life, showing a small shuttle above them. It had already turned on its searchlights and had begun aiming them directly at the Celestia, blinding his view. He quickly switched cameras to get a better view.

“Hello! Tilly! Are you down there?” He called over the intercom.

“What is that thing?” Devyn wondered as she stared at the image of the small ship. “Where did it come from?”

“I have no idea,” Luis said as he waited impatiently for someone to answer his hails on the intercom.

“I’m here! I’m here!” Tilly answered over the intercom.
“What’s up?”

“I need Kovacic!”

“I sent for him! What’s going on?”

“We’ve got company.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“‘Oh, fuck’ is right,” Luis agreed, “because it isn’t one of ours.”

* * *

“That’s her,” Jessica said as she peered out the side cockpit window over the copilot’s shoulder. “Damn, she looks just like the Aurora, doesn’t she?”

“Never thought I would see a ship that size sitting on the surface of anything,” Major Waddell stated.

“EDF shuttle calling the Celestia. Do you copy?” the copilot called over the comms.

“She’s covered with dust,” Major Waddell added as he tried to see from behind Jessica.

“EDF shuttle calling the Celestia. Do you copy?” the copilot turned his head and looked back over his shoulder at Jessica. “It’s no use, sir. She’s not answering.”

“She’s probably shut down, gone cold to hide,” Major Waddell commented.

“She looks dead,” the major mumbled.

“The Earth resistance said the Celestia had orders to go cold: no comms, no sensors, as little emissions as possible—preferably none at all.”

“How are we supposed to make contact?” the major asked.

Jessica turned to the copilot in front of her. “Take us down, parallel with the boarding hatch. Down there,” she instructed, pointing at the Celestia forward section. “There’s almost no gravity down there, so you shouldn’t have any pull to fight. We’ll put the cargo ramp in platform position. Then back us in close, no farther than a meter or two. We’ll jump across.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jessica turned around to exit, facing the major behind her. “Grab your helmet, Major,” Jessica said. “We’re going for a walk.”

* * *

“Are you sure it’s not one of ours?” Kovacic asked over the intercom.

“There’s no way, sir. It’s just too strange,” Luis answered from the Celestia’s tactical station. “It has to be a Jung shuttle.”

"Why would they send a shuttle?" Kovacic asked. "I thought shuttles were for orbital flights. Who the hell takes a shuttle all the way to Jupiter?"

"Maybe it's one of our people," Devyn said. "Maybe they stole it to make contact with us. Or maybe they defeated the Jung and that was all that was left."

"You're a tactical officer," the lieutenant commander said. *"Any of that seem plausible to you?"*

"More optimistic than plausible, I'm afraid," Luis admitted. "At the speed a shuttle flies, it would take them years to get here."

"Maybe Jung shuttles are faster," Kovacic said.

"I'm looking at her now, sir, and I'm not seeing enough of a propulsion system to support..." Luis stopped mid-sentence as the image of the shuttle on the view screen changed its attitude. "It's doing something. It's moving."

"Where?"

"It's sliding to port and descending. Wait, I'm switching cameras." Luis switched to one of the Celestia's port side cameras. The shuttle appeared at the very top of the view screen, moving down the screen as it slowly rotated its nose away from the camera. "It looks like a cargo shuttle, sir. It's got a big rear hatch on..." Luis stopped again as the hatch on the back of the shuttle began to open, slowly swinging outward and down from the top edge of the shuttle.

"You cut yourself off," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said over the intercom. *"What did you say?"*

"Its rear hatch is opening, sir," Luis reported as he watched the shuttle descend. The image of the small ship began to grow in size. Luis looked down at his display, checking the distance between the contact and the Celestia. It was decreasing. "It's moving closer." He looked back up at the screen. The rear hatch was now completely opened,

sitting parallel with the longitudinal axis of the enemy shuttle and revealing the opening into the back of the spacecraft. He could not see inside the ship, as it was too dark within the tiny craft. Then a body appeared, stepping out onto the ramp. It wore an EVA suit of some kind, but it was a design he had never seen before. Then another person stepped out behind the first, followed by four more. The last four carried weapons.

“Oh, God,” Luis exclaimed.

“*What is it?*” Kovacic asked.

“Sir, I think they mean to board us.”

* * *

Jessica looked down at the surface of Metis, nearly eighty meters below her from her position on Jumper Two’s cargo ramp, as the shuttle floated over the surface of the small moon. The Celestia seemed massive from her current perspective as the shuttle slowly backed toward the ship. As she peered out through her visor, she couldn’t help but feel like she was looking at a gigantic, sleeping dragon lying peacefully on the crater floor.

The shuttle’s maneuvering jets shot out tiny spurts from thrust ports on either side of the aft cargo hatch, leaving her hanging motionless next to the Celestia. Jessica walked out to the end of the cargo ramp, its weak, artificial gravity just strong enough to keep her from floating into space. The gravity of Metis was so weak that, from this altitude, its mass had almost no measurable effect on them.

The end of the shuttle’s cargo ramp was at least ten meters away from the four-meter-deep depression in the side of the Celestia’s hull containing her port boarding

hatch, as well as her massive cargo hatch located directly below.

“Huh,” Jessica said over her suit-comms. “I thought there would be a ledge there.” She turned around and looked at the six men in pressure suits standing at the shuttle’s cargo hatch. “Guess I forgot about the cargo hatch below.” She started walking back toward the shuttle. “Any chance we can get a little closer?” she asked over the comms.

“With that ship powered down, her hull could’ve picked up a static charge. I’d like to avoid that if possible.”

“No matter,” Jessica said as she reached the men at the hatch. “There’s no gravity to speak of out here anyway, right?” She winked at Major Waddell, who was standing in his pressure suit in front of her, then turned back around and took several unnatural-looking, running strides toward the end of the ramp, jumping off into space. She floated easily across the ten meter gap, bumping softly against the Celestia on the other side. She grabbed the edge of the grappling bracket just below the boarding hatch, holding firmly so she would not float off. She activated her mag-boots and placed them firmly on the hull of the ship, locking them in place. She bent back in order to look up at the shuttle now hovering over her. “Come on over, guys,” she called over the comms.

“Perhaps we should run a safety line,” Major Waddell suggested.

“Let your boys do that. We need to get inside and make contact ASAP.” She watched as the major ran clumsily across the ramp and jumped out. He floated across more quickly. In mid-flight, he fired tiny maneuvering jets in the suit’s thick, midsection ring, rotating his body so he was falling feet first toward the Celestia. He landed with a bit

more force than Jessica had, but he landed more gracefully and on his feet.

“Show off,” Jessica said as she stepped aside to make room for the next man.

“*Training,*” the major replied, a grin forming behind his visor.

One by one, all four of the major’s squad came over in the same manner, also landing on their feet. “I guess you guys practice this kind of stuff on occasion,” Jessica said.

“*We have made considerable use of the Aurora’s zero-gravity training room,*” Major Waddell said.

“Open that panel next to you,” Jessica told him. “There’s a crank in there to manually open this hatch. Would you mind?”

Major Waddell opened the hatch and unfolded the crank handle. He began turning the crank, causing the boarding hatch to split down the middle and slowly slide away into the hull of the ship.

Jessica looked down into the unlit airlock below. “Give me that crank handle,” she instructed the major.

Major Waddell removed the handle and passed it to Jessica, who in turn pushed it downward toward the airlock below. The handle floated down toward the opening, drifting slightly toward the dark gray deck of the airlock as it passed all the way through and bounced against the inner hatch.

“This will be interesting,” she said as she sat down on the hull with her feet dangling down into the airlock. She bent her legs to her right, placing the soles of her boots against the dark gray deck and allowing her mag-boots to take hold. She slid off the hull into the open hatchway, transitioning into a squatting position with her body now oriented to match the Celestia. After standing and turning to her right to face out the hatch, she looked at the five men

staring down at her, each of them at a ninety degree angle to herself. "Okay, this is weird." She looked at their faces. "Are you guys coming?" she said as she turned and headed inward.

* * *

"Sir, the port side boarding airlock's outer hatch has been manually opened. Whoever it is, they are inviting themselves in. I think we need to be ready," Luis said over the intercom.

"It's only a few men so far, right? You said the ship was small. How many men do you think it can hold?"

"In EVA suits, ten or twelve. But that's not the point..."

"It is the point, Ensign. We need to find out who they are and what they want."

"I think it's obvious who they are, sir."

"You said you had never seen that type of ship before, correct? Then how do you know it's a Jung ship?"

"You're right; I don't, but..."

"There is no manual override for the bridge airlock. The only way in there is to cut it open. If they do that, then it's safe to assume they're hostile."

"You're assuming they're coming here," Luis pointed out.

"If they wanted to get to engineering, wouldn't they use the aft boarding hatch?"

"Assuming they know where it is. And if they were EDF, they'd damn well know where every hatch was located."

"That's a good point, I have to admit," the lieutenant commander said.

"Nothing so far indicates that they're our people: not the ship design, not the weapons some of them are carrying, not their EVA suits... nothing."

There was a long silence on the intercom.

"I'll have Tilly set the charges," the lieutenant commander finally said.

"That's all I'm asking, sir," Luis answered.

"But I'm not destroying this ship, Metis, and probably half of Jupiter until I'm damned sure there's no other choice."

"I concur wholeheartedly, sir. Besides, there's got to be a much larger ship nearby. That shuttle couldn't have made an interplanetary trip all by itself. If we can wait long enough, she might show herself."

"It would be nice to take a big fat Jung target out with us when we go, wouldn't it?" the lieutenant commander agreed. *"I'll contact you when the charges are all set."*

"Yes, sir." Luis switched off the intercom and leaned back in his chair.

"What do we do now?" Devyn wondered.

"We sit and wait," Luis answered with a sigh. "And we hope you're right... that they're really our people using Jung gear," he added, feigning optimism for Devyn's sake.

* * *

"It's like walking through a ghost ship," Jessica said as they made their way through the Celestia's dark, unpressurized command deck. "I can't help but feel like I'm looking at our own ship, abandoned and falling apart."

"You have an overactive imagination," Major Waddell said over her suit-comms. *"Many of these command quarters have been lived in recently,"* he added as he exited the compartment that he had been exploring and returned to the same corridor as Jessica and the others.

“Where are they, then?” she wondered. “Maybe they’re dead. Maybe they all suffocated when this deck decompressed.”

“Unlikely,” Major Waddell said. *“The Aurora is very compartmentalized for just that reason. Being her sister ship, the Celestia should be similarly designed. It also appears that these areas were carefully evacuated. They took everything they needed with them, leaving very little of value behind. This would indicate a slow decompression, perhaps hours or even days.”*

“Makes sense. If that’s the case, I’m betting they’re on the bridge. It’s designed to be a self-contained vault. It has its own power generation, life support, and water recycling systems. It even has its own airlock into the corridor. It can support the entire bridge staff for months. At least, the Aurora’s bridge can.” She looked around at the numerous open panels and loosely hanging conduits. “I’m not so sure about this place.”

“Might they also have evacuated aft?” Major Waddell asked. *“Perhaps to engineering?”*

“It’s possible. There are airlocks passing through the primary aft bulkhead in case they have to decompress the entire propulsion section during an out-of-control fire.”

“Perhaps we should send some of our team aft,” Major Waddell suggested.

“The bridge is just around the corner,” Jessica said. “If no one is there, we’ll all head aft.”

“As you wish.”

Jessica turned the next corner, arriving at the port entrance to the Celestia’s bridge. The outer airlock hatch was closed, a condition she had never seen on the Aurora. She walked up to the control panel next to the hatch and examined it, pressing several buttons in an attempt to

activate the airlock controls. "It's locked out," she said, "from the inside."

"There is no manual override?"

"Nope. It's designed to be a vault, remember?"

"Even a vault can be opened," the major said.

"Yeah? Well, there are only two ways to open this one. We cut our way in, which will work but will take forever. It's also likely to scare them into blowing up the ship."

"What is the second way?"

Jessica pulled out a small bundle of cable. "A comm adapter. Vlad made it for me."

Jessica plugged one end into a jack on the side of her helmet. "This allows me to connect the ship's intercom system with your Corinairan suit's comm system."

"The ship appears dead," the major said. *"Will the intercom even work?"*

"They're sound powered," she told him, "like those used on ocean-going warships on pre-plague Earth, only far more sophisticated. No external power source." She smiled as she placed a small box over the speaker grill on the intercom panel and pressed a button to activate the unit. The device instantly clamped down around the grill and sealed itself in place. She connected the other end of the cable to the device, then activated the intercom. "Celestia bridge, this is Lieutenant Commander Jessica Nash of the Earth Defense Force. I am outside your airlock, requesting entry. I have authentication codes for your validation. Do you copy?" She looked at Major Waddell and shrugged her shoulders. After a minute, she repeated her hail, after which she switched the intercom button off again. She looked at the major.

"They may be dead," he told her. *"We do not know how long ago this deck was depressurized."*

“That is a possibility.” Jessica activated the intercom again. “Crew of the Celestia currently occupying the bridge, I’m going to read my authentication codes to you.” Jessica slowly rattled off the long, three-part identification code given to her by President Scott. Again she waited. After another minute, she said, “Celestia bridge crew, I’m awaiting validation.” She looked at the major again.

“How do I know you are who you say you are?” a voice answered. It was a male voice, partially obscured by static and at a low volume due to the electromagnetic adapter used to generate the simulated sound waves.

“Hey! You’re alive!” Jessica said. “That’s great! But I didn’t quite copy your last message. Can you repeat?”

“I said, how do I know you are who you say you are?” the voice repeated more slowly and with greater volume.

“Uh, ‘cause I gave you the correct authentication codes.”

“You could have gotten them from a prisoner or stolen them. Or you could be a Jung collaborator.”

“Collaborator?” she said, suddenly getting angry. “I’m gonna...” Jessica cut herself off mid-sentence, pausing to regain her composure. “I’m gonna let that remark slide, since you don’t know what I’ve been through over the last five months.”

“The question still stands,” the voice said.

“Yes, I admit, those are all possibilities. Listen, what’s your name?”

“Luis.”

“You got a last name, Luis?”

“Delaveaga.”

“What’s your rank, Delaveaga?”

“Ensign.”

“Okay, Ensign, what’s your sixth general order?”

“Why?”

"Humor me, Ensign."

"To receive, obey, and pass on to the sentry who relieves me all orders from the commanding officer, command duty officer, officer of the deck, and officers of the watch only. Now what the fuck is your point?"

"So, Ensign Delaveaga, try obeying the order to respect those who presented you with proper authentication codes."

"Why?"

Jessica was becoming irritated. "Because if the codes were compromised, then the war is over. That means the people of Earth are Jung slaves, and nothing you or I do here will matter. So either blow the fucking ship or open the goddamned door, but quit wasting my time!"

"Nice try."

Jessica looked at Waddell as she switched off the intercom. "What the hell does this asshole want from us, the latest sports scores?"

Waddell looked confused by her statement.

Jessica switched the intercom back on. "You know we can cut our way in, right?"

"And my orders, from my commanding officer, are to blow the ship if you do."

Jessica switched off the intercom and looked at Waddell. "This is going to be harder than I thought." She switched the intercom back on. "Look, I know that you are under orders to blow up the ship rather than let her fall into enemy hands, and I respect that you're just trying to follow those orders. But I'm telling you, we're on your side, Luis. Besides, if you blow yourself up, you'll also be destroying whatever technology is still on those data cores you're carrying. We've only scratched the surface, you know. There's probably lots of really advanced stuff on there that we just don't yet have the means of manufacturing."

Major Waddell looked at Jessica. *"How do you know this?"*

Jessica switched the intercom off momentarily. "Abby told me... and told me, and told me."

"How do you know about the data cores?" Luis asked.

"The same way I knew the authentication codes. Buckeye, remember?"

There was silence.

Jessica switched off the intercom and looked at Waddell again. "That's got his brain twisting." She smiled.

"Where's your ship?" Luis asked.

"It's parked right outside," Jessica answered. "Surely you can see it on the main view screen—you know, that big dome-shaped thing that wraps around half the damned bridge."

"That ship is just a shuttle," Luis said. *"A big one, yes, but there's no way that ship made it all the way here from Earth. Why haven't I seen its design before? Why can't I identify its power source, and how did you sneak up on us like that?"*

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Sorry, most of that is classified, I'm afraid."

"Wrong answer."

Major Waddell looked at her. *"He's going to find out anyway, assuming he does not blow us all up."*

Jessica shrugged, her eyebrows raising. "Fine, you want answers? Here you go. The shuttle is Corinairan. Nice folks, live on a beautiful Earth-like world about a thousand light years from here. The power source, well, that's a Takaran design. They're neighbors of the Corinairans. They used to be a monarchy run by an evil jerk named Caius until I blew his face off. It was a really nice shot. You should have seen

it. Oh, and we used the shuttle's jump drive to sneak up on you." She looked at Waddell.

"That might be over doing it, Nash," the major said, one eyebrow raised.

She switched off the intercom. "I'm starting to lose my patience with this guy."

"That was pretty good, really," Luis answered, sounding amused. *"But you forgot about your ship. What ship are you from? Where's it hiding?"*

"I'm from the Aurora, and it's currently about two light years away, waiting for me to report back."

"The Aurora, huh?" Luis said, fighting back the laughter. *"Who's your captain?"*

"Nathan Scott," she answered. As soon as the name left her lips, she realized she had made a mistake.

"Wrong! You almost had me, too!" Luis laughed openly. *"You have a great imagination though! You should consider writing science fiction stories for the Earth-Net."*

Jessica sighed and looked upward as she switched off the intercom for a moment. "Damn it, I fucked up. I should have said Roberts." After pausing a moment, she switched the intercom back on. "Look, I know it's hard to believe, really. If I hadn't lived it, I wouldn't believe it either, but it's true. Every last word of it."

"I knew Nathan Scott," Luis said. *"I knew him well. There's no way that guy is captain of anything. Besides, the Aurora was lost five months ago, in this very same area ironically enough."*

"But..."

"Look, Nash, or whoever you are, you tried. You failed. So either start cutting your way in or get the hell off this ship."

"I can't do that," Jessica exclaimed. "What do I have to do to convince you I'm telling the truth?"

"You want to know what you have to do?" Luis asked.

"Yes!"

"Show me Nathan Scott!" Luis insisted, anger sneaking into his tone. *"I want to hear it from his mouth!"*

The intercom went silent. Jessica unplugged the cable from her helmet, leaving it to hang loosely from the device in the minuscule gravity of Metis.

Major Waddell looked at Jessica as she turned to depart. *"Where are you going?"*

"He wants Nathan Scott? We're gonna give him Nathan Scott."

* * *

"Sir, I really want to believe it's true. I really do. But I'm telling you, it just doesn't add up. That ship, their EVA suits, and that outrageous story she made up? When she started talking about the Aurora and Nathan being the captain, that was it. I knew I had her."

"But why would she make up a story like that?" Devyn said. "I could think of a dozen more believable stories than that."

"She's got a point," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said over the comm-set.

"Sir, Nathan Scott was my roommate for four years at the Academy. He was my best friend. He's a great guy, but there is no way he'd make captain. He's too much of a screw-up."

"Wait, isn't he the son of the president?"

"Yes, but the president was only a senator back then," Luis pointed out. "He didn't get elected president of the NAU until a few months after the Aurora was lost."

"Any chance his daddy pulled some strings..."

"I know what you're thinking, sir, but no way. They didn't get along. Nathan's father didn't even like the EDF, and he certainly didn't like it when Nathan joined up. I don't see him trying to help his son's career. If anything, he'd probably try to get him kicked out or assigned to surface duty."

"So you think this Nash person is using a bunch of screwed-up data then?"

"Maybe the Jung have collected bits and pieces of information from old news broadcasts or something. Maybe they thought it was believable that Nathan would be promoted, since his father was elected president."

"But why would that woman say she was from the Aurora?" Devyn asked. "Surely the Jung knew that the Aurora was lost and that we knew the Aurora was lost as well."

"That's the part that worries me," the lieutenant commander said. *"They wouldn't. That lie would be too easy to spot."*

"So you think she was telling the truth?" Luis asked. "You think the Aurora is alive and well, and Nathan Scott is in command?" Luis couldn't believe it. "Come on, sir. That's ridiculous!"

"I don't know what to think at this point," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic declared.

"I'm telling you, sir, Nathan Scott is dead and so is the Aurora. That girl was a Jung collaborator. I'd bet my life on it."

"You just might be, Ensign," the lieutenant commander said. *"We might all be."*

"What do we do in the meantime?" Devyn wondered. "They're bound to come back."

"The charges are all set. We can blow it remotely from here, and you can blow it from your panel up there. We can also set it on a timer if necessary. When they come back, we can still blow the ship."

"What if they manage to access our environmental systems?" Devyn wondered. "They could introduce a gas, something that would render us unconscious."

"We'll just have to keep a sharp eye out."

"You want me to start using active scanners?" Luis asked. "That way, they couldn't sneak up on us."

"No, not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because if she was EDF and not Jung, going active would bring the real Jung right to us."

"That's going to leave us with a lot of cameras to watch, sir."

"We've got lots of screens back here and more people. Patch all the cameras back to us as well, and we'll help out. Meanwhile, you watch the passive sensors for anything out of the ordinary. I doubt they'll be back soon. It takes several hours just to go around the back side of Jupiter."

"Yes, sir." Luis switched off his comm-set, leaned back in his chair, and sighed, rubbing his face with his hands.

"So you really don't think she was telling the truth?" Devyn asked.

"Devyn, I want Nathan to be alive, too. He was my best friend for four really long years. I even took him back to spend a couple weeks with my family. He was like a brother to me. But captain of the Aurora? No way. The guy barely passed basic flight."

"I always thought he was pretty smart."

"Smart, yes," Luis agreed. "Just irresponsible. He didn't start taking things seriously until his third year. There's just

no way he would be in command of the Aurora, even if she did survive.”

Luis leaned forward and pressed a button on his console. The main view screen switched cameras.

“Which view is this?” Devyn asked.

“Primary view,” Luis explained as he rose from his seat at the tactical station and moved to the command chair in the middle of the bridge. “It’s pretty much the same as if we were standing on the hull directly above us.” He sat down in the command chair, slowly rotating from side to side as he looked over the massive, spherical view screen. “It’s as good a place to watch as any right now. At least I can see everything easily from here.”

“It is a pretty nice view,” Devyn said, looking out at Jupiter as it filled most of the view beyond the surface of Metis.

A brilliant blue-white flash suddenly filled the screen, washing the entire bridge with its blinding light. Both Luis and Devyn instinctively raised their hands, palms forward, to shield their eyes from the flash.

“What the...” Luis exclaimed, nearly falling out of the command chair.

The flash subsided as quickly as it had come. Luis lowered his arms and looked at the view screen. Directly in front of them was the Aurora, upside down and hovering only a few hundred meters above them, her forward section directly above them.

“Oh, my God,” Devyn whispered, her voice taken from her by the shock of what she was seeing.

“Bridge! Kovacic! Are you seeing what we’re seeing?!” the lieutenant commander called over the comm-set.

Luis ignored the lieutenant commander’s hails, transfixed by the impossible image he was seeing before

him.

"Delaveaga!" the lieutenant commander repeated. *"Can you hear me?! Is that what I think it is?"*

Something beeped. Devyn turned away from the view screen toward the comm station behind her, moving up onto the platform and behind the primary comm console. "We're being hailed," she said in disbelief.

Luis turned around. "From..." he couldn't say the words.

"I think so," Devyn answered. She looked at Luis, who stood there staring at her, his face covered with indecision. "Shouldn't we answer?"

Luis's eyes were wide. "Yeah," he whispered, still in a state of shock.

"Luis!" the lieutenant commander called over the comm-set. *"Answer me, damn it!"*

Luis continued to stare at Devyn as she accepted the hail. "They're asking for video."

"Put it up," Luis answered meekly as he began to turn around.

"Mister Delaveaga," Nathan said over the comms.

Luis spun around, not believing his ears. There, on the view screen in front of him, was the image of his friend, Nathan Scott, his image filling the entire screen. He was on the bridge of the Aurora, sitting in a rather relaxed position in the command chair with staff working busily about him. He was smiling from ear to ear. "Nathan?"

"Glad to see you survived, Luis," Nathan answered, sitting up straighter in the command chair.

"Is it really you?" Luis asked, still in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's really me."

"But, how..."

"Listen, buddy, we're kind of in a hurry here. So if you'd be so kind as to disarm your charges and prepare to be

boarded, I'd really appreciate it."

Luis just stared.

"I can make it an order, if you'd like," Nathan said jokingly, tugging at his collar to show his captain's rank insignia.

"Sure," Luis finally answered. "I mean... Yes, sir?"

* * *

Eli Scott stood in front of the big, picture window that looked out from his office across the sea of lights in the city below. He had looked out this window many times, staring at the city of Geneva that served as his seat of power as the Jung-appointed Governor of Earth. All his adult life, he had dreamed of such power, and now he had it.

The massive double doors at the far end of his lavish office split in two, opening just enough to allow one man, his chief of intelligence, to enter. The chief's boots clicked on the marble floors as he approached, each tap echoing through the room.

"Have you captured the Celestia?" Eli asked as he turned from the window to address his subordinate.

"Not exactly," the man answered. His English was perfect, although some of his Jung accent had begun to creep back in since the invasion. "There has been a complication."

"General," Eli said, disappointment in his voice, "don't tell me the admiral led us on another wild goose chase."

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, sir," the general answered. "This time, he led us into a trap."

Eli sat down and put his elbows on his desk, covering his face with his hands in exasperation. "How bad?"

"I'm afraid one of our cruisers has been badly damaged."

"And how did this occur?" Eli asked.

"When the cruiser approached the asteroid named by Admiral Galiardi as the hiding place for the Celestia, the asteroid exploded. Several hundred men were killed. The ship is now limping her way back to Earth orbit and will require extensive repairs."

"That leaves us with what?"

"One battleship, three cruisers, four frigates, and two gunboats, sir."

"That doesn't seem like enough to me," Eli said, his eyes narrowing with anger, "not after seeing how easily the Aurora destroyed two of our cruisers with... whatever that weapon was." Eli looked up at the general. "I don't suppose you've determined where the Aurora got such weaponry."

"No, sir, we have not."

"So the good admiral has tricked us again, has he?" Eli exclaimed, almost delighting in his subordinate's string of failures.

"It appears that this has been his intent all along," the general said, "feed us false information mixed in with legitimate, yet low value, targets in order to keep us believing the information he provides. I suspect that there are more traps waiting for us and that it is the admiral's job to lead us to them."

"Most clever, that man. Always has been."

"He has been seriously punished for his deception. Unfortunately, we assess an eighty-seven percent chance of his continued survival, and only a twelve percent chance he will provide us with any more useful information. May I suggest we stop wasting our time interrogating Admiral Galiardi and proceed with reconditioning?"

“Very, well. If he survives, you may proceed with reconditioning.” Eli took a deep breath, looking at the general. “Have you any other bad news to report?”

“No, sir,” the general answered. “Actually, I have some rather good news to report as well.”

“Do tell, General,” Eli said, his face becoming more optimistic.

“Various other intelligence sources have yielded an interesting prize: a man with a surprising amount of information, especially considering his lack of training in interrogation resistance.”

“Really? Who is this man?” Eli wondered.

The general smiled. “Your father.”

Thank you for reading this story.
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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